

Between the lines

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2007. Translation: Ann Cotten/Catherine Schelbert**

A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully.¹

Since the beginning of her artistic career, Andrea Wolfensberger has dealt with human perception, which she analyses in depth in her work. She fixes her attention on everyday moments and the facts of natural phenomena, observing and registering them in various media. Her observations form the starting point and the substance of her works, which acquire shape in a complex process comprising multiple steps of transposition, remodelling and shifting. Wolfensberger's approach resembles scientific experimentation, and she often works with phenomena from natural history, mathematical parameters and abstract systems of order studying their potential for change or filtering them out of her visual source materials. These rules and applications play an essential role in the production process, but subsequently undergo substantial change when incorporated in the works themselves; they do not function as content or formal paradigm but rather as underlying principles of artistic design. Andrea Wolfensberger's film and video installations, her video projections, photographs, paintings and sculptures are demanding. To appreciate them requires patience and concentration, for they rest on subtle, not readily accessible artistic strategies and methods, devised and refined by the artist over the past two decades. One such strategy plays a central role in this œuvre: the aspect of translation.

Points of light in the dark

In the installation *La danza degli storni* (1991), one film and two slide projections face each other. The film shows tiny, bright elements moving through a dark grey (picture) space in swift, rhythmic undulations. Sometimes the camera zooms in slightly, sometimes it follows what is happening with a quick, almost abrupt swerve. In silence, the points of light morph into different shapes, congregating into clouds of dots or pulling apart as delicate, linear configurations – accompanied only by the rattling of the film projector and the humming of the slide projectors. The two slides projected on the wall opposite the screen show an assembly of small, dark spots on a light background and a flock of birds in a blue sky sinking into twilight. What is implied in the title becomes more and more concrete, the longer we look at the installation. The white dots in the film as well as the black ones on the slide are actually birds, more precisely starlings. The formations and patterns are produced by the movements of the flock, carried out, for example, in ritual self-defence.

Andrea Wolfensberger originally filmed this natural spectacle in Super8, then copied the sequences onto 16mm film in reverse black and white, without further modification. She also took slides of the same phenomenon. The use of different media, of the moving film and the still photograph, and especially the reversal of light and dark values in the film undermine the actual moment of the recording and the common motif, and instead accentuate structural phenomena and systems of order. The ritualised flight of the birds is translated into abstract movement. The birds can no longer be identified as such; they have turned into small, bright items that form configurations in an indefi-

nable dark space. What triggers the coalescing and dispersing »designs«, the patterns and arrangements, remains as much in the dark as their underlying criteria and the physical, material nature of the points of light. In the film sequence, spatial orientation is impossible for long stretches of time; only rarely does the bright silhouette of a roof sign or tower decoration jut into the picture from below. In contrast, the two slides restore a certain reference to reality. Interestingly, it is not necessarily the »realistic« assignment of the light and dark values but rather the aspect of colour that allows an interpretation of the image in terms of everyday perception. In addition, since the photograph does not move, it can be visually scanned and probed until the dotted shapes become recognisable as the silhouettes of birds.

On studying the installation *La danza degli storni* as a whole, one gradually becomes aware of a multi-layered concept that addresses the inherent qualities of the media themselves as well as questioning visual preconceptions and routine patterns of perception. The film and slide projections are not only spatially but also, and in particular, conceptually opposed. In the velvety darkness of the film projection, the grain of the film stock and also single grains of dust contend with the bright luminous signs of the birds. The consciously filmed subject matter and the »artefacts« that are a consequence of the medium itself blend into a cosmos of their own. The two slides, functioning, in a sense, as counter-images, serve as reference (to reality) but also as medial inversion: in colour, not black-and-white, still, not moving. Andrea Wolfensberger has generated a kind of double vision in this compact installation, two translations of one natural occurrence, which engage in mutual commentary. Through these spatial and medial cross-connections, through the opposition of »nature picture« and phenomenological translation, the artist traces processes of perception and explores facets of abstraction and the interpretation of visual signs. It is only by subjecting the original visual experience to numerous medial and conceptual transformations that she reveals the essence of that experience: the complex physical laws underlying the swarming movements as well as their quasi-abstract beauty and intrinsic poetry.

Spaces of movement

In her first media installation, Andrea Wolfensberger had already used strategies and methods that were to be seminal to the future development of her work. Four years after *La danza degli storni*, she again deployed the patterns made by flocks of starlings as the source material for an installation. *Stare* (1995) is designed for a specific spatial context, the lobby of the cinema in the Air Force Officer Training Centre in Dübendorf. The silent two-channel video piece is shown as a rear projection on two glass surfaces measuring 132x105 cm: one is let into the ceiling and the other is on the floor directly below. The speed of the video, filmed with Betacam SP, is reduced by 50 per cent, so that the spiralling, intercrossing formations of the birds take shape slowly, almost majestically, as dark silhouettes. Coming together and drifting apart, staggered configurations, stretching out into scattered flatness to the point of dissolving altogether, details drawn with great precision, yet ephemeral and uncertain. Sometimes we see what triggers the birds' social behaviour: the intruding predator – in this case a falcon – pierces the flock; it differs from the starlings not only in size, but even more in its flight behaviour.

Another characteristic of Andrea Wolfensberger's work is that she chooses a specific slice of reality, one that is precisely delimited by her framing. What goes on inside this image space is observed with quasi-neutral precision, as if in a laboratory. In a further step she changes certain categories of human perception, manipulating basic elements of the construction of reality: in the case of *Stare*, time and the spatial arrangement. The flight of the birds in slow motion appears as if it were the object of scientific analysis; the extreme deceleration makes it easier to follow the movements and orient oneself in space. Presenting the videos on glass plates inserted in the ceiling and the floor relates to the original situation of shooting the film; it establishes a certain »proximity

to nature«. On the other hand, it also causes a distinct sense of alienation. It proves completely impossible to regard both sequences at the same time; the viewer stands in the midst of the projection, or suspended, as it were, above one of the videos. While the video projected on the ceiling is a fairly linear composition showing the slow approach of the swarm of starlings and their large-scale formations, the recordings projected on the ground dive directly into the pack of birds and offer a close-up view of the multiple, precise structure. Thus the viewer is permanently in a middle space, torn between different modes of movement and spatial constructions. In this hybrid situation, there is no definable vantage point; every change of view, looking up or looking down, triggers an irritation and undermines any attempt to adjust, in one's mind, the space-time continuum in the video. The setting of the installation in combination with the manipulated video sequences causes a curious tension between natural phenomena and abstract appearance. The instinctive and usually obscure behaviour of the birds becomes comprehensible. We realise that it is a physiologically determined pattern, a complex physical system that points beyond the immediate context to causative principles of order in nature. The sequences shot from a greater distance that reduce the starlings to pictograms, the manipulation of the speed and the positioning of the videos all underline the character of the installation as a study of group dynamics and communicative processes, on the relationship between individual and mass, between strategies of attack and defence.

Arythmic time

Moving from the two installations created in the nineties to the more recent development of Andrea Wolfensberger's work, one notes a shift in the aforementioned strategy of translation. In the early work this process can be pinpointed particularly as the translation of a concrete, defined area of reality into different media whose essential qualities undergo profound analysis in the process. At the same time, changes are made to certain parameters immanent to the media, though not a visible presence in the subject matter itself. Time as a constant and a variable, as the basis of optical and physical laws, and the phenomenon of duration and standstill are important categories in this respect. While *La danza degli storni* and *Stare* focus primarily on the structural and phenomenological aspect of these concerns and therefore do not abandon their concrete point of departure, the video installation *Hitzewelle* (Heat Wave, 2003), made ten years later, shows a differently weighted approach.

A rock field in a stone desert, air shimmering in the heat. In the misty background a cliff can be made out, in the foreground several larger boulders whose shady sides contrast sharply with those exposed to the sun. Starting with a Super8 recording of this scene, Andrea Wolfensberger creates a compact, video projection lasting almost thirty minutes. A thirty second excerpt of the digitised film sequence is modified using a complex aperiodic algorithm; the resulting units of eight frames each, i.e. fragments of one third of a second, create an irregular time pattern. The soundtrack, especially composed and performed for this video by the musician Marianne Schuppe, is based on a melody from a medieval Spanish manuscript. The voices, layered in clusters and sung in eight tones, build up and die down seven times in a linear sequence, reaching a culmination when all seven sound fields are heard at once, successively swelling and abating. Schuppe's composition »accompanies« the images during the middle section of the video, which lasts approximately 20 minutes. The sound sets in after several minutes of silence; the staggering of clusters continues until one hears the eight voices again at the end of the composition. Then the last note dies away and silence returns for the remainder of the projection.

The static detail shows a strangely flat image with an indefinable sense of depth and an equally indefinable focus in the middle distance. There is movement in every moment although the subject matter is actually immobile. The edges of the rocks soften in swift, startling shifts; the play of light and shadow is flickering and abrupt. Andrea Wolfensberger turns a fleeting moment in the lifeless

volcanic landscape into a half-hour sequence; she introduces a concept of time that frustrates understanding. An arbitrary numerical progression, generated by a clear-cut set of mathematical rules (matrix.spiralig.zentripetal.hundert, 1993), is converted into accelerated and retarded, stretched and shortened units of time. In addition, another characteristic of Andrea Wolfensberger's work comes to the fore: something abstract is made visible. In its pure state as a progression of numbers, the fundamental algorithm is merely a function that expresses the mutual dependency of various values. It is only by applying it to the video images, to the units comprising eight images, that it is translated into a visual form. But even in this it remains, in the end, a theoretical category that cannot be derived from the visual form.

Further examination of these mathematical orders reveals interesting observations regarding the definitions of spatial measurements as well. In *Hitzewelle*, one might say that Andrea Wolfensberger visualises the translation of a one-dimensional geometry – a linear sequence of numbers – into an four-dimensional, temporal-spatial arrangement. There, however, it is only the temporal aspect of its extension in plane and space that is ultimately affected. In split seconds and for varying lengths of time, a non-perspective, intangible image appears that effectively undermines any sense of space. The image seems to remain in a similar state of arhythmic unrest throughout, making it impossible to perceive any movement, any sense of development. It is only when sound sets in that this hybrid visual situation undergoes a certain stabilisation. The soundtrack sets accents, marks certain temporal, acoustic and, especially, contextual moments that differ between a before and an after. Moreover, it is only by transmitting the sound through loudspeakers that the installation unfolds in space, filling the air between the area of the projection and the walls with vibration, physical presence and action. Here, together with Marianne Schuppe, Andrea Wolfensberger develops a multi-faceted work, its conceptual strands bundled in dense audio-visual form. The situation, perceived and recorded in its concreteness, becomes the starting point for a multiple overlay of individual translation processes. Foundations in pure mathematics and theoretical physics are applied to the visual material, providing parameters for a defined visual moment. The complex process underlying *Hitzewelle* also pushes the limits of video editing: the thirty minutes of video required 10,000 cuts. What results is the audiovisual translation of a natural phenomenon, the breaking of light waves in hot air, whose intrinsic qualities are convincingly mirrored in their artificially produced irregularity and their unnatural appearance.

Painted movement

In this context, a younger body of work by Andrea Wolfensberger merits closer inspection as well: the two picture cycles *was uns blüht* (The Flowers We're In For, 2003) and *von den hereinbrechenden Rändern* (Of Crumbling Edges, 2006), each comprising several works. The two cycles are based on digital, hand-held videos of the same garden, shot at different times: in spring 2002 and autumn 2004. Accordingly, the pictures can be ascribed to one of the two seasons. Andrea Wolfensberger selects individual moments from the temporal continuum of the video recordings and transfers the resulting stills, which arrest 1/25th of a second, in oils on aluminium or cotton, using the classical system of a grid. This in itself reveals the conceptual nature of the cycles, in which both medium and content focus on preserving the fleeting moment. The time-based medium of video is transformed into a solid state by singling out frames that are imperceptible in the normal course of 25 images per second. The paintings represent the essence of a specific visual moment; they are the visualised concentration and reduction of duration. The movement of the camera, perceived as a basic quality or element of style in the video, becomes blurred in the stills, depending on the speed. Without a before or an after, it is no longer possible to perceive the individual images unravelling in time, one after the other, as part of an event. Here Andrea Wolfensberger deliberately detours through the medium of video on her way to painting, in order to accentuate a very specific aspect of the arrested moment in a still. In contrast to photography, which captures a moment in an

incomparably shorter time and thus pulls it up short, as it were, the selection of single frames from a sequence of movement leads to a kind of slowing down of the image. The selected split second is consecutively frozen, condensed in itself and, even in its translation into painting, retains traces of its medial background. The painted pictures are thus caught in decelerated time. Again and again, viewers are entangled in the smeary, blurred areas or optically glance off different elements in the pictures, unable to pass through the impenetrable space of the image, which offers no inner-pictorial referential support. Around the pictures, a kind of vacuum ensues that keeps viewers at bay and places them unequivocally outside of this visual reality.

Despite their common ground in concept and approach, the two cycles diverge in several important respects, throwing a distinct light on the way Andrea Wolfensberger works, which, as mentioned, strongly calls to mind the set-up of an experiment. Strictly speaking, *uns blüht* comprises four groups of work conceived as both individual pictures and as series in the format 40x50 cm. For instance, *Sternmagnolie* (Star Magnolia) consists of three paintings that show several video stills from a sequence of several minutes. This temporal and dynamic affinity lends the pictures a formal relatedness that is more than the sum of their parts. Except for *Christrosen I* (Hellebore), a single, self-contained piece, similar traces of movement can also be observed in the other groups of work. Take the two *Anemonen* (Anemones): they possess a mirror axis between them on the wall, so that they seem to be angling away from each other at the same distance. Thick dabs of paint characterise the execution of the works in this cycle. Every pastose brushstroke appears to have been applied with the same attentiveness; every square centimetre in the composition has been given the same weight. This technique heightens the suspense and density that is inscribed in the paintings. The more recent suite, *von den hereinbrechenden Rändern*, is different both in terms of painting technique and the way in which movement is translated into the picture plane. The seven large-format paintings (160x200 cm) are explicitly separate, self-contained works, whose common motif surfaces only when seen in the installation-like presentation in the exhibition. It is, in fact, of secondary significance. Much more important is the individual composition of the pictures, demonstrated particularly by the choice of detail and framing. The motif, strictly delimited within the borders of the painting, offers no clues as to its shape, spatial extension or position. The individual elements are rigorously cropped and once again there is no sense of depth or uniform perspective. The edges of the blurred elements in the picture are outlined and partly crossed by thin, horizontal lines, not only as a direct consequence of the video still, but also as self-referential commentary on the linear composition of video and monitor. These lines, evoking cross-hatching, accentuate the size of the motif and yet also soften its contours and the distinction between different levels within the image. Flat washes are repeatedly broken up by lighter, more compact areas that belong to the background in terms of content, but optically reach into the foreground. It is precisely in these places that the already fragile sense of space disintegrates; the motif begins to oscillate, a movement that infects the already identified elements as well. Considering the differences outlined above, the two successive cycles can undoubtedly be seen as findings that have emerged by subjecting the source material to the same basic procedure, although the interpretation and visualisation of the »facts« is weighted differently in each case. The fundamental issues and strategies of concern to Andrea Wolfensberger prevail in both groups of paintings. Her method of working with variables shows an artistic attitude that has an affinity to scientific research methods, as a result of which both rapprochement and detachment from these concepts are inscribed in the two cycles.

In between

Andrea Wolfensberger's work is formally quite varied and, hence, not characterised by a distinctive artistic handwriting or a conspicuously personal idiom. This allows the basic artistic approach to be recognised only when dealt with in depth, often making her work seem inaccessible and unyielding. A rigorously conceptual work process reinforces this impression. Starting with concrete situations

and facts, Wolfensberger confronts us with strangely neutral and almost raw imagery that opens unpretentious and unspectacular windows to reality, as seen especially in the two cycles described above. Point for point the artist transfers the elements and spatial composition of the source material into painting; she does not allow herself any personal signature in painting technique or in the interpretation of the subject matter. Edges and central areas, foreground and background are subjected to the same treatment, undercutting the artistic meaning of the individual brush stroke and only letting it count as part of a process of translation. A strictly regimented procedure defines the process of painting, which deliberately ignores the different models of imitating nature.

In conclusion, let us ask a few questions in the attempt to illuminate the treatment of space and medium in Andrea Wolfensberger's œuvre: What is it that makes her work so curiously fascinating? How do the multi-faceted working strategies unfold within it? At first glance, the works seem unpretentious; they show an almost matter-of-fact use of different media. The »motifs«, the pictorial inventions and imagery seem familiar, evoking everyday moments, visual experiences thought forgotten, casually registered memories. Despite these references, there is an almost troubling inaccessibility about these works that is heightened by the inherent tension between what is known and its immediately perceived translation, between the »image in one's head« and its concrete counterpart. They draw their resilience from the precision with which Andrea Wolfensberger pursues her »scientific subject«. She meticulously analyses and isolates its visual and structural facets. Most importantly, she enlists processes of translation to probe the spaces in between what we see and perceive and the fundamental nature of the observed moment. The image under the surface, the »kernel« of a process, the essence of a moment: these appear like palimpsests shining through the physical, medial form of her works. Herein lies the uniqueness of an artistic practice that explores the very foundations of human perception and of nature itself, rendering them in a sensually accessible form. It is a practice dedicated to an invisible in-between, a practice that casts an expanded net of perception and seeks out what lies between the lines.

1 Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, *Tableaux parisiens*. Deutsche Übertragung mit einem Vorwort über die Aufgaben des Übersetzers, in: Ders., *Gesammelte Schriften*, hrsg. von Rolf Tiedemann und Hermann Schweppenhäuser, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1996, Bd.IV, 1, S.18.