

## Recurring Images

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I shall describe the picture as I remember it from the first time I saw it: In a garden a young woman is lying asleep in a deckchair in front of a pool. She is dressed in jeans and a tee shirt, and has wrapped her sweater around her like a blanket. It is night and the water glistens dark and enticing. Beside the chair stand a roe deer and her young. The atmosphere in the picture is magical, with a strange sheen of faded glamour, like a fairy tale world for adults who live out their secret lives in the darkness of the night while the rest of us are asleep and notice nothing. The picture is taken from the artist-couple Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler's *House with Pool* (pages 131-135). This is a twenty-minute film that is shown in an endless loop. It was released in 2004, and I believe that I saw this image shortly after that. It reached me in the form of a series of mailings telling me about exhibitions all over the world. And it was specifically this image of the sleeping woman in the dark, nocturnal garden with the wide-awake animals that caught my interest. I actually knew very little about the artists; it was something about the picture that prompted me to save it in a folder marked "interesting." It remained there for several years until I was asked to write the essay that you are now reading.

This story that I am writing for some artists whom I have never met and for a museum that I have never visited is undoubtedly mainly about that image. And this account undoubtedly actually had its beginnings in that little decision to save the picture, wanting to keep it so as to be able to look at it again. The next question is how to tell the story, a question that I dare say is also a driving force behind Hubbard and Birchler's art, which in many respects is an investigation of the various narrative techniques used in our visual culture. Should I begin by saying what made me save the picture, or should that be placed at the end of the text for reasons of narrative technique? Since I do not know much about that I might just as well say it right away. Pointless points hardly improve by being saved for later. I know little more than that the picture managed to preserve its mystery during the long journey that it took to reach me: a moment in a film, packaged and made comprehensible for exhibition informational material, itself made to be grasped in an instant by a hypothetical public. Informational material that was intended to be effective and user-friendly. As a rule, such images are wide open. But this one kept its secrets. I had no idea what it wanted from me. It was this inaccessibility that prompted me to save it, and which made me so curious about its authors that, several years later, I came to write this text.

One of the underlying conditions for Hubbard and Birchler's work is film, its visual techniques, rhetoric, and history. This applies both to their works involving moving images and to their still photographs, which in themselves provide a map of the structures of film. Their works are underpinned by the pictorial history of film, which has to such a great extent shaped our culture: what we see, how we see, and what we believe we see. We inhabit a collective memory made up of various images from the history of film,

images that we look through when we form our image of reality. They constitute a grammar of seeing, a visual corrective. Another factor underlying their works is that film today exists in parallel with other, competing visual techniques, techniques that have created new paradigms for our notions of seeing. We employ and are still a part of the visual tradition of film, but we can also see beyond it. This allows us to see and understand it from a critical distance. It is only when a technique has become outmoded and redundant that we actually see it, and are actually able to reflect on these underlying assumptions. So it is no surprise that the preoccupation of the art of recent decades with film, its format, its history, and its images, has paralleled digital technology's development of new techniques for seeing. Hubbard and Birchler's filmic works rely on this consciousness, which is also an agreement with the viewer. Both artist and viewer know that this is how films are made, these are the rhetorical and technical devices that we use, and this is what people have done in certain specific films. This is a common space for us to spend time in, visual intellectual property that we can share. The way that Hubbard and Birchler choose to use space and to comment and play with our common pictorial heritage gives their work critical impact. An impact that is as crucial to their works as their visual seductiveness and technical skill. Or to put it a bit more precisely: technical skill and powerful visuality underpin the critical analysis of the rhetoric of film conducted in their works. This is an analysis that has long-lasting effects. It is far from certain that viewers will discover it as they stand facing the work-this is a silent criticism that is fit for travelling far in distance and time.

Part of the intense visual seductiveness of Hubbard and Birchler's works can be understood as a fetishistic double bind, a double bind that actually constitutes the film's underlying logic. We know that what we are seeing is not for real, that it is a result of technical and rhetorical devices. Yet we still want to believe in what the film shows us, we want to be spellbound by the great power of illusion. Hubbard and Birchler have deliberately emphasised this double bind, and allowed it to become part of a sophisticated play with the viewer's desire for images that promise gratification, a promise that they both keep and break, that gives their works a strange tension in which they move between visual enticement and critical defloration.

Hubbard and Birchler's oeuvre consists both of videos and photographs, that is, of both still and moving images. In particular the relationship between moving and still images is a red connecting thread running through their work, I would even dare to maintain that it is a motif in itself. Or perhaps put even more pointedly: the movement of time is a motif of their art. This applies to the very structure of their works, to the way they disrupt the narrative approach that we take for granted-chronology, plot-driving characters, dramatic highs and lows, beginnings and ends-and replace them with repetition, duplication, and ongoing flow, so as to create a different experience of time from the conventional one. But also the way that their videos always leave room for the flow of images that move, are repeated and recur once again, music that is played over and over again, people moving about, water flowing, sprinklers throwing out cascades over and over again, rain pouring down apparently interminably. Their art asks questions about the nature of

time: How can we show the movements of time? What kind of time is shown in the film's still photographs set out one after another? What happens to time when we transgress the traditional chronology of narrative?

The carefully staged images that we are faced with in Hubbard and Birchler's art always evoke a sense of entering into a sequence of events before or after the significant moment. Something has happened or is about to happen. In the video *Eight*, 2001 (below and 104- 109) a little girl in a party dress goes out into a garden where the remains of her rained -out birthday party have not yet been cleared away. The rain pours down over the table, with its plates of cake and glasses of juice, as the girl cuts a slice of leftover cake. And then it begins over again. The film is a narrative about what happens after the narrative, after the dramatic event when the rain cut short the party and everybody rushed indoors. As viewers we get a feeling that something pivotal has happened here, the sort of event that shapes a person's life. The fact that we come in before or afterwards seems to have something to do with what happened being so pivotal that it is not really possible to capture it in images or words. It can only be described by circumvention.

Their works often make use of clever pastiches of the audience-grabbers of mainstream film -a powerful image that promises that everything will now go according to all the rules of the art. As viewers we feel comfortably secure that we will not be put under strain by deviant narrative techniques or unusual camera angles. In *Night Shift*, 2006 (below and 138-141) a police officer sits in his car, drinking coffee and chatting with his partner in typical fashion, a moment of everyday camaraderie among colleagues that we recognise from countless films and TV series. But the conversation develops in such a way that we as viewers are transported into a world that shifts between dream and reality, a situation that is reinforced by the video being looped and the same improbable conversation being repeated over and over again. This unexpected breach of narrative convention is never explained, and hence has no resolution.

Through having the video repeat itself linear time is eliminated. The pictures flow like the rain in *Eight*. We are no longer sitting in front of a video that we know has a set beginning and end, and a definite temporal span. Instead we are drawn into an ongoing sequence of events in which we ourselves have to decide how long we want to take part. This decision will in turn be influenced by what works we have seen and what we have experienced. Repetition is also the underlying theme of *House with Pool*, the artist duo's most extensive project so far. This reiteration, return, recurrence is not there solely because the artists have chosen to show the video as a loop, but permeates the entire video, its characters, the structure of the narrative built up by the images. An elegant modernist building is the scene of the action for various stories and periods of time that overlay and intersect with one another. A young woman visits a house with which she seems familiar, presumably her childhood home. She moves familiarly through the garden and the various rooms, sits down at the piano, plays, and suddenly leaves the house as unobserved as she came. A beautiful woman in middle age, who could be her mother, also move through the house

and its garden, she swims in the pool, plays the piano, waits, puts on a cardigan, looks out through the window. The young woman comes and goes without being noticed. She sleeps by the pool, where a roe deer and her young are passing by. In the morning the gardener finds the animal dead in the pool. We never get any proper explanation for how these narratives fit together. The connection between them is left to emerge through associations, atmospheres, minute gestures, and resemblances. Of course, we think this is probably the young woman's mother, and we read her movements as an expression of loss. Or then the two women are the same person at different times. The video can also be read as a migration between different states, times, and spaces: then and now, outside and inside, day and night, dream and reality. The associative, open-ended narrative makes everything possible. The work is open to a number of readings the literal, the symbolic, the formal engage in play with each other. In this work the artists' use of the loop takes on a deeper significance. The repetition becomes like a search for clues. We watch the work over and over again in order to understand it and, every time, the pictures seem to offer new solutions. Finally my looking becomes like importunate questioning. I want to know something that I am convinced the pictures are hiding from me. The loop ultimately becomes like a compulsive repetition-by saying the same thing over and over again, we try to avoid answering the most difficult question. As a viewer I am constantly discovering new things, new meanings unfold, layer is added to layer, possible connections emerge, the atmospheres change, interpretation is added to interpretation. But, finally, I become painfully aware of the limitations of my own seeing. I will never get to know everything, and the picture keeps its mystery.