

Dieter Appelt, *Forth Bridge — Cinema. Metric Space*, Canadian Centre for Architecture, March 9-May 22, 2005

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Dieter Appelt

Forth Bridge — Cinema. Metric Space

Canadian Centre for Architecture

March 9–May 22, 2005

Forth Bridge — Cinema. Metric Space (details)

tableau of 312 gelatin silver prints

150 x 400 cm

2004

Collection Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal

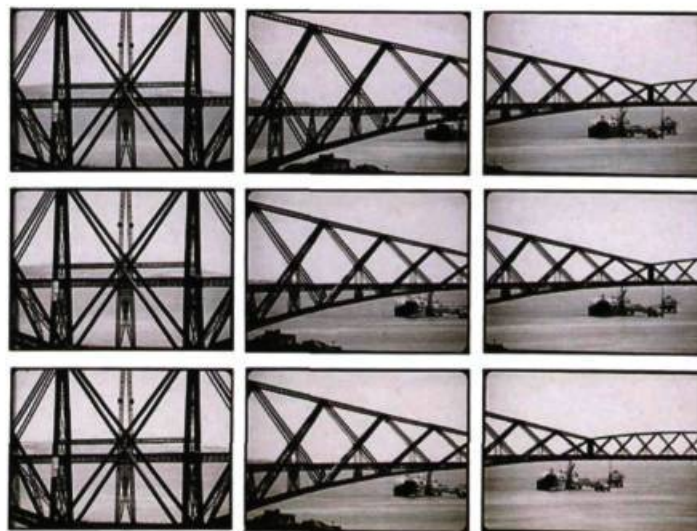
Ever since Dieter Appelt dedicated his career to making photographs in the early 1970s, he has addressed ontological issues relating to the nature of life, death, and the transmission of experience and memory. He has done this not only by developing complex sequencing structures for his images, but also by integrating into them the imagistic properties of film strips and sound recordings. Often taking his naked body covered with white marble powder as the subject of his photographs, he has enacted performances (“aktions”) under extreme circumstances, such as hanging himself upside down from the limb of a tree, placing himself in a shallow grave, and partly immersing himself in a bath of water for hours on end. Through Appelt’s art, the viewer is transported into an environment of uncommon experience where conventional relationships with time, space, and sound are displaced by alternative constructs. But even when we think we are familiar with his strategies of dislocation, Appelt, through his fertile imagination and intense drive to renew his experience of the external world, is able to confound our expectations. His *Forth Bridge-Cinema. Metric Space* (fig. 1) is a case in point.

Because a large part of Appelt’s oeuvre deals with the relationship between body, structure, and space in a very direct manner – for example, his self-portraits from the early 1970s, *Crossing the Moor* (1977), the sequence *Memory’s Trace* (1977–79), and *The Mark on the Mirror that Breathing Makes*, as well as the many other images that touch on life, death, and decay and share a corporeal quality – the *Forth Bridge-Cinema. Metric Space* seems at first glance to be contradictory in spirit. Observing a shift in his work as early as the 1980s from a theatrical and emotional approach toward a more mathematical and scientific one, Sylvia Wolf notes, “He built images by making a single work out of multiple pictures and by making multiple exposures on a single sheet of film. Inspired by Futurist works, he integrated motion into his photographs in an effort to challenge the static nature of the still image and imply more than two dimensions in photography.”¹

Perhaps it was the structural dynamism of the monumental nineteenth-century cantilevered Forth Bridge that first caught Appelt’s attention in 1976 when he visited Scotland. His initial efforts to translate the Forth Bridge’s massive and complex forms into an image were not successful, however, and the project lay dormant until Appelt returned to the subject in 2002, after Hubertus Amelunxen, senior visiting curator at the Centre for Canadian Architecture, introduced him to the CCA’s archival collection of material relating to the bridge.² A photographic work composed of eight vertical panels, each made up of three vertical columns and thirteen horizontal rows, resulting in a total

of 312 images, *Forth Bridge-Cinema. Metric Space* shares both formal (non-amplified sound patterns, film-strip projections, and sequencing) and conceptual (architectonic form, space, and time) attributes with earlier works, but it also differs strongly from them in mood and style. Amelunxen describes the process of making *Forth Bridge-Cinema. Metric Space* as follows: “Dieter Appelt first photographed the complete length of the Forth Bridge according to a numbering system based on the bridge’s railings. He then filmed it, using a 35 mm Arriflex single-frame camera, in individual 1/125-second frames.”³ Although Appelt still responded to the bridge in physical terms – he recently likened its main span to that of a giant spinal column⁴ – he was clearly searching for a means to express his experience of it in such a way that it would encompass both his sensual and intellectual appreciation of it. Amelunxen’s description of Appelt’s incorporation of the Fibonacci Sequence, a mathematical formula involving an incremental numbering system, into the photographic work, as well as the influence of Greek composer Iannis Xenakis’s percussion compositions, with their intense alternating rhythms upon it, clarifies how he succeeded in transcending a literal transcription of the bridge.⁵

This evolution of Appelt’s work from almost primordial images to sophisticated and epic orchestrations of images into grids raises the question of what the source was for this later structuring and geometricizing aesthetic that we see in *Forth Bridge-Cinema. Metric*



Space. How are we to reconcile it with the earthy, almost tactile imagery of the 1970s, and is there evidence of a conceptual, if not formal, continuum? When asked to explain how his early work connects to the later work, Appelt draws an analogy of the relationship between a satellite and its power station.⁶ Appelt's rich repository of evolving ideas about how to express his humanity in the face of life, death, and history, as well as his more immediate empirical experience of the natural and built world, is what appears to define this "power station."

I would argue that the links between early and later work are strong and progressive. An evidentiary, if rather obvious, comparison between one of the railing details in *Forth Bridge-Cinema. Metric Space* (fig. 2) and an image from *Der Augenturm* (1977) sequence (fig. 3), in which Appelt strikes a Vitruvian pose in the crossbars of his wooden tower, reveals an ongoing engagement with the resonant relationship between the human body and the built structure. The fact that the artist's body does not appear in the dynamic intersections of diagonals in *Forth Bridge-Cinema. Metric Space* has much to do with the onward intellectual journey that he made from the late 1970s to the late 1990s. During this period, he made a number of seminal images, each of which, while becoming more formally complex yet aspires, paradoxically, to greater simplicity and a greater wholeness.

Erste Hängung (*First Hanging*), from *Monte Isola* (1976) illustrates Appelt's inverted nude body hanging from a tree branch, an experience that he described as having had a "shattering emotional impact": "Afterwards I produced pictures as if in a trance, one after another. I didn't plan anymore. This picture is the beginning."⁷ If this work permitted him to think differently about his physical relationship with space, *Das Feld* (Wiesent River) (1991), composed of thirty images of the surface of eddying water arranged in a grid of five columns by six rows, extended his awareness of time. Capturing an image every sixty seconds, this work addresses a simple state of synchronicity between the moment of image creation and the changing reality of its subject matter. It also shows the artist performing his ritualistic interventions in an increasingly systematized and conceptualized manner. *Waldungen: Partitur zur Waldrandabhörung* (*Forests: Score for listening to the forest*) (1987/1994) becomes even more complex in terms of drawing interdisciplinary or intersensory comparisons, as it is a sound/sight equivalency composed of a 27 x 20 grid in which he likens the jagged silhouette of a forest's treetops to the visual pattern of soundtracks that appear alongside the imagery on a film strip. He describes this piece as one in which you "see what you hear and hear what you see."⁸

In *Forth Bridge-Cinema. Metric Space*, the same concerns regarding the experience of the body in space are evident, the same structuring intelligence is in operation, and the element of ritualistic recording practice is still there. *Forth Bridge-Cinema. Metric Space* is therefore not so much a departure from Appelt's initial investigations as it is an expansion of his visual vocabulary in order to satisfy his expressed desire to "avoid being reductive in terms of reality."⁹ The signals from the power station are consistent and evolving.

Ann Thomas

1. Sylvia Wolf, *Dieter Appelt* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago and Ars Nicolai, 1994), p. 36.

2. Phyllis Lambert, "Foreword," in Hubertus von Amelnunx, Louise Désy, and Dieter Appelt, *Dieter Appelt. Forth Bridge-Cinema. Metric Space* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2005), p. 8.

3. H. von Amelnunx, "Tempus Fugit," p. 28.

4. Dieter Appelt, "Bridging the Firth of Forth," p. 13.

5. Amelnunx, in *Dieter Appelt*, p. 28.

6. Wolf, in *Dieter Appelt*, p. 47.

7. Ibid., p. 20.

8. Ibid., p. 36.

9. Appelt, "Bridging the Firth of Forth," in *Dieter Appelt. Forth Bridge-Cinema. metric space*, p. 14.



Iain Baxter &

VOX, centre de l'image contemporaine

Montréal

10 septembre au 22 octobre 2005

La commissaire Marie-Josée Jean a fait montre de beaucoup d'imagination pour intégrer un très grand nombre d'œuvres de cet artiste prolifique dans l'espace relativement modeste de VOX.

Avouons tout de suite un préjugé, la première période de l'art contemporain, comme catégorie historique, celle qui commence dans la seconde moitié des années soixante (avec ses précurseurs) et se termine à la fin des années soixante-dix (avec ses épigones), représente sans contredit le grand moment de l'art de la seconde moitié du XX^e siècle. Iain Baxter appartient à cette période d'extraordinaire floraison intellectuelle où tout ce qui touche à l'art fut remis en question avec un radicalisme qui n'a jamais été égalé depuis. Après, dans les années quatre-vingt, les choses se sont pas mal gâtées. Maintenant, les jeunes générations jouent avec les miettes d'un programme esthétique de plus en plus clairsemé, chacun se cherchant qui un sujet, qui une cause comme autant de bouées sur une mer incertaine.

L'exposition de Michael Snow, qui avait lieu à l'UQAM en même temps que celle de Baxter dans le cadre du Mois de la photo à Montréal, offrait l'occasion d'une comparaison intéressante pour comprendre ce qui se passait dans ces années-là. La démarche de Michael Snow précède, esthétiquement parlant, un tantinet celle d'Iain Baxter, et le passage de l'un à l'autre illustre bien la transition qui s'opère du minimalisme à l'art conceptuel. La comparaison est un peu boiteuse toutefois, puisque Michael Snow – notre Marcel Duchamp canadien – est peut-être le plus conceptuel des minimalistes, mais elle va comme ceci : les œuvres de Snow, minimales en apparence mais perceptuellement complexes, requièrent une attention particulière de la part du spectateur qui doit déchiffrer le mode, ou le code, par lequel l'expérience de l'œuvre peut advenir. C'est toujours un « trip » que de regarder et de finalement comprendre une de ses œuvres. Dans l'art d'Iain Baxter, et dans l'art conceptuel en général, la dimension perceptuelle se trouvera réduite jusqu'à l'extinction au profit de la conception de départ. Car c'est souvent avec une nonchalance frondeuse que l'artiste conceptuel abordera la question de la forme matérielle qui doit concrétiser son idée, et qui se réduira parfois à une simple description par écrit. L'œuvre imitera l'apparence de documents légaux ou administratifs. Elle adoptera, dans les décisions régissant la mise en place des objets, toute la sensibilité d'un contremaître d'entrepôt. L'artiste s'associera au discours de la science, de la philosophie ou du monde des affaires pour produire des œuvres plates et impersonnelles en apparence, mais qui repoussent en fait la dimension esthétique dans ses derniers retranchements, en une sorte de fin de partie où le jeu devient de plus en plus dépouillé.

Pour les spécialistes de la question – et ils sont légion, croyez-moi –, l'art conceptuel pourrait marquer l'abandon du projet moderniste de l'art pour l'art pour inaugurer une pratique postmoderne, plus tournée vers la réalité extérieure. Mais peut-être ce changement s'est-il produit plus tard, dans les années quatre-vingt, et alors c'est d'un tout autre post-modernisme dont il s'agirait. Fascinant, n'est-ce pas ? Moi, il y a des nuits où je n'en dors pas.