

STATION TO STATION: A CIRCUITOUS PATH THROUGH DOMINIK STAUCH'S VIDEOS

Paul Young

Atrocity Exhibition. World War. The avant-garde. The early 1900s. The atrocities of the First World War inspired Europe's most impassioned artists to dig deeper into the social, theoretical, political and spiritual meaning of art and to produce more profound expressions. For some of Europe's most idealistic, that meant moving away from notions of image, away from notions of personal expression, and instead into the realm of pure logic, order and machine-like precision. Popova's geometry, Malevitch's negation, Kandinsky's colour and Mondrian's balance were less about the natural world than pure representations of thought. So when those same artists began picking up movie cameras instead of paint brushes, they understood that moving imagery was not simply the medium of hope, progress and the future, but the very best way to represent dreams and ideas.

L' Anarchie. MTV and Purity. Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling, who were often referred to as 'absolute' filmmakers, were some of the earliest artists to take the ideas of the Supremacists and Neo-Plasticists and set them into motion. For Richter and Eggeling, movement itself was not only the future of painting but a way to edge the plastic arts ever closer to the pure experience of music. Oskar Fischinger and, later, Harry Smith would eventually follow suit by combining their lyrical, often highly symbolic abstractions with soundtracks composed of popular music (that is, Franz Liszt and the Beatles respectively). Stauch would find a

similar approach nearly fifty years later – not through the absolute filmmakers but through the post-modern cut-up techniques of William S. Burroughs and John Zorn. His approach would be less about achieving a kind of 'visual music' and more about creating a controlled collision, where a wide range of avant-garde references (from Mondrian to Motorhead, De Stijl to PiL, Kandinsky to Cash) would bounce off one another in an endless hall of mirrors.

Aural Pleasures. Pop and the Personal. Numerous composers – from Aaron Copland to Oliver Knussen – have woven well-known pop and folk songs into their compositions, primarily to create an instant connection with listeners. But Stauch breaks from those artists in that he not only removes each song's lyrics but drains each song of its 'colours' as he says. (He uses little more than plaintive guitar riffs in 2004's *Cowboys & Indians* for example, which correspond to a sun-like disc of changing hues.) Therefore his brightly-toned, moving images can be seen as phantom limbs for each song's chromatics and thus become instruments in and of themselves. (As Robert Morris once said, 'Color is the most optical element in an optical medium'.) The combination of spare sounds with vivid colours results in a raft of memories and suggestions, however ambiguous. *Cowboys & Indians* might invoke the wide-open expanses of Montana for instance, or the entire history of spaghetti westerns.

Pure Phase. The ghost of Minimalism cannot be avoided in Stauch's films. Indeed, one could argue that Donald Judd's boxes, Robert Morris's L beams, Ellsworth Kelly's curves, Jasper John's targets, are the real movie stars in his work. However, unlike Robert Morris (or perhaps more like Ellsworth Kelly) his shapes are often reflections of his own personal experiences. After visiting New York City, he made *Broadway Breakdance*, 2005, which presents a number of simple grid shapes patterned after New York subways and gave it a jazz score. And for *Hey Hey, My My (Into the Black)*, a song by Neil Young, he created a field of independent circles, which seem to expand and contract in a never-ending cycle. For Stauch, who was inspired by the line 'It's better to burn out than to fade away,' his dots might reflect the transient nature of celebrity, while at the same time making a direct reference to Warhol's factory. Yet in truth, like any Minimalist work, such references can never be seen as absolute.

The Colossal. Let's get Lost. Acid House. As T. J. Clark has illustrated, the birth of the middle class ushered in new notions of leisure and privacy. That in turn gave rise to two seemingly disparate trends: modernism and spectacle. 'In fact, the two are inextricably related', adds Clark. As consumer culture grew so did the appetite for the spectacular. Thus, by the 1960s, when media debates were at a fever pitch, artists began creating 'sensoriums', light shows and 'movie-dromes' specifically to immerse the viewer to the point of sensory overload. In those settings, when the conditions were just right, the viewer could experience a synesthetic response called 'haptic visuality' – as Laura Marks referred to it, where the sensation of touch could be achieved through vision alone. (Another form of haptic visuality occurs in moments of physical danger, where sound, smell and physical sensations will become organs for the eyes.) As Marks suggests, the effect can be utterly euphoric when the imagery is not calamity but visual harmony. Stauch has achieved a similar effect in such installations as *Tinkerbell*, 2009, where visitors were surrounded by massive, 360-degree, moving colour fields.

Endless Love. We/me. Inclusive vs. exclusive. In 1966, Yayoi Kusama filled an entire room with blinking lights and polka dots in a show she called *Endless Love*. That could be an equally appropriate title for Stauch, whose work seems to have an affinity for the 1960s. For Kusama love was the dissolution of all distinctions and a much needed expression for the Vietnam era. Yet love (and the boundless) also defines Stauch's work. His art is a celebration first and foremost – of history, of art, of genius, of the sensual, of media and our ability to use technology in a way that can take us to faraway places. Some say that it's futile to seek transcendence in visual art today, but Stauch suggests that transcendence is alive and well.

Paul Young is the founder and director of YoungProjects, a gallery based in Los Angeles, which is devoted to moving-image works. As a journalist his articles have appeared in *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Rolling Stone*, *Variety*, *ARTnews*, *Art+Auction*, and many more. His weekly column 'Untitled', which covered contemporary art issues, ran in the *Los Angeles Times* for two years. He is also the author of *Art Cinema* (Taschen publishers), which explores the convergence between film and contemporary art practices, and he also holds a master's degree in Film Directing. Mr Young also curates video programmes and exhibitions worldwide. His most recent show, *Supratemporal*, takes place at the Kulturhuset in Stockholm in the spring of 2012.



Dominik Stauch, *Tinkerbell*, 2009, 4-Kanal-Videoinstallation Farbe, Ton / 4 channel video installation colour, sound, 00:32, Installationsansicht / installation view CentrePasquArt Biel, Foto / photo: Patrick Christe



Dominik Stauch, *Cowboys & Indians*, 2004, DVD Farbe, Ton / DVD colour, sound, 03:30, Installationsansicht / installation view Museum Liner, Appenzell, Foto/ photo: Urs Baumann