

HELMHAUS ZÜRICH

Hannes Rickli Videograms

6 September to 25 October 2009

The work of Zurich artist Hannes Rickli examines fractures in the aesthetics of the everyday. The “Videograms” exhibition is based on scientific audiovisual material gathered from research into the behaviour of insects and fish. The result is a productive tension between two sets of arguments: those of the natural sciences on the one hand, and of the arts on the other. In parallel with the Hannes Rickli “Videograms” exhibition, Zurich’s Helmhaus is showing “Videogeographies” by Ursula Biemann.

The audiovisual material used in Hannes Rickli’s installations at Zurich’s Helmhaus was created in scientific laboratories. It consists of images and sounds recorded by cameras and microphones during observations of the behaviour of insects and fish. The media equipment furnishes biologists with the tools of their trade and is part of their experimental systems. Once they have been scientifically analysed, the products (“videograms”) do not normally have any further use.

Hannes Rickli’s work examines fractures in the aesthetics of the everyday: using videograms and installations, he opens up perspectives to reveal the mechanisms of social relationships through the use of instrumental media. He finds them in places as diverse as car parks, sports stadiums, CCTV cameras and scientific laboratories.

For the series of works shown at the Helmhaus, Rickli has removed the materials from the laboratory environment in which they were created and transposed them into the realm of art, transforming scientific data into worlds of image and sound. In so doing, he releases the potential for narratives in which rational and aesthetic arguments intersect and conflict.

The artistic sphere renders observable the processes of research in the early stages of experimentation: the actions of building and assembling, matching objects, media and research subjects, spatial and lighting conditions, atmospheres, gestures of searching and hesitating. Image interference and transmission errors serve to remind us that the artist is working at the edge of what can be depicted. Behind the appearance of objectivity, and as an unnoticed by-product of the data, it becomes evident that scientific facts are established not simply on the basis of preordained plans, but rather in the physical resistance among human, technical and animal actors. The information ultimately presented in a scientific publication as a fixed table, diagram or formula has its origins in a series of specific events in which the test subject is continually questioned in novel and evolving ways.

The animal – the very nature and object of epistemic interest – is present only briefly in the research process. By reversing the relationship between scientifically relevant data and the time of its recording – often a matter of just a few seconds or milliseconds – the exhibition’s

videograms enable the viewer to experience different forms of temporality: the brief moment of a measurement (phenomenon time); series of reconfigurations of the experimental system over a period of years (researcher time); or, in the case of the live transmission of the work "Roter Knurrhahn" ("Tub Gurnard") from Helgoland, observation of the experiment in real time, with the impossibility of predicting what events will occur and when.

Since the early 1990s, individual researchers have been passing recordings of their video-graphic work to Rickli once the results of their experiments have been published. This archive – organized as a work-in-progress project ("Arena, Excess", from 1992), now contains over a hundred hours of video on U-matic, VHS and S-VHS tapes, and around two thousand hours of digital video. A few sections of them have so far been incorporated into individual works and shown in an artistic context. However, systematic processing of the collection's holdings has only been undertaken in the last two years, via the "Excess – videograms of experiments" research project initiated by Hannes Rickli and conducted at the Zurich University of the Arts. This work has given rise to eight of the ten installations on display in the exhibition.

The scientific research material that Hannes Rickli has selected and is now showing in isolation within the artistic context is characterized by a sense of calm, but also by the way in which the scientists' deliberately reduced experimental systems constantly challenge us to ask what is actually happening. In fact there are both highly active, even dramatic sequences of a fruit fly in flight, for example, and restful, contemplative sequences in which a tub gurnard (a bottom-dwelling sea fish) is simply sleeping. Then suddenly it wakes up, and with an elegant swish of its tail fin begins to move away. The researchers are listening out for the sounds it makes, its communication: for them, every sound is an event. The fish, on the other hand, has a completely different and more open perspective. It simply carries on living while it is being investigated. Rickli thus also reflects the mode of observation: the observation of the researcher and observation in art, as both producer and recipient of art. The creatures being observed are not consigned to a purely passive role, but rather assert an autarky governed entirely by its own rules.

This silent concentration on individual creatures gives the images a unique beauty. Movement patterns, captured either in real time or with the use of a high-speed camera in slow motion, are rendered visible. The magical appearance and disappearance of a fish exemplifies the eventfulness of life as a whole, and not merely that of animals. It stands for coming and going, and poses the question, "Where to?" In each round of projected images from a research station in Lake Constance, closer inspection reveals the shape of a globe. An element of theatre and performance breaks in when the head of a researcher suddenly butts into the picture, or when we follow with fascination the gestures of a scientist clad only in shorts, socks and a headlamp: What patterns and motivations are his terpsichorean gestures pursuing?

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Unlike other forms of image in the scientific environment (such as photography and tomography), which have already been the subject of much debate, the influence of the video medium on the process of obtaining knowledge in laboratories has hitherto received little theoretical attention. From 10 to 12 September 2009 at the Collegium Helveticum / Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Zurich, an international conference entitled "Latent images – forms of narrative in useful film" (organized by the Zurich University of the Arts, Ruhr University Bochum and the Helmhaus Zurich) will address this very topic.

The pieces on display at the “Videograms” exhibition were mostly produced as part of the “Excess - videograms of experimentation” research project at the Zurich University of the Arts. The project, which ran from 2007 to 2009, was headed by Hannes Rickli and supported by the Swiss National Fund. Research partners: PD Dr. Philipp Fischer, Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Marine Research, Helgoland; Dr. Steven N. Fry, Institute of Neuroinformatics, University and ETH Zurich; Prof. Dr. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin; Prof. Dr. Hans A. Hofmann, Section of Integrative Biology, University of Texas at Austin. Project partners: Videocompany Zofingen; Helmhaus Zurich. Artistic assistants: Michele Dell’Ambrogio; Roman Keller. For further information, visit www.ifcar.ch

Hannes Rickli was born in 1959 and studied photography and the theory of art and design at the University of Art and Design, Zurich. He has received numerous awards for his work (most recently an artist’s scholarship from the city of Zurich, 2005; a studio fellowship in Berlin, Landis & Gyr, 2005; and the Prix Meret Oppenheim, Federal Office of Culture, 2004), which has also been shown at many exhibitions in Switzerland and abroad (one-man shows, most recently: 2008 Galerie Weltecho, Chemnitz, “Aggregat Chemnitz” and Kunstraum Kreuzlingen, “Videogramm Knurrhahn” [“Tub Gurnard Videogram”]; group exhibitions, most recently: 2008 Villa Elisabeth, Berlin, “Art as Research”; 2007 Weserburg, Museum of Modern Art, Bremen, “Say it isn’t so. Art trains its sights on the natural sciences”; 2006-07 Helmhaus Zurich, “Was macht die Kunst. Ankäufe der Stadt Zürich 2001-2006” [“What’s art up to: Purchases by the city of Zurich, 2001-2006”]; and 2005 Fotomuseum Winterthur, “Set 2: The Dream of Myself, the Dream of the World”).

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While Hannes Rickli transfers audiovisual material from natural science research to the artistic arena, Ursula Biemann, whose works are being shown in a parallel exhibition at the Helmhaus, organizes sources of knowledge – both existing and deliberately created by herself – to form polyphonic aesthetic montages. Where Rickli uses material left over from scientific research in an artistic environment, Biemann combines expert knowledge with her own personal impressions. Both artists add value by collating scientific and theoretical material and transposing it into the artistic arena. By appropriating from research and science, they investigate the production of knowledge – and, in so doing, create new knowledge of their own that extends beyond science: art lays bare its own activity in a constant spirit of self-reflection, thereby opening it up for discussion. Both artists thus sensualize theoretical material and contribute to a productive, cross-disciplinary process of theory construction.

The medium of video is the perfect channel for demonstrating the eventfulness of socio-political occurrences and scientific research. Hannes Rickli sheds new light on the stability of scientific results. He shows the steps in the process of discovery and illuminates the wealth of material on which they are based – and, in interviews, critically examines the motivations of their authors. For Rickli, then, science is a fragile construct that begins by groping in the dark, is guided by individuals, and is consciously exposed to coincidences. Rickli’s view of science is critical in the best sense of the word – constructively critical, because releasing scientific images in an artistic space opens up new ways of reading them. The African cichlid and the common fruit fly are immediately transformed from research subjects into autonomous individuals whose behaviour can indeed be partially studied, given the right amount of research skill and effort, but which, as creatures, remain largely unexplained in their entirety.

Removed from laboratories and liberated in their full graphic quality, these moving video images develop contemplative, almost meditative qualities. We could never have imagined that such granular “detritus” taken from scientific laboratories and exhibited in the “neutral” environment of art would restore to us our ability to stare open-mouthed at the mobile wonders of nature.

Ursula Biemann’s work, by contrast, reveals the extent to which the information presented to us every day as a master narrative via media such as CNN is in fact a construct; she shows us how selective and interpreted, how fluid and fleeting it really is. Biemann heightens our awareness of the repressed subsidiary strands of information, of conflicts and contradictions. Instead of taking mainstream information at face value, she examines packages of data from every angle, looks at what lies behind them, how they came into being, and what they are hiding. In this sense, her work too is critical – constructively critical – as the distance between her attitude and the object of her criticism generates new information. For Biemann, the medium of video opens up ways of revealing the constructed nature of information – and of transparently communicating new, nuanced, polyphonic information. Biemann’s video explorations are devoted to counter-geographies created by concealed operating systems, innovative practices of resistance, and migratory self-determination. By entering zones that are off limits, secret pathways, clandestine and virtual territories, the videos render visible a subversive geographical practice, thereby examining the extent to which artists can take their place in these symbolic and material spaces.