The mechanics of the ephemeral

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The ahistoric immediacy of real time transmission and the absolute presence of the moment
The French cultural philosopher and »dromologist«[1] Paul Virilio has described the history of mankind as »an endless race with time«.[2] What started out as a law of survival (the swift don't get eaten) and later became an economic motor (time is money) and often a central power factor has, toward the end of the 20th century, undergone a revolution of speed beyond compare. According to Virilio, this revolution turns against the human being and leads to a loss of space and time, a paralysis, a »polar inertia«[3] in the greatest (virtual) mobility.

The cover of the German edition shows a telling picture of this »polar inertia«: a Ferris wheel at a fairground on which the individual lights blend together and make a standing wheel out of revolving points. The change and sometimes even loss of meaning that occurs in the blending is perhaps even more dramatic when the effect is applied to an acoustic phenomenon: When you speed up a soundtrack, the voices on it mutate into a grotesque and comic tittering, then blend to an indistinguishable mass and finally to a single tone.

The speed that we attain thanks to technical progress and that propels us through space faster than the speed of sound is so much increased by the quasi absolute speed of electromagnetic waves that we experience »a completely new worldview, completely new approach to the world«.[4] From the speed of direct transmission follows the inertia of my paralysed, autistic body whose presence happens mostly in a virtual realm; the outside, real, objective world offering resistance is atrophied.[5] This annullation of spatial distance makes a good deal of presence possible, an »instantaneity« in which we are globally connected with one another, but it also means the loss of the »here and now«. The zero interval required for television broadcasting not only questions the philosophical notion of »present time« but also that of the »real moment«.[6] The experienced moment is without past or future, orphaned in history; it is a shrinking of the present.

The German word for real, »wirklich«, contains the word »Wirkung«, effect, and this effect anchors a moment in space and time. Speeding up information to the point of live transmission also undermines the competence of globally interconnected people to act and make decisions. According to Virilio, this has clear ethical consequences. A further effect of the speed of information being accelerated up to live transmission is to disable the active and decisive competence of the globally interconnected human being, and, to Virilio, thus possesses a clear ethical consequence. The speed of the information that is provided worldwide »in the blink of an eye« is so great that we, as individuals, disorganised and not institutionalised people, can no longer cope with it. Here too, there is a standstill: communication grinds to a halt when listeners, bombarded with information, are condemned to being eternal recipients with no space and time left to respond and no real counterpart to communicate with. Virilio considers this last revolution of speed – in which we are only confronted with decisions and no longer make them – a great threat to democracy. By exposing ourselves of necessity to such an accelerated environment, we surrender some of our democratic decision-making competence to speed.[7]

The fact that we live in a perpetually accelerated and accelerating society is not a new thesis, nor that technical accomplishments go hand in hand with a fundamental change in consciousness. According to the culture theoretician and sociologist Hartmut Rosa, the acceleration of time is inherent in the project of modernity. In his book Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne he supports his thesis with many cultural and sociological illustrations, often lacking in Virilio's sermons on the future.[8] Faust, meanwhile, is the epitome of the modern man. The desire to »plunge« into »the rush of time«,[9] eagerly invoked by a despairing Faust at the beginning of Faust I, intensifies in the second part, which Goethe continued to work on throughout his life. Faust races helter skelter through history with Mephisto, frantically looking for the meaning of life. Faust's zapping machine is not the speed of live transmission but a devilish principle that dissolves the borders of time and space and transports him into a context that might be called virtual since he can abandon it at any time. Having sold his soul to the devil in payment for this acceleration and virtualisation of life, Faust confidently agrees to the pact in the first part of the tragedy because he believes that the devil will never be able to keep his side of the bargain, namely to give him a moment of such happiness that he will want it to last forever.[10] However, this not only conceals a possible early death but also the fulfillment of what Faust intrinsically yearns for: absolute presence, which is so valuable to him that, were he granted success just once, he claims he would have lived enough. Faust juxtaposes an (aesthetic) epiphany, as a kind of utopian state, with the (virtual) fullness of life, a state he tellingly experiences at the very moment when he has become most powerful as a statesman.[11] This moment, too, means immobility and one could regard it as without history. The immobility it contains is the immobility of collection, so that half an eternity fits into the ephemeral state of the moment. It is without history, but not in the manner of a homeless presence sinking into the nirvana of arbitrariness and meaninglessness, but without history because past and future are concentrated in the moment itself as in a seed soon to sprout. This highly sought-after »absolute presence« is the utopian flip side to the loss of the present that threatens the accelerated society.

Slowing down and reducing information

Andrea Wolfensberger's works are anything but moralistic pointers like Paul Virilio's sermons on the future that speak of the »apocalypse of the outside world«,[12] of the »paralysis (or autism)«[13] of our bodies, and of the »contamination« or »pollution of the surroundings«.[14] Nor do they seek those charged moments of absolute presence, the aesthetic epiphany that is supposed to compensate the disappearance of the present by encompassing a whole world, a whole eternity. Andrea Wolfensberger's search for the dialectic of immobility and movement lies between these two sides of the coin: a culture of accelerated time, the ahistoric presence of a virtual furor come to a halt, producing ahistoric immediacy versus the absolute presence of the aesthetic moment. Her work deals with deceleration, reduction of information instead of information overkill, the ability to grasp things, sometimes the presence of individual moments and their ambivalence between (endless) expanse and flightiness. Of course, deceleration is created primarily by reducing the playing speed, i.e. in the video works Stare (Starlings, 1995), Kinderlied (Children's Song, 2003) or YOYO (2007). Retardation always has an alienating effect that disturbs the routine of seeing, so that the viewers not only see »more« in the same period of time, but automatically also invest more attention.

In Andrea Wolfensberger's video work, however, deceleration is often created by reducing information and concentrating on seemingly »banal« minimal situations, isolated like elementary building blocks, no matter whether the length of the video sequence is only 23 seconds or 50 minutes: a mountain under changing light (Berg [Mountain] 2000), soap bubbles quivering in the wind (Seifenblasen [Soap Bubbles] 2001), a rock in a torrent (Stein [Stone] 2002), a child playing the violin (Kinderlied [Children's Song] 2003), a babbling brook (Bach [Brook] 2003) or a boy trying out his yoyo (YOYO 2007). Viewers, used to speed and »potent«, shocking images, are sometimes frustrated by the seeming banality of the video sequences: »That's it?«. Staying with it, you get used to a

kind of seeing in which – to return to the simile of lights on a revolving wheel – the individual lamps become visible.

The titles of the video works are just as simple and unsettling as the minimalism of the situations. Anyone who turns to them in search of interpretational extra value is initially disappointed, as they simply name the objects on view in the pictures.[15] If one wants to make works speak for themselves, there is always the option to label them »untitled«, but Andrea Wolfensberger does not opt for that solution. As if they wished to hold themselves back and give as little additional information by means of language as possible, they refer – more even than the use of »untitled« could – back to the subject and underline its fundamental character: These are the simplest elements: the mountain, the soap bubble, the brook.

Bach/Brook

A brook is a small river. The river is a metaphor for time. Time flows. The brook, little brother of the great time metaphor, is not as momentous as a river, the brook rips nothing away, no one would navigate a brook. When time babbles, there seems to be more time than when it flows. This is strange. The photograph Bach, which Andrea Wolfensberger exhibited in 2003 in the Schoenthal Monastery, shows a brook from above on a print of 4 m by 25 cm. Walking the length of it is like walking along the banks of a brook, for the view of the brook, or so it seems, was taken as one single photograph. In the video installation, the artist animated the photograph and added a soundtrack. The projection takes up the whole wall and the brook seems to be floating by in front of the viewer. At the same time the viewer takes an acoustic stroll along the brook. One hears the babbling of the brook, and if we listen carefully, we realise the sound was recorded not in one spot but by actually proceeding along it. What cannot be heard are the steps of a person walking along the brook, which makes this »walk« as unreal as the animated photograph, for we float dreamily along above the picture of the brook, a frozen moment caught by the camera.

The animation of the photograph, the floating above the brook, even the photograph itself, all show a perspective we can never assume. Andrea Wolfensberger made a continuous bird's eye view out of the digitised versions of about 40 individual analog pictures of the brook, creating a startling perspective. For we cannot find a single vantage point from which the perspective of this one bird's eye view seems to be correct, nor can we distinguish the different sections. We keep looking at the brook, trying again and again to adopt different positions in order to gain a »correct« perspective, but we cannot make the picture »work«.

In the video installation, this interplay of immobility and movement is changed yet again; the motionless, multi-perspective picture moves and, when we wander acoustically, sound and image separate. It is as if one were covering a distance and at the same time stopping at a point, as if one had time to go for a walk inside the moment, follow its course, take part in its expanse, without linear time itself moving on. The time structure of the video installation Bach is like a »time pocket«, a moment with room for half an eternity. Still, there is nothing emphatic, nothing utopian in this artistic reflection; it concentrates on the question of how one can pursue the mechanics of the flightiness of a moment. The tension between immobility and movement is heightened by the »mini-scenario« of the photograph, when read, like the animation, from right to left, for it speaks of acceleration: At the end of the floating ride over the brook there is a little slope; the speed of the flow increases.

Sand in the works

Whether it is a babbling brook, soap bubbles quivering in the wind, the close-up of a poppy or a stone in the water, the isolated elements have little narrative quality; they are the building blocks of possible narratives. The »mini-scenario« to be found in Bach does not change this. When arranged

in succession, as is the case in the loop of the video work Bach, the elements become individual patterns in a series. One could completely give oneself over to this repetition and its meditative character, the cyclic, non-linear understanding of time, if there weren't this irritation that emanates from the seemingly sober work and increases the longer you look at the work. The sound of a babbling brook is anything but meaningless in our culture; it stands for the idyll, for a peaceful, intense experience of nature. Although we are basically pointed towards this nature experience with a quote via sound and image, we are standing in front of an installation that makes no attempt to conceal its artificiality. The longer one looks at the projection, the more acutely one becomes aware of the absence of the here and now.

If one takes a second look at the titles of other works, which at first seem only to name the subject matter of the pictures, they prove to be anything but innocent: blauer Mohn (Blue Poppy) is the epitome of Romantic longing. In the video it takes up the whole screen and only from time to time, quivering in the wind, allows a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Winterspaziergang (Winter Walk, 1995) triggers associations of a vast, white winter landscape; we follow at the heels of a person walking through the snow, the frame fixed on the footprints, and see one foot set down after the other again and again with small variations. The video work Kinderlied (Children's Song), which was exhibited at the same time as Bach at the Schoenthal Monastery, is also extremely unsettling. On the video one sees the head and torso of a child playing the violin, in the background the reproduction of an angel. The angel has a red cape and a hairstyle like that of the child playing the violin. The angle from which this was filmed is slightly oblique – like the general impression of the work. Though image and sound track are decelerated by the same amount of six per cent of the recording speed, and in the same way, one still has the impression that the image and the sound track follow separate paths. After a while, one can read the picture of the child pulling the bow over the strings at speed, but the ear is not as quick; it cannot reconstruct a high violin note out of the deep slow-motion sounds. The bass tone remains a bass tone, but still possesses the uncertain and fumbling manner of the beginner. It is not a full, calm, adult tone but more like a sound in invisible shallows, like a sound released from an enclosure, breaking the ostensibly innocent impression of the angelic musician.

A basso continuo of ethical concerns underlies Virilio's analysis of the raging paralysis of our culture of time; it cannot be overheard, in contrast to the softer tones of Andrea Wolfensberger's artistic agenda. Her mechanics of the flighty are mechanics of the fundamental. She does not enlist the utopia of an absolute, emphatic presence to cope with the pressure of the instantaneous in our virtual world; instead, deceleration performs that function and enables fundamentals to become visible again.

The single elements are so fundamental that their narrative content is reduced to a minimum. But nothing can be so isolated as to preclude all referential associations. The appearance of neutrality in Andrea Wolfensberger's video work is undermined by such references; they gum up the works like grains of sand: the blue flower, the babbling of a brook, a winter walk, the innocence of an angel. These references are so very unsettling that all our experience of space and time and all contextual relations fall apart in quite undramatic ways: A brook is a brook is not a brook. What can we do with this reality? No one can relieve us of having to seek possible answers to such questions.

1 »Dromology« is a term coined by Virilio for a science which postulates time as the seminal factor in an analysis of society.
2 Paul Virilio, Revolutionen der Geschwindigkeit, Berlin: Merve, 1993, p.7.
3 Paul Virilio, Polar Inertia, London: Sage, 2000, pp.71–87.
4 Paul Virilio, Revolutionen der Geschwindigkeit, p.12.
5 Ibid., Polar Inertia, pp.83–84.
6 Paul Virilio, »La vitesse d'exposition«, in: La Vitesse, ed. by La Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris: Flammarion,

1991, p.140.
7 Paul Virilio, »Les revolutions de la vitesse«, Entretien avec Paul Virilio, propos recueillis par Jean de Loisy et Patrick Javault, in: La Vitesse, ed. by La Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris: Flammarion, 1991, p.16.
8 Hartmut Rosa, Beschleunigung: Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2005.
9 See J.W.v. Goethe, Faust, A Tragedy The first part, München/ London: Th. Stroeffer, 1877, p.56. Faust: »In the rush of Time let us plunge with glee/ And in Adventure's rolling sea!/ Then let pleasure and distress,/ Vexation and success/ Change alternate, as they can;/ Restless action becomes a man.« Mephistopheles: »You're not confined by bounds or stint./ If at all things you like to nibble,/ In flight to snatch what's eligible,/ Do't, and much good may you find in't./ Only fall to, and be not coy.«
10 Ibid., p.55. Faust: »When to the passing hour I say,/ ›Thou art so fair! Oh, tarry, prithee!‹/ At once thy fetters on me lay,/ And take me to destruction with thee!/
Then toll the death-bell once for all,/
Then art thou from thy bondage free;/ The clock may stand, its hands may fall,/ Be Time a thing no more for me!«
11 Cf. Karl Heinz Bohrer, Suddenness. On the Moment of Aesthetic Appearance, transl. Ruth Crowley, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
12 Paul Virilio, »La vitesse d'exposition«, p.138.
13 Paul Virilio, Polar Inertia, p.83.
14 Paul Virilio, »La vitesse d'exposition«, p.140.
15 The title of the video piece who is afraid of yellow (1999), in which a yellow balloon being blown up increasingly dominates the space of the picture, is an exception.