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REPORT FROM BERLIN

Meiu Münt, *The Day is Dark*, Estonian Embassy, (Jan. 31 - June 30, 2007),
Peter Greenaway, “Cinema is Dead - Long Live Cinema,” Humboldt University, (Feb. 9, 2007).

aiting has always been ahead, in terms of societal and philosophical developments,” said Peter Greenaway, delivering this year's Thyssen lecture. “But only few people can read them. There is a visual illiteracy. We are trained to value language, the spoken and written word, but not the image.” He showed excerpts from his most recent films, *Nightwatching* (2006) and “Episode 7” of *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* (2003-07), where a multiscreen language was used for a new visual experience. Uncannily, his critical stance was echoed in two other events at the time: in the Meiu Münt painting exhibition *The Day is Dark* and at the 20th *Transmediale* (tm20), festival for art and digital culture, where Byung-Chul Han spoke poignantly about hyperculture. All three artists articulated their concern that historical consciousness must be raised.

Münt’s exhibition at the Estonian Embassy opened on the day of the tm20. The two events could not be more
different. One was a show by a young painter from an ex-Soviet Republic, who pursues a traditional painting practice; the other, the festival for web- and media-art fans. Timothy Druckery was among the latter and declared that media art has won the battle with traditional art. “It’s 26 years old.” The term media art, which initially meant video art, is overused and emptied of its meaning. Panellists called for a new designation such as digital, web and/or Net art. But before that, Druckery asked, “What is media-art practice now, and who controls it?” Answers given included: experience through an apparatus, interrogation of the apparatus itself, electronically distributed field and “digital standards are controllably interrogated by big companies.” No new term was articulated.

Greenaway declared painting “the supreme art of the Western world” and positioned himself as a painter by training. “Just think about how powerful paintings are,” he started his talk. Cinema is a natural follow-up, but nothing new is being done. Cinema is desperately lacking the visual because it is too textual. “Scorsese is redoing Griffith. Harry Potter and Lord of the Rings are illustrated texts.” Has the language of cinema really changed? He paused, then said, “My feelers tell me that cinema is becoming a subculture to painting.” He spoke of the hunger to reintroduce benchmark paintings to a younger generation. Those brought up with the World Wide Web, cellphones, iPods and other digital technologies lack historical knowledge of visual culture. They don’t know where their high-definition tools come from. Critics at the tm20, among them Christine Ross, also voiced concern over this issue. “Current video art,” she said, “does not indicate a sense of the understanding of the history of video.” Liu Wei, in A Day to Remember (2002, 13 minutes, TV monitor), exposes the lack of knowledge of important moments in history among his peers in China. Holding his hand-held camera, he went on campuses and asked students, “What happened on June 4?” Responses expressed ignorance and denial. Hundreds of young protestors were massacred on that day in 1989 around Tiananmen Square. The jury awarded Wei an honourable mention. The media-art award went to the Belgian Herman Asselberghs for Proof of Life (2005, 30 minutes), a projection of rooms empty of people with a male voice describing horrific scenes seen on TV. Proof demonstrates the power of the text with death as subject while the digital medium functions as mediated witness.

In Nightwatching, Greenaway turns Rembrandt’s Nightwatch (1642) into a tableau vivant. Rembrandt is depicted as an uncouth individual, but passionate a painter. “I want to bring into view his public and private life, his idea of painting-as-stage-production,” while exposing the production processes. The seven-hour Tulse Luper deals with issues of imprisonment, inasmuch as we may all be prisoners of something: and with uranium as energy or mass destruction, paradise or Armageddon. Greenaway challenges cinema’s tyranny (as he phrased it) – text, single frame, acting, camera and director. The result is a visual and sound experience, a hypermedia of immediacy and estrangement. He leaves us in the digital format, where new possibilities of seeing and perceiving are explored, possibilities that would be unthinkable with celluloid. He paints with a digital brush, in the present tense, to jolt viewers into active critical relations with art, history and life.

This Brechtian idea of combining art and life by leading viewers away from a feel-good response and towards a critical disposition is also realized in Münt’s oil paintings. Her compositions (of iconic isolation, no shadows, shallow spaces, uncertainty of location) are dark and austere and they generate a critical and disenchanted appeal. I regard them as visual parallels to Han’s arguments: One cannot easily step into her tableaux to escape or dream, except by “wearing” one of the old-fashioned dresses (likely costume studies) that occupy half of the show’s pictures. The dresses vary in size, as do the canvases. The smaller paintings depict child-size ballet dresses; the larger cocktail dresses in red, grey and black, all against a dark background. Small Dots (2002), a 1950s-style dress, is the most inviting. As the only adult-size garment on a lighter ground, it seems frivolous, even in its stylistic simplicity. Each dress is placed on a cloth hanger — not fastened, just suspended. During his talk, Han made reference to a performance he saw at the tm20: “I would have liked him to keep his clothes on,” he said, “for to clothe is to close. We don’t know how to clothe/close anymore.” He also spoke of “time as getting naked,” of theology and of teleology and narrative — those traditional old-time dresses.

A small tableau in the corner of the beautiful old villa housing the embassy was especially captivating. Black Angel (2006) is a childlike creature, crouching and with wings spread, looking out with gleaming eyes. Brush
The most challenging compositions, judging from remarks \[\text{I read}, \] were the four Episode canvases (2006) on which bodies either fade in or emerge out of an apparent black ground, as fragmented beings. To the remark, "I can't see their faces in that darkness," the artist responded, "I paint with navy blue not black." Chromatic distinction makes all the difference and alters perception. There is relief in knowing that dark blue was used, and not black, which would implying loss and pain.

Han painted a maritime picture (based on Hegel): "Now one looks into the World Wide Web—an ocean without a horizon—to navigate in darkness and alone. The lights of the others are turned off, except for this inner, intellectual light, which is burning. But thinking alone is loneliness." This new seascape knows neither spirit nor Logos (the Word of God in Christian theology) in an emphatic way. Logos is replaced by a hyperlink, turning dialogue into log-in. Hypercultural windowing does not allow dialogue. "It's about identity formation and growing up," said another spectator of the Episode pictures. Indeed, something like that can be discerned and drawn from those fragmented individuals—boys or girls, young men or women— with little to wear but undergarments, crouching and waiting as in Episode 1—White Socks. Or crawling and searching for firm ground and guidance as in Episode 2—Crawling. Han spoke of the younger generation not having a firm ground to stand on. It is uprooted locally but connected virtually to the world. It surfs the oceans not as adventurers or colonizers, as in Hegel's time, but as friendly tourists in the hyperroom and as consumers. Viewers applauded the show, their fascination was visible, and it seemed to me that they were recognizing traces of their own life and time, though they were unable to translate it clearly into conscious terms.

Some said Han's talk was a harsh critique of the digital age, while others called it "disaster thinking." Han spoke of death and unfilled time as markers of the current hyperculture—a notion clearly reflected in the art discussed. Many young listeners, not much older than the speaker—it's not about a generational gap here—left the room in defiance, perhaps jolted by a truth unbearable to take? Days later, Han's small but significant book, Hyperkulturalität, was sold out. He started his lecture with, "We live in a time of death. But I want to give you a philosophical declaration of love." His arguments are based in part on Hegel's notion of love and freedom concerned with the homo liber (free person). I saw this Benjaminian angel, it has knowledge of the past and future, in Black Angel. He built on Godard's film Passion went to the Estonian Ulo Krijgul for his composition Jenzeits [sic].

The Transmediale developed as an alternative to Berlin's International Film Festival and runs parallel to it, comprising exhibitions, performances, workshops and conferences. This year's theme was "UTUHUH." Druckery named art historians Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh "the horsemen of the apocalypse" for excluding media art from their recent joint publication.

He was invited by the Museo del Prado to do a film project on Velasquez's art.

The Transmediale catalogue, Berlin 2007, 58 and 61.

He built on Godard's film Passion (1982). Nightwatching was commissioned by Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum.

Byung-Chul Han, "Hyperlogik," in his Hyperkulturalität: Kultur und Globalisierung (Berlin: Merve, 2005). See also the review of this book by Max Lerner (on the web).

Maria Zimmermann Brendel who holds a PhD from McGill University, Montreal, is working as an art critic in Berlin.