

PICTURES OUT OF A PERSONAL COLLECTIVE A MEDIAL MUSÉE IMAGINAIRE

When you drive towards Bakersfield from Beverly Hills, you come to a turn-off, three times as wide as the main road, that ends up at the gates to Universal Studios. Here hundreds of sets and Potemkin-Like buildings are the stamping ground of all those film stars people often know even better than they do their own neighbors. The studios house an elaborately devised, artificial reality, whose omnipresence in movies, television and the press has substantially influenced the way we perceive the world around us. The scales, in our reception of what is authentic and what is counterfeit, have forever been tipped in favor of fiction.

The studio for special effects is highly recommendable. On three stages visitors are shown how the celluloid artists simulate fantastic worlds in small, stuffy studios - a tour of the history of medial construction. The reenactment of a sequence from Hitchcock's film *Saboteur* (1942) is particularly impressive, not because of the plot but because of the exposure of the conditions of construction. A few visitors are invited to go up on stage to be stars of the screen for a brief resurrection of the Hitchcock episode that most of them have already seen in the "original." Thus the audience witness a rather strange performance: on one hand, the great master's original is imitated by nonprofessionals; on the other; this imitation is professionally filmed and projected on to a huge screen in the studio. Like the closed circuit often used in video art, the result, though unintentional, is a juxtaposition of three medial aggregate states: the pictures in our minds, the drama on stage, and the live video transmission of the distilled performance.

This presentation is strikingly akin to the artistic strategy that marks the work of Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler. The cult of medial images - affirmatively celebrated in Hollywood - is subjected to highly sophisticated, deliberate and complex deconstruction in the artists' installations, videos, and photographic series. like Hitchcock,¹ Hubbard and Birchler explore the deceptive surfaces of everyday realities, both "real" and mediatized. They examine and analyze their own gaze and, to a certain extent, ours as well. Given the

current mix and overlapping of disciplines, art-immanent,² historiographic³ and museological references are not only inevitable but, in fact, intentional: in their subtly intricate and enigmatic manipulation of today's medial *Musée Imaginaire*, Hubbard and Birchler test the depth and the patterns of our reception with unerring precision. This quality is most conspicuous in their last two works, *Falling Down* (1996) and *Desert Song* (1997). *Falling Down* is a series of eight photographs, each of which show part of the body of either a man or a woman, between the knees and the stomach. Through the systematic omission of the head, the gaze is focused on the gesture and the bodies are depersonalized. Although the artists function as the protagonists of the pictorial story in *Falling Down*, as in most of their works, their biography is not relevant to the reception of the pictures. They wear ordinary clothes, they move in front of an ordinary background, they experience the ordinary little mishaps of daily life: they play the role of the bungler - always breaking cups and glasses, money running through their fingers, dropping a ball - and thereby transform themselves into human archetypes.

This impression of heightened motifs is intensified by means of ingenious, multi-layered scenarios, reiterated in all of the photos. There are three distinct physical planes in *Falling Down*: the falling object (money, shoes, ball, cup, loaf of bread, book) in the foreground, an establishing background (bus station, camp site, hotel room, kitchen/canteen, food store, library), and the actors in between. Although the three levels cohere in terms of motif and narrative, one realizes on closer inspection that the artists have juxtaposed three different, precisely constructed realities. The background, which provides the setting, was actually shot separately and projected on to a screen from the back in the theater of the Yukon Arts Center in Canada, while the falling objects in the foreground are in a sense trompe-l'œil properties. Invisibly attached to the ceiling with a transparent string or resting on an invisible support, the objects simulate the effect of gravity but are actually fixed in space. Having staged their artificial scenario, the actors now enter the scene and fake the mishap with histrionic gestures. Once photographed, this multi-layered composition conveys the distinctive character of a moment frozen in time, of an arrested moving picture. *Falling Down* is thus photograph, film, and theater rolled into one.⁴ Although Hubbard and Birchler's pictorial constructions tell a story that has not

actually taken place in reality, they possess a curious, emblematic credibility; which the conventional snapshot can never convey, despite its obvious authenticity.

The construction of medial authenticity - be it on stage, in film, or in art - basically rests on mimetic role play, ritualized rehearsal, masquerades, and nowadays, digital simulation.⁶ Hubbard and Birchler deploy these techniques of medial construction in other works as well, only to deconstruct them again in an act of duplicate simulation, as it were. In *Falling Asleep... Waking Up...* (1994), the artists wear wax masks in mute frozen gesture, thus lending visibility to those moments between consciousness and unconsciousness which are, in effect, no longer than the blinking of an eyelid,⁷ while *Desert Song* stresses the ritualized conditioning involved in attitudes and gestures. The latter is based on a pair of ballroom dancers rehearsing a waltz. Four monitors show a four-minute sequence, clearly much slower than the original, in which a couple rehearse their steps over and over again, while constantly interrupting themselves and gesticulating as they discuss a certain sequence. The footwork, the position of their stomachs (the only place ballroom dancers are allowed to touch apart from their hands), the movement of their hands, and the correction of certain figures are the cause of the interruptions, which generally last longer than the actual execution of the steps in question. The sequences are shown without their musical and verbal context, resulting in a drawn out, excruciatingly slow and almost unbearable concentration on systematically controlling all display of feeling.

This decelerated process of rehearsal and simulation, with the dancers absorbed in their effort to eliminate mistakes, makes a striking contrast to the elegant and effortless result in competitions. But *Desert Song* only shows us the latter in two still photos of the dancers in full regalia each mounted on a freestanding wall. The man is wearing a black suit with the competition number on his back. He has taken off his glasses and dyed his hair. The woman, made-up and wearing artificial hair, poses in her glamorous dress. Shown separately, without their shared dance movements and the competition atmosphere, the two masqueraded contestants impart a disturbingly rigid, impersonal isolation. This form of presentation not only undermines the validity of the rehearsal screened on the

monitors but also of the criteria that define the functionally designed clothing. The idealized images of dancing that viewers have in their minds grasp at the air and the synchronicity of sound and movement cannot be verified. The sequences of movement reveal only the ritualized procedure of rehearsing, focusing on the discrepancy between uncontrolled and conditioned gestures, i.e. the moment of transition when affect and vitality lapse into mask-like stiffness and the internalization of a certain pose devolves into rigidity.⁸

The installation, *Contestants in a Birdhouse Competition* (1991/96), can be considered a key work in Hubbard and Birchler's studies of the rigidity and inflexibility that emerge in the interaction between the media, art, history and society. The piece is based on a documentary photograph that the artists found in the archives of the Museum of Natural History in Banff, Canada. It shows a group of children posing in front of a building in 1913 with their home-made birdhouses. Author, setting, and subjects of the photograph are unidentified. All we know today is that it was a competition. The uniform arrangement of the people and their stereotyped presentation stand in great contrast to the imaginative variety and creativity of the birdhouses.

Details are barely distinguishable in the bright sunlight that heightens the contrast and blurs the particulars. Even so, the photograph is believed to be of sufficient value as a historical source to be preserved in the museum archives. But what about its legibility? In search of an answer to this question, Hubbard and Birchler undertook precise reconstruction of the scene. They started by enlarging the original (77/8 x 97/8 in.) to approximate life-size. They then made copies of the birdhouses in the photograph. Finally, the artists slipped into the role of two children in the front row of the historical document and had a video made of themselves in this pose. *Contestants in a Birdhouse Competition* consists of the photographic enlargement of an original picture, of reconstructed birdhouses, and of the imitative video, a filmed still as it were, in which only the occasional blink of an eye betrays the fact that the subjects are alive. Although produced with the technology of the outgoing twentieth century, the reconstruction is virtually indistinguishable from the yellowed black-and-white picture of 1913. With

facility and nonchalance, the artist-actors are at home in the role of the pupil, still internalized today as it was then. Hubbard and Birchler make one thing unmistakably clear: no amount of study can ever objectivize the truth of the picture; it is hidden under well-rehearsed rituals and the visual ideas of the collective. Speaking about the medium's indistinctness, Jonathan Crary writes, "The photograph becomes a central element [...] in the reshaping of an entire territory on which signs and images, each effectively severed from a referent, circulate and proliferate."⁹

Along with the media, museums, as guardians and purveyors of pictures, play a preeminent role in adjusting human perception. They help to disseminate or relativize collective images. Hubbard and Birchler's early works in particular - *On Loan from the Museum in Us* (1993) , *Noah's Ark* (1992), *From Gardens Where We Feel Secure* (1991) - examine this catalytic function of the museum, that is, the interaction between subject and object, and the role of the institution as mediator. By confronting the conventional idea of a museum with their own ideas of museality, by manufacturing their own simulated items for display, by putting three-dimensional items in the setting of the painted picture, and by declaring themselves objects of museological display, the artists subvert the conventional function of the auratic item on display. With pointed precision, Hubbard and Birchler demonstrate that traditional criteria have lost their grip on the credibility of the object and the reception of the subject in today's media society, in which even "the congealed space of the museum cannot transcend a world where everything is in circulation"¹⁰

Translation: Catherine Schelbert

1 *Rear Window* or *Birds*, to mention two famous examples, start out by depicting a predictable, intact world - an idyllic, impermeable surface that corrodes in the course of the narrative, revealing the dark sides underneath.

2 Cf. Philip Ursprung, "Zu den neueren Arbeiten von Teresa Hubbard und Alexander Birchler" in: Gery de Smet, Andrea Fisher, Teresa Hubbard & Alexander Birchler, ex. cat., Kunsthalle Palazzo, liestal, 1994, pp. 25-29.

3 Cf. Eva Sturm, "Hubbard & Birchler" in: Speicher. Versuche zur Darstellbarkeit von Geschichte/n, ex. cat., Offenes Kulturhaus, linz 1993, pp. 144-146.

4 In contrast to Jeff Wall, for example, whose older works incorporate integral reality as the backdrop for his scenarios, or whose more recent works, like *Dead Troops Talk*, entail a digitalized computer creation assembled from analog pictures, Hubbard and Birchler synthesize a reality recorded on three levels of mediatization.

5 In this connection Philip Ursprung rightfully refers to the popularity of the genre painting in current art. Cf.: Ursprung, op.cit.

6 Oliver Stone's rendition of John F. Kennedy's assassination offers compelling proof of cinema's simulative capabilities. Stone's montage of "authentic" and "fake" pictures in the movie led to a substantial modification of public opinion regarding the president's murder. The California artists group Ant Farm already tried in the 70s to deconstruct the effect of media pictures by reconstructing the events in Dallas in their video *The Eternal Frame*.

7 In his first film, *Sleep* (1963), Andy Warhol takes an opposing tack; he records the state of sleep in real time as an uninterrupted entity by showing the main actor, John Giorno, for six hours.

8 The reverse process is visualized by Bruce Nauman in his video, *Violent Incident* (1986), where a couple's ritualized, domestic life suddenly turns into violence.

9 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. An October Book, MIT, 1990, p. 13.

10 Crary, *ibid.*, p. 20.