New position in media art-installations

*From Spark to Pixel: Art + New Media, Martin-Gropius-Bau.*


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See table of contents

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ny renewal of representation will necessarily be accompanied, if not beckoned by the sights and sounds of the historical specters enveloping it. Picture the architectural ground plan of an antique Roman villa, just larger: a central atrium, glass roofed here, surrounded by numerous rooms, some with richly carved ceiling decorations. This is an approximate description of the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, a superb building for the large-scale exhibition From Spark to Pixel: Art + New Media, curated by Richard Castelli (Paris). The show was nothing short of spectacular comparable to the baroque Gesamtkunstwerk, a synthesis of the arts. Twenty international artists, mainly men, and their collaborators presented new positions in media art-installations that provided entries into sight and sound spaces, some with trance effects. In other words, an ecstatic experience or a supernatural vision could be had. Word spread quickly and many young ticket holders came immersing themselves into a new art with admiring endurance levels. The exhibition had a loose, historical sequence starting with Candle TV (1975) by the pioneer of electronic art, Nam June Paik (South Korea/USA) where a burning candle was set into an empty wooden TV, followed by Feuerkasten (Fire Box, 1991) by KAI (Germany) containing a bird-headed monster that spits fire when a button is pushed. Gregory Barsamian (USA) in Scream (1998) had rubber masks of his own face mounted on a ring-like mechanism that rotates to enormous speed inspired by the zoetrope drum, a forerunner of
cinema. But what he most freely employed was a synchronized stroboscope. Interestingly, a sign put up by local personnel warned people of possible dizziness when watching. Scream is an impressive visualization of mind clutter harmless to one's health. The show was also popular among parents whose children sat mesmerized, as I observed, on a long bench watching Visp (2002) by Christian Partos (Sweden). Rotating machinery, nine meters in length, spins light-wires like skipping ropes, producing changing light patterns, surface effects you wanted to catch, see longer, but could not except by extended watching. The percep­tual strategies employed by all the artists was an unfolding of their work over time, hence the many benches to sit on, or beanbags to lie on, as under Hemisphere (2006/07) by Ulf Langheinrich (Austria/Ghana) where people waited patiently to get their empty spot. Watching Visp and hearing the grinding noise of the computer generated, rotating mechanism, I thought of Denis Papin who discovered the potential of steam pressure and built the first machine-driven ship, and Gottfried Leibniz who expanded the study of mechanics, and with his theory of monads ushered in the machine and computer age. The performative role of the appar-
tatus and its theatrical exaggeration—surface effects, grinding sounds, large dimension—are the referents of performance, to involve us in thought, space, time and memory. I heard an art critic say that this art attracts through an impressive new technique, but is empty otherwise. The same has been wrongly said of the Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists more than a century ago. I contend with Jean-Francois Lyotard that it is more important to deposit a new discourse, as here, awe-inspiring representations, than to know its meaning. Meaning unfolds in time. That is the strategy of the art in Spark to Pixel, flashy and cutting edge on the one hand, demanding on the other, slowing spectators down in order for the sights and sounds of the specters of history to emerge. Presumption (2000), a six-screen video projection by Du Zhenjun (China/France) was the only overtly dark subject in the show employing sensors and infrared beams. Entering the installation all remained black at first. When moving closer to any of the six screens, loosely set up in a circle, black and white images of prisoners suddenly appeared, their bodies outlined with coloured markers. The life-sized pictures re-appear and disappear for brief moments related to the viewers’ movements in the various
zones. Irrespective of the images' duration, the emaciated men can be immediately recognized as prisoners—their heads shaved and held low, their bodies barely covered. Extracted from a TV report about Bosnian prison camps, the news pictures have been reworked by Du Zhenjun to integrate notions of time—appearance, simultaneity, erasure—which are suturing devices into critical discourse. Flow Berlin (2007) by Erwin Redl (Austria/USA) covered the entire roof of the atrium with LED waves consisting of 30,000 light-emitting diodes, mounted on cables. The individual strings, which are switched on and off in sequence, form a gigantic wave pattern bathing everything underneath it in shades of indigo blue. "This is cool," said a teenager standing beside me as we both looked up at the virtual starry sky, in awe. Vincent van Gogh's Starry Night seems whimsical in comparison. How people must have felt in the seventeenth century entering the Milky Way, thus drawing the sun into the centre of the solar system? More earthly, this is in keeping with the work of Michel Montaigne, in his Italian journal, records a visit to the Villa Pratolino where "by a single movement the whole grotto is filled with water and all the seats squirt water up to your bottom as you fly ... a thousand water jets will bath you." While no such tricks are a part of Ondulation, the water itself is the element of surprise turning into a liquid frieze or painting, the result of various engineering techniques. Leaving this impressive installation, I also thought of water in an environmental context, as a resource. The video-work Tentative d'éprouvetage d'un lieu, Berlin (2002) by Marie Maquaire (France/Canada) is exactly as the title implies, an exhaustive projection "thrown" on the floor, walls and ceiling. People had to traverse and go through the art in order to continue their parcours. This passageway of an installation shows images of Berlin taken from the moving S-Bahn (Berlin's above-ground metro railway) with focus on the Eastern part, the former Soviet sector. The shots are familiar—houses in need of renovation, empty spaces, concrete blocks and large, unused buildings where the property rights are not yet cleared—all parts of a metropolis in the long recovery process from an oppressive regime. Maquaire's work is doubly important here. Firstly, for a productive disorienting aesthetic that plunges the city momentarily into an abyss as you step onto familiar spots, and secondly, as art made by a woman within this exhibition. In sum, the works presented here relating to fire, sound, light, water and electricity are truly formidable, many of which are shown for the first time in Berlin, some having a world premier. But I believe the lack of women artists participating. Can it really be that women are less interested in large-scale electronic media or sound art, or was it simply a fluke by the curator who selected internationally, irrespective of, or not concerned with gender?

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