
Found gazes

Eva Teppe's visual investigations

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The most famous 8mm film of all times was made by Abraham Zapruder from Dallas. The manufacturer of women's clothing and part-time film enthusiast would hardly have gone down in history had he not accidentally had his camera on at precisely the moment on 22 November 1963 when the lethal shots were fired at John F. Kennedy. The few minutes of this amateur film have been scrutinized, scanned and enlarged countless times by criminologists and other experts in the slender hope of detecting any further hidden details that might shed light on this curious sequence of events still shrouded in mystery.

In our own age Zapruder would probably have shot his footage with a digital video camera, but today the charm of the now somewhat dated feel of the analog Super 8 standard continues to attract numerous adherents, frequently organized in hobby clubs.

From the 1950s to the 1970s Super 8 reigned as *the* medium for recording family gatherings, holiday pleasures or, at times, bizarre occurrences of everyday life. It has now become all but impossible to reconstruct the source or the circumstances of the films and film fragments from this period that can still be unearthed on flea markets, junk shops or on the internet, and their authors have largely sunk into anonymity.

On a professional artistic level, however, Super 8 was more the preserve of 'film authors', independent filmmakers like Kenneth Anger and Jonas Mekas, who explored the medium's aesthetic appeal and began to use and incorporate so-called found footage in their own work. Parallel to his own films, for instance, Jonas Mekas also compiled a broad collection of amateur films on which he based his presentation in the Lithuanian pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2005.

Eva Teppe has also amassed numerous old Super 8 and 16mm films which she uses as found footage in some of her artistic work. The focus of her activity lies on processing this film and video material in a variety of ways and transforming the results into spatial *mis-en-scène*. The first piece she based on old Super 8 amateur film footage was titled *Private Matter #1*, made in 1999. A small sheet of squared paper is suspended from the ceiling on nylon threads. Projected onto the paper are moving images she happened to find at a flea market. They show a man and a woman who are running across a meadow, stop, come closer and then touch each other. What are they doing? Is this a love scene? Or some kind of game? The situation suddenly assumes a menacing air. Is the couple arguing? Or is even some kind of crime taking place?

We never find out – and neither is this Eva Teppe's concern. Unlike in TV or cinema documentaries, her found footage is not intended to serve as authentic evidence underlining the credibility of what is being reported on. Instead, the artist treats the material more in the way found footage is used in feature films and experimental movies. When employed in the context of film collage or montage techniques, it can be implemented as a quotation from 'real life' to heighten the illusionism of narrative fiction or, equally, to disturb the narrative flow. Furthermore, found footage is predestined as a means for critically questioning the purported objectivity of documentarist strategies and for highlighting their aesthetic and subjective potential.

Just how found footage is perceived and interpreted in any particular situation depends on the degree to which the material is processed and, above all, on the context in which the material is placed. The precise form of manipulation Eva Teppe performed on the film fragment used in *Private Matter #1* consisted in fully re-editing it and turning it into a loop. The new setting for this section of found footage is not some larger cinematic context but a scrupulously designed spatial ambience. As in many of the artist's works, the technical equipment used for its presentation forms a consciously visible element of the piece – in the case of *Private Matter #1* this consists of a video projector mounted on a tripod and the sheet of squared paper hanging from the ceiling. But the behaviour of the viewers in the room also acts as a component of her installation. By walking around the freely hanging sheet of paper, visitors create a draft which causes the paper to gently flutter. As a result the projected image sporadically goes out of focus or slips marginally 'out of the frame'.

This emphasis upon the paper's material quality – its lightness – lends the image an affinity to a drawing or a sketch. But the image also assumes a spatial dimension, allowing the entire ensemble to be viewed almost as a floating sculpture. As in *Private Matter #2*, in which a young couple in a snowscape seems involved in behaviour oscillating ambiguously between play and mutual threat, Eva Teppe explores lightness and heaviness almost like aggregate states, yet without barely altering the sequence of the film.

Some of Eva Teppe's found film fragments have also led to photographic works. *Paralysis* is a ten-part photo series based on sections and snippets of 16mm film, from which she has created a new configuration. The black-and-white images show a man in a bedroom hopping and rolling around on his bed, before he then wraps himself in a blanket and finally slumps into a heap. This sequence is as bereft of a decipherable plot as is *Private Matter*, even if it evokes associations with slapstick comedies and grotesques.

In *Half Asleep* and the trilogy *The Human Fly* (2004) Eva Teppe works with various modes of, at times, extremely decelerated motion. Here she did not use Super 8 film material, but turned to VHS cassettes with footage showing so-called base jumpers performing their skydives, which are officially banned. In *The Human Fly* the yellow-red outfit of a base jumper stands out brightly against the brown-grey rock of the cliffs, which in slow motion has blurred into a texture resembling the surface of water and against which the man seems almost to be hovering rather than plunging down. By thus manipulating the film's speed the artist dispels all sense of the danger posed by such reckless leaps, while the base jumper is made to look like a diver gliding through a fluid biotope, giving the impression of a sleepwalker, as indeed the title *Half Asleep* suggests. This mood is further heightened by the airy, floating soundtracks in both films which were composed by Mika Vainio. But what the films also evoke are associations with cinematic special effects such as those used in the Chinese action film *Tiger and Dragon*, where the colourfully costumed fighters overcome gravity and appear to lift off from the ground with feather-like ease.

We are reminded by the title *The Human Fly* just how swiftly this ostensible lightness can come to a tragic end. And we are explicitly told of the Norwegian Thor Alex Kappfjell who in 1998, having performed more than 225 jumps from various radio and TV masts, bridges and some of the highest buildings in the world (among them the Empire State Building and the World Trade Centre), fell to his death from a relatively low cliff.

It is not in the secluded wastes of Nature but before a large audience that the equally precarious activities of the 'castellers' are performed. In the course of large fiestas these Spanish athletic groups compete with one another to form the highest tower ('castell') composed of people – with the ever-imminent risk that the human pyramid could end up collapsing like a house of cards, bringing all the participants tumbling down.

Footage from a TV documentary about such casteller groups formed the basis for a work that Eva Teppe titled with the Wittgenstein quote *Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist* (The world is everything that is the case'). As in her base jumper films, the deceleration of the sequence of movements strips this action of its immediate physical impact. The falling bodies and the stark enlargement of the original material engender an abstracted flow of colour, which in such extreme close-up makes the viewer feel as if he himself were caught in the midst of the action. At the same time the images convey a diffuse sense of menace far in excess of the rashness of undertaking the self-chosen risk of this well-rehearsed ritual. With our present-day sensitivity to the effects of terror attacks and natural disasters, images of which have swamped the media with increasing frequency in recent years, we are, for instance, instantly reminded of the plummeting human bodies that were filmed against the collapsing facade of the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001. Although her digital processing of the film footage strongly evokes 'painterly' effects, Eva Teppe intends no explicit art-historical allusions to particular paintings – which is by no means seldom in video art: Bill Viola's paraphrases of religious canvases are among the best-known examples.

In Eva Teppe's work, certain references to the pictorial tradition, even to Christian iconography, can nonetheless be elucidated through analysis of her imagery. The body mass being drawn downwards in *Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist* is automatically inscribed in the classical motif of the descent into Hell – as is incisively depicted, for instance, in Peter Paul Rubens' famous painting on display in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. In modernity, the descent into Hell mutates into the city as Hell, as is paraded by George Grosz in his work *Widmung an Oskar Panizza* (Devoted to Oskar Panizza; 1919; Staatsgalerie Stuttgart), the painting of a mass of people surging forth in a downward flood. As a surface, the obliquely tipped street overflowing with people creates a pyramid that seems about to collapse in the same way as the human tower of castellers.

The laws of gravity are involved in several of the meanings of the German word 'Fall' (both *fall* and *case*) that Wittgenstein's statement, used as a title by Eva Teppe, bundles almost like a prism. "Wittgenstein's statement, in which the term *fall* is used in a metaphorical sense, "falls apart" into a broad spectrum of meanings when one considers the numerous *cases* in which *fall* is used in more than just the concrete sense of a fall as in a descent. The origin of all *falls* is perhaps the fall from grace, and after the first human beings were subjected to earthbound gravity it was then their frailty ('Hinfälligkeit'), their propensity to stumble, that hastened their descent onto earth." (H. Joachim Schlichting, *Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist*, http://www.uni-muenster.de/Physik/DP/lii/Poetisches/P_Fall.pdf).

'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent' is the famous maxim with which Wittgenstein concludes his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. The oath of silence finds a social setting in the 'Omertà', which binds the members of the Sicilian Mafia to a law of secrecy and is also respected by the island's population out of fear of reprisals from the Mafia. In a room installation titled *Omertà* (2005), Eva Teppe returns to old Super 8 films as her source material. For this she selected seven short sequences of footage shot at private family parties. Each one captures a moment when someone happens to look into the camera. Shown as a loop, all we see – over and over again – is the brief passage from when a head turns to look at the viewer, its eyes giving us the impression we are being inspected, be it with an air of concentration, of suspicion or of shyness, until the person then withdraws back into himself – accompanied by sounds composed by the Finnish musician Mika Vainio which seek to relate to the character of each of these anonymous subjects.

Here, the familiar sensation of being followed by the gaze of the person portrayed in a painting is lent greater intensity, not least of all through the slow iterative repetition of the unvarying head movement. Paradoxically, however, some of the figures appear almost to be evading the gaze of the viewer. Do they have something to hide, a secret they must keep? Such criminological associations are prompted not only by the mafioso title. Could these people in fact be wanted criminals who were proven by this film to have been at a certain place on a certain day? Or is this perhaps even footage of Mafia family or clan celebrations, the kind that is almost obligatory in genre films of *The Godfather* mode? However, any potential clues as to time, place and context are blotted out because the backgrounds from which the faces mysteriously loom have been transformed into areas of uniform, diffuse darkness. These scenes are reminiscent of Rembrandt portraits or of the 'pictorial' effects generated by pioneer photographers such as David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, who kept their subjects from gazing directly into the camera, often even casting their eyes in shadow, since the still relatively long exposure times in the 1840s made it almost impossible to maintain a sharp focus. This too comes to mind in *Omertà* where through slow motion the eyes remain closed for unusual lengths of time.

Eva Teppe proceeds by retrieving the chosen film snippets from the proverbial shadows of the archive and first turning them into 'portraits'; she heightens these in an alternative version in which, instead of the film loops portraying her subjects, she presents a still of each person mounted as an image on the wall.

As a work condensed from short film sequences, *Omertà* clearly demonstrates how much more Eva Teppe is concerned with close observation, exploration and a deeper understanding of images than she is with following or relating a set of events. She constantly employs the projected image itself as a screen, as is evident in *During Listening*, which she produced for Ars Electronica in Linz in 2005. In this work she did not use found footage but filmed on video in black-and-white the faces of five individuals looking directly into the camera while they are listening to *Dialogue*, a piece of music written by the American composer Elliott Carter. Projected larger than life-size, the faces are presented to us in minutest detail, similar to the photorealist pictures of Chuck Close or the portraits shot by Thomas Ruff.

What can be read in these faces? Are they attentive, concentrated or absent-minded? Or are we instead projecting onto them what we ourselves feel as we listen to the music? At times the viewers of Eva Teppe's work must experience something similar to what went on in the minds of the investigators, who imagined they could make out a sniper in the shadow of a small patch of garden that happened to come into Abraham Zapruder's field of vision as he was filming the Kennedy assassination, but which could equally have been just a small irregularity in the film's grain. The reality we perceive is often simply the one we want to see. We are living in a world of projections – an observation that Eva Teppe articulates in her found and treated images as well as with her room installations.

She frequently steers our gaze towards filmic details that the original makers of these films were probably not aware of; her reason for doing so, however, is not to amass evidence towards solving a crime but to scrutinize, again and again, the way perception is determined by the viewer's perspective, by dimensions and proportions, and by the speed at which events are related in time. She systematically exposes the need to grasp onto clear-cut, immutable interpretations as little more than a shot in the dark.

While this serves as a description of the conceptual dimension of Eva Teppe's art, it says little of the poetic complexity and emotional intensity of her work and how these qualities shed new light on altogether mundane and commonplace aspects of life – but precisely in which way these are illuminated, however, ultimately depends on the individual viewer. By eliciting hidden evocative qualities and an associative potential not directly contained in the original raw material, the artist also succeeds in multiplying the moments through which the most personal experience of each individual viewer can be addressed. Among the faces in *Omertà* some people might feel reminded of one or another well known personality. But this would be just as accidental as it was which people it befell – here too another layer of meaning derived from Wittgenstein's *fall* – to look into the camera at the very moment it

was running. Admittedly, this accident – coincidence or chance, in German: *'Zufall'* – did not have the same world historical dimensions as Zapruder's film of Kennedy's assassination, but it has, nonetheless, managed to go down in art history.

Translated from the German by Matthew Partridge