

Andreas M. Kaufmann

**ON COLORS,
GESTURES &
TRANSFORMATION**

This show by Andreas M. Kaufmann (Zurich, 1961) brings together the installation *13 Blind Men Walking*, the electronic sculpture *Public Monument: Carlos* and the project *Innocent Colors*. It is a triptych in which each individual component respectively investigates sensorial dislocations, expressive forms in public space, and the relationships between information, propaganda and photography.

11.06 – 26.09.2021

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Ajuntament de
Barcelona



Many of the projects undertaken by Andreas M. Kaufmann (Zurich, 1961) explore the role that technology plays in the construction of linguistic, sensory and even ideological perceptions. However, instead of dwelling on its most obvious quirks such as unidirectional interaction, games that distort or endorse the subject of observation, and the sense of wonder aroused by certain devices, the artist actually investigates the opposite. In other words, he studies to what extent there are some forms of technological expression that not only “question themselves” to allow the grammatical elements within them to be glimpsed, but also become vehicles of simplicity and channels that assemble interfaces and their rearguards.

A usage proposal rather than a poetics, a production of meaning rather than a statement of intentions. That is how we might consider the role of the device in the works by Kaufmann, who brings to all of this a certain playful vision blended with positions that are not devoid of political irony. Because, when machines “talk”, when they eschew their “gadget” nature, all they actually do is announce their inherent anachronism, the characteristic that enables them to occupy several space-times at once. Indeed, it is such simultaneity – the most inalienable condition of a work of art – that distinguishes art from science or history, is it not?

On colours, gestures and transformation is a show that brings together three different works: the installation *13 Blind Men Walking* (2021), the electronic sculpture *Public Monument: Carlos* (1998) and the project *Innocent Colors* (2009-2011).

It is a triptych in which each individual component respectively examines the processes of dislocation of audio and visual coordinates, collective attention systems in public space, and the antagonistic relationships between information, propaganda and photography.

Turning firstly into a beat and then into music, the rhythm finally becomes a deafening symphony in which the artist himself appears simultaneously “overexposed” and “underexposed”, omnipresent and fragmented into multiple prisms. It transforms *13 Blind Men Walking* into a kind of metaphor about the spectral character of images, and about the transfers that bring together and separate whoever is recording and looking, and whoever is being observed. This installation shares a spirit associated with Dadaist nonsense and

also with a kind of archaeology of industrial noise music and aesthetics, as if, in a single gesture, Nam June Paik or Wolf Vostell were mixed with Electronic Body Music (EBM), as if Dan Graham's *Time Delay Room* (1974) were crossed with one of those optical attractions that cause surprise and hilarity, and that make us understand how cameras recording our movements and distorting our faces work.

The Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa has insistently questioned the prevalence of “ocularcentrism” in Western culture, the hegemonic role that sight plays in the hierarchy of the senses. Pallasmaa advocates a subjective reconfiguration based on a new haptic paradigm, where the capacity to experience space is returned to touch and the skin. Kaufmann seems to extend that reprobation from the very interior of his images, chopping them up in such a way that they somehow become uncapturable.

Public Monument: Carlos is a piece whose apparent simplicity belies multiple readings. A man with functional diversity, stationary in the middle of a busy shopping avenue, starts performing the typical football keepy-uppy exercise. He does it with two crutches instead of feet; he also uses his head. His abilities are really amazing; the accuracy he displays in no way goes unnoticed by the passers-by. Some watch him in awe and some reward him with a few coins for the show he has put on, while others walk past indifferently.

Against the symbolic reification that a monument represents, Carlos is an embodied metonym of how public space is also—or is, above all—a vast spectrum of signs in which any interference forces habits and expectations to be renegotiated. Although it may seem otherwise, this work and *13 Blind Men Walking* display strong connections; using audio and visual recordings, both document the disruptive presence of two individuals—Kaufmann himself and Carlos—within two opposing yet parallel symbolic territories, one of perception within a protected environment like an exhibition room, and the other of socialisation in an unprotected place like the street.

Innocent Colors started with a compilation of news stories downloaded from the Internet, in which the headlines and illustrations were linked. From here, Kaufmann relates two observations: the first is whether a photograph serves to illustrate news content and even whether an image can add information to what is apparently being communicated; the second is about Photoshop software, which



Sequence of *Public Monument: Carlos*, 1998

Hubble looks for missing matter



provides an Average filter that functions like a spectrophotometer that analyses the amount of RGB or CMYK in an image and can therefore define it using exclusively chromatic variables.

By applying this filter to several images, the outcome is a kind of Pantone system in which the photograph has been replaced by colours with absolute value, which compose a tonal landscape on which the various headlines are inscribed. The absence of optical detail, the photographic condensation transformed into polychromy, turns what was previously illustrative—adding iconographic elements or characters—into a theatrical background, so to speak. An image that bypasses, accentuates or distorts what is being said becomes, by means of a game of saturation or omission, a uniform backdrop, the place where the links between information, dissuasion and distortion are laid bare.

THERE ARE IMAGES...

Siegfried Zielinski

Alchemy is a practice of transformation. Moreover, it is a highly sophisticated culture of experimentation. The most important procedures are dividing up and putting together. Repeated separation and mixing changes matter. The goal of this experimental practice is two-fold: in the course of the work processes, experience with the things of nature is increased and it is also about the refinement of base, profane matter. Through separating and mixing that which is familiar and cheap to us, alchemy seeks to create other more valuable qualities than those in existence before the process began.

In alchemistic tracts, the various stages of transmutation were often described as steps. Corresponding to the number of planets known at the time of classical alchemy, the transformation process consisted of seven steps. The adepts named the highest one the step of projection. This was where the mysterious change from evil to good, from base to noble, took place.

The concept “project”, which is contained in the idea of projection, took on a special meaning at the end of the 20th century. In the philosophy of Vilém Flusser it was also introduced as an alternative; a possibility which would enable us to escape from paralysing and despairing subject-object relationships. Flusser’s draft of “the world as projection”—the title of one of the last essays to be published in his lifetime—is for him a way to save the option of changing the world by locating it in a context that is, to a great extent, programmatically determined, that emerges from calculations.

Understood in this way, projection comprises a utopian potential. Projection machinery as techniques for changing the world is machinery of possibilities and also machinery of hopes. It does not destroy, or at most only surfaces that appear to have been handed down by tradition. It fits things together in a new way. Its mode of existence is light. Without the power of this energy, one can see nothing in the outside world at all (Analogous to the electromagnetic waves of sound: loudspeakers project sound waves into three-dimensional space and, in this way, make it into an acoustic time-space.). In processes such as these, the

artist is responsible for two essentials: for controlling the direction and intensity of light and for structuring the objects that are transmitted by the light. The latter is dirty work.

For the projection of pure light, insofar as it is possible under laboratory conditions, only dazzles, there is not a trace of perception of structure or form. The excitement felt by 17th century experimental astronomers about the new possibilities opened up by tele-scopy of heavenly bodies in the scientist’s laboratory was not occasioned by the fact that light could now travel great distances. What fired their enthusiasm was being confronted by the spots that had suddenly become visible, on the surface of the sun, for example. In Johannes Zahn’s famous handbook on optics, *Oculus Artificialis* (1685), he is still euphoric about the capabilities of the camera obscura: “it can even pull the spots down from the heavens...” And the first historical instance of an artificial image being projected that I know of was a female devil-angel in 1420—disreputable, forbidden, eerie.

Andreas Kaufmann does both—the dirty work and the refinement. He is a rag-and-bone man, refuse collector, archivist, tinkerer, and at the same time an illuminator, magician, and divinely gifted projectionist and epidiascopist.

For his projects, he rummages through collections, pulls them apart, isolates certain elements, and puts them together again using self-made circuits and intervals for his projectors. In the cases of his large and small machinery of art history or *Dies academicus* (1990), these are images on which history, the market, science, or critics have bestowed the status of great art; however, because of endless passages through processes of reproduction, they have long since taken on a character of triviality. In *ZWANG und Wiederholung* [compulsion and repetition] (1994), the material is journalistic photos, frozen moments of the social and political everyday world that Kaufmann has wrenched from their original medium, the newspaper, in order to put them together again in another form: the projection screens are formed by the folded edges of stacks of newspapers. In the *Machina Encyclopaedia* (1995), it is fragments of the collected knowledge of images from the authoritative lexicon of the Germans, the mundane *Brockhaus*...

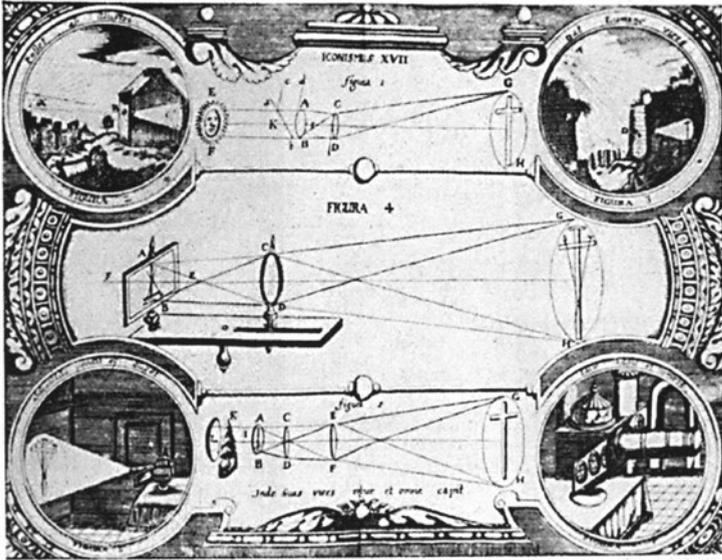
To reach for the light has its dangers. To have light at one's disposal means to possess power. Tales from mythology and religion are full of temptations and enticements via light as a medium of ascendancy and as a medium of decadence that ultimately leads to the realm of shades. *Sturz* [fall] (1994), the projection of the famous drawing by Hendrik Goltzius from the late 16th century of Phaeton falling backwards (the last time I saw it was in Porto Allegre, southern Brazil, where it was engraved on an ugly concrete wall in the town centre) but on the façade of the Amsterdam Hilton hotel it can also be read as a warning, as a critical reference to the artist himself. Light and grandeur are very close. Refinement through art does not necessarily mean that competing with the appearance of the divine is desired or intended. "It is not the fall that kills you, but the sudden stop", as Zack alias Tom Waits scratched on a house wall in Jim Jarmusch's *Down By Law* before his girlfriend throws him out for good.

According to Kant, subjectivity is the active appropriation of a place. For artists, who do not work for a particular gallery, an unknown collector, or a museum but instead, in their works and work processes, intentionally engage with a specific time and space relation, this definition still makes a lot of sense. Andreas Kaufmann is such an artist. He works with and through media which have the power and the possibility to leave the hallowed halls of art, possibly even to transgress them. He is a vagabond squatter, temporarily occupying cellars, bunkers, castles, monasteries, or hotels who changes these receptacles built for other purposes into arsenals of recollections, into audiovisual card indexes, into discourse-machines, or their facades into shining architecture that seems to lose its gravity through his projections, temporarily liberated to become filigree structures. In a very special way he thus gives those architectures with pretensions to having been built for posterity their temporality back again. Light not only moves very fast, it expends itself quickly, is wasted. For Georges Bataille, the sun is the most extravagantly wasteful of all the celestial bodies.

A special form of projection is the televisual one. What we see on the fluorescent screen, for example, of the Braun tube of a monitor, are points of light inscribed at amazing speed. The speed at which they succeed one another is so fast that they get round the



Monk with the projected figure of a she-devil



Johannes Zahn, *Oculus artificialis*

lethargy of our possibility for visual differentiation and we perceive them as continuous movements. Here, the projection beam is aimed at us. It comes directly at us from the deflectors of the tube and is only toned down by the milky glass of the matt screen. Otherwise, we would be dazzled. However, from our perspective as the viewers, what we have here is not *bias light*, as in cinema or slide projection, where our gaze takes the same direction as the projector's beam. Television and video are dispositifs of transmitted light. There is a complete confrontation between our gaze and the cathode rays of the tube. This creates a condition of distance, contrasted to the inclusion, or even immersion, of film projection. With television, there is no identification; at best neighbourliness, familiarity.

In his installation *27 Blind Men Walking* (1999), Andreas Kaufmann attempts to reverse these conditions of seeing and projection, to turn them upside down. A collection of various types of video monitor stand in a room and quite close to each screen is a ticking metronome. Tiny cameras, which are usually employed in surveillance, are mounted on the arms of the metronomes. These mini-cameras are looking at us; they extend the rays, so to speak, that reach us from the monitors. Views of us, the visitors in the room, are taken and fed back to the monitors in a short loop. The conditions for seeing and projecting are made even more complicated by the fact that there is not just one camera and one monitor but twenty-seven and, what is more, each artefact is very different. The movement of the metronomes causes the cameras on their arms to deliver truly crazy images. Conventional time-space relations appear temporarily suspended. Nothing seems to be safe any more. It takes quite a long time to work one's way through this world of images and reach solid ground once more. One experiences this same feeling of happiness if one is not put off by chaotic situations but studies them until they reveal their inner beauty.

It is a strange state of uncertainty among all these conditions of seeing in projection and introspection, of supervision and transparency, of inclusion and exclusion, that the electronic sculpture *Public Monument: Carlos* (1998) describes. For me, this work has a special status in Kaufmann's work. For this work, he combed the living arsenal of a city, a continuous nervous montage of attractions, both pleasant and repulsive, which we subsume

under the abstract concept of urbanity. Suddenly, he encounters a single phenomenon in the heterologous diversity which he cannot get out of his mind. In the midst of shopping crowds in a Cologne precinct, a cripple juggles a red ball with his crutch. Masterfully, totally absorbed, with great calm and dexterity. Time and again, Kaufmann goes back to him, stays with him, until a relationship of trust develops between them. Only when this has been achieved does Kaufmann take up a frontal position to the unusual juggler and takes a close medium shot of him engaged in what he does every day. Then Kaufmann processes the juggler's artistry into a seemingly endless, flowing movement. The resulting sculpture in time is highly sensitive and empathic. Andreas Kaufmann creates something that art rarely manages to achieve, and art through and with media hardly ever. The images he has recorded and how he has worked them give the man in front of the camera something back that for many, who see him in the street and throw him a few coins, he has lost: dignity, respect, autonomy.

There are images that make one completely forget for a time how they came about, through which technique, mechanical or electronic, analogue or digital... . The inner rays of sight of an observer and the energy emitted by an object meet in mutual affection. In these rare cases, the alchemistic process has reached the highest step. It can indeed be called a successful projection.

Translated by Gloria Custance

Published in: *Andreas M. Kaufmann: here you are*. With texts by Siegfried Zielinski, Montse Badia, Jan Winkelmann and Uta M. Reindl. Published by Susanne Pflieger (Städtischen Galerie Wolfsburg). Köln (Salon Verlag) 2000.

Curator: Valentín Roma

DL B 10011-2021

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