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## Report from Berlin

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Humboldt University, (Feb. 9, 2007)

Maria Zimmermann Brendel

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ACTUALITY OF THE FUTURE

Berlin

## REPORT FROM BERLIN

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ainting has always been ahead, in terms of societal and philosophical developments," said Peter Greenaway, delivering this year's Thyssen lecture. "But only few people can read them. There is a visual illiteracy. We are trained to value language, the spoken and written word, but *not* the image." He showed excerpts from his most recent films, *Nightwatching* (2006) and "Episode 7" of *The Tulse Luper Suitcases* (2003–07), where a

multiscreen language was used for a new visual experience. Uncannily, his critical stance was echoed in two other events at the time: in the Meiu Münt painting exhibition *The Day is Dark* and at the 20th *Transmediale* (tm20), festival for art and digital culture, where Byung-Chul Han spoke poignantly about hyperculture.<sup>1</sup> All three artists articulated their concern that historical consciousness must be raised.

Münt's exhibition at the Estonian Embassy opened on the day of the tm20. The two events could not be more



different. One was a show by a young painter from an ex-Soviet Republic<sup>2</sup>, who pursues a traditional painting practice; the other, *the festival for web- and media-art fans*.<sup>3</sup> Timothy Druckery was among the latter and declared that media art has won the battle with traditional art. "It's 26 years old."<sup>4</sup> The term *media art*, which initially meant video art, is overused and emptied of its meaning. Panellists called for a new designation such as *digital, web and/or Net art*. But before that, Druckery asked, "What is media-art practice now, and who controls it?" Answers given included: experience through an apparatus, interrogation of the apparatus itself, electronically distributed field and "digital standards are given by corporation, and digital culture is dominated by big companies." No new term was articulated. Greenaway declared painting "the supreme art of the Western world" and positioned himself as a painter by training. "Just think about how powerful paintings are," he started his talk. Cinema is a natural follow-up, but nothing new is being done. Cinema is desperately lacking the visual because it is too textual. "Scorsese is redoing Griffith. *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* are illustrated texts." Has the language of cinema really changed? He paused, then said, "My feelers tell me that cinema is becoming a subculture to painting." He spoke of the hunger to reintroduce benchmark paintings to a younger generation.<sup>5</sup> Those brought up with the World Wide Web, cellphones, iPods and other digital technologies lack historical knowledge of visual culture. They don't know where their high-definition tools come from. Critics at the tm20, among them Christine Ross, also voiced concern over this issue. "Current video art," she said, "does not indicate a sense of the understanding of the history of video." Liu Wei, in *A Day to Remember* (2005, 13 minutes, TV monitor), exposes the lack of knowledge of important moments in history among his peers in China. Holding his hand-held camera, he went on campuses and asked students, "What happened on June 4?" Responses expressed ignorance and denial. Hundreds of young protestors were massacred on that day in 1989 around Tiananmen Square. The jury awarded Wei an honourable mention. The media-art award went to the Belgian Herman Asselberghs for *Proof of Life* (2005, 30 minutes), a projection of rooms empty of people with a male voice describing horrific scenes seen on TV. *Proof* demonstrates the power of the text with death as subject while the digital medium functions as mediated witness.<sup>6</sup>

In *Nightwatching*, Greenaway turns Rembrandt's *Nightwatch* (1642) into a *tableau vivant*. Rembrandt is depicted as an uncouth individual, but passionate a painter.<sup>7</sup> "I want to bring into view his public and private life, his idea of painting-as-stage-production," while exposing the production processes.<sup>8</sup> The seven-hour *Tulse Luper* deals with issues of imprisonment, inasmuch as we may all be prisoners of something; and with uranium as energy or mass destruction, paradise or Armageddon. Greenaway challenges cinema's tyranny (as he phrased it) – text, single frame, acting, camera and director. The result is a visual and sound experience, a hypermedia of immediacy and estrangement. He leaves us in the digital format, where new possibilities of seeing and perceiving are explored, possibilities that would be unthinkable with celluloid. He paints with a digital brush, in the present tense, to jolt viewers into active critical relations with art, history and life. This Brechtian idea of combining art and life by leading viewers away from a feel-good response and towards a critical disposition is also realized in Münt's oil paintings. Her compositions (of iconic isolation, no shadows, shallow spaces, uncertainty of location) are dark and austere and they generate a critical and disenchanted appeal. I regard them as visual parallels to Han's arguments: One cannot easily step into her tableaux to escape or dream, except by "wearing" one of the old-fashioned dresses (likely costume studies) that occupy half of the show's pictures. The dresses vary in size, as do the canvases. The smaller paintings depict child-size ballet dresses; the larger cocktail dresses in red, grey and black, all against a dark background. *Small Dots* (2002), a 1950s-style dress, is the most inviting. As the only adult-size garment on a lighter ground, it seems frivolous, even in its stylistic simplicity. Each dress is placed on a cloth hanger – not fastened, just suspended. During his talk, Han made reference to a performance he saw at the tm20: "I would have liked him to keep his clothes on," he said, "for to clothe is to close. We don't know how to clothe/close anymore." He also spoke of "time as getting naked," of theology and of teleology and narrative – those traditional old-time dresses. A small tableau in the corner of the beautiful old villa housing the embassy was especially captivating. *Black Angel* (2006) is a childlike creature, crouching and with wings spread, looking out with gleaming eyes. Brush



strokes are laid bare, and thus the tenderness of the hair and wings, of the entire being, comes into sight. The work sparkles in its darkness. *The Day is Dark* (2006), by contrast – large in format and from which the show's title was derived – was perceived as a mourning scene by some viewers, who reacted to the black-veiled girl. The most challenging compositions, judging from remarks I heard, were the four *Episode* canvases (2006) on which bodies either fade in or emerge out of an apparent black ground, as fragmented beings. To the remark, "I can't see their faces in that darkness," the artist responded, "I paint with navy blue *not* black." Chromatic distinction makes all the difference and alters perception. There is relief in knowing that dark blue was used, and not black, which would imply loss and pain.

Han painted a maritime picture (based on Hegel): "Now one looks into the World Wide Web – an ocean without a horizon – to navigate in darkness and alone. The lights of the others are turned off, except for this inner, intellectual light, which is burning. But thinking alone is loneliness."<sup>7</sup> This new seascape knows neither spirit nor Logos (the Word of God in Christian theology) in an emphatic way. Logos is replaced by a hyperlink, turning dialogue into log-in. Hypercultural windowing does not allow dialogue. "It's about identity formation and growing up," said another spectator of the *Episode* pictures. Indeed, something like that can be discerned and drawn from those fragmented individuals – boys or girls, young men or women – with little to wear but undergarments, crouching and waiting as in *Episode 1 – White Socks*. Or crawling and searching for firm ground and guidance as in *Episode 2 – Crawling*. Han spoke of the younger generation not having a firm ground to stand on. It is uprooted locally but connected virtually to the world. It surfs the oceans not as adventurers or colonizers, as in Hegel's time, but as friendly tourists in the hyperroom and as consumers. Viewers applauded the show, their fascination was visible, and it seemed to me that they were recognizing traces of their own life and time, though they were unable to translate it clearly into conscious terms.

Some said Han's talk was a harsh critique of the digital age, while others called it "disaster thinking." Han spoke of death and unfulfilled time as markers of the current hyperculture – a notion clearly reflected in the art discussed. Many young listeners, not much older than the speaker – it's not about a generational gap here – left the room in defiance, perhaps jolted by a truth unbearable to take? Days later, Han's small but significant book, *Hyperkulturalität*, was sold out. He started his lecture with, "We live in a time of death. But I want to give you a philosophical declaration of love." His arguments are based in part on Hegel's notion of love and freedom concerned with the *homo liber* (free person). What follows are further excerpts of his arguments: We see death everyday in the media. All of us must die, it is our destiny, but we behave as if there is no end. Death must be acknowledged as part of life so that time can be filled with meaning. Human derives from *humus*, meaning earth, and that is our destiny. We live a life of denial and material excess (in the West), and cross borders and oceans by way of electronic navigation while sitting before our screens – alone. The option is paralysis. Much of current communication is made through cellphones, which are often noncommittal. Friendship and relationships lack loyalty and long-term duration. On the Web, all is about fading in and fading out, and this has spread into our social and cultural life. Until the Cold War



ended in 1991, the atomic bomb was *the* global threat. It was a constant reminder of an impending apocalypse – the end. Do we have such a threat now?

As he spoke, I thought of the radiation-proof bunker that lies underneath (West) Berlin's main shopping street – the Kurfürstendamm – where Russian shoppers are currently the big spenders. Still functional, the bunker was built in the 1970s to shelter up to 4,000 people from a possible radioactive attack by the Soviets. We have to develop a consciousness of history and its possible catastrophic returns, argued Han. A time without end produces *Kurzschluss* (irrational action), the actions of terrorist. A time without end drives us mad.

Globalization has taken the aura of the local and replaced it with an open, borderless world of virtual attraction. The result is exposure, flexibility and acceptance of the other, but also loss of home and cultural inheritance (Heidegger's *Heimat*). In the 1970s, Deleuze and Guattari uprooted the tree, replacing it with endless rhizomes – the Net, now fully realized. Rhizomes have no memory. Ours is an existence outside cultural inheritance and memory. We need a new philosophical model that can redeem us and provide hope for the future. Han spoke of Walter Benjamin's messianic idea and alluded to his angel. I saw this Benjaminian angel, able to fill the time of the present with meaning because it has knowledge of the past and future, in *Black Angel* as promise (not as doom), waiting with wings spread, ready to fly! Han is working on a philosophical model that differs from modern and postmodern thought. Hyperculture is not multi, trans or inter but hyper.

MARIA ZIMMERMANN BRENDL

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Han is currently teaching in the Philosophy Department at the University of Basel, Switzerland.
- <sup>2</sup> In 2005, the *Young Euro Classic Music Award* (at the Konzerthaus Berlin) went to the Estonian Ula Krügel for his composition *Jenzeit* [sic]. Sincere thanks go to Dr. Nina Roy, Sandrine and Nicolas Raffet and Reet Weidebaum.
- <sup>3</sup> The *Transmediale* developed as an alternative to Berlin's International Film Festival and runs parallel to it, comprising exhibitions, performances, workshops and conferences. This year's theme was "unfinished."
- <sup>4</sup> Druckery named art historians Rosalind Kraus, Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh "the horsemen of the apocalypse" for excluding media art from their recent, joint publication.
- <sup>5</sup> He was invited by the Museo del Prado to do a film project on Velasquez's art.
- <sup>6</sup> *Transmediale* catalogue, Berlin 2007, 58 and 61.
- <sup>7</sup> The trailer version of *Nightwatching* was shown at this year's Film Festival in Cannes. For an interview with Greenaway, see Hanno Rauterberg, "Rembrandt war kein Maler" [Rembrandt Was No Painter], *Die Zeit*, December 29th, 2005.
- <sup>8</sup> He built on Godard's film *Passion* (1982). *Nightwatching* was commissioned by Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum.
- <sup>9</sup> Byung-Chul Han, "Hyperlog," in his *Hyperkulturalität: Kultur und Globalisierung* (Berlin: Merve), 2005, 72. See also the review of this book by Max Lorenzen (on the web).

**Maria Zimmermann Brendel** who holds a PhD from McGill University, Montreal, is working as an art critic in Berlin.