

When Reality Becomes Theatricality: Staged Reality in the work of Julie Born Schwartz

by Monika Wermuth

"In real-time multiple-projection cinema becomes a performing art: the phenomenon of image-projection itself becomes the 'subject' of the performance and in a very real sense the medium is the message." —Gene Youngblood

In her large-scale installations, Julie Born Schwartz poetically narrates the stories of actual individuals. This connection with reality initially seems to represent a break from the artificial and staged expressions of theatricality.¹ Yet from the beginning, this reading proves to be unfounded. Instead, Schwartz's protagonists philosophize about their lives in intimate interviews, reveling in nostalgic memories or trying to make sense of their world, all without fully revealing themselves. The images are dominated by their own surroundings acting as a stage for life, which can be described as a musically filled visual symphony. The resulting hybrid of a documentary and visual and spatial performance forms the starting point for questioning the production of reality within video art. This coupling of an interview's documentary form with the cue of diegetic sound seems to be central to the question of theatricality—yet without the grand gestures that transfer emotions despite their apparent immateriality.

Life's Stage

On several occasions, the possibility to meet with extraordinary individuals served as the impetus for Julie Born Schwartz to begin a work. This was the situation in 2009 when she created the work *Leda and the Swan* after meeting with erotica author Neils Rydung. While Rydung speaks about himself, his collection of erotic objects and his belief in love, the viewer is immersed in the highly saturated red fetish environment, provocative dolls and kiss-shaped phones which fertilize the imagination of the author.

Last year the video artist completed her installation *Fly me to the Moon*, for which she composed an accompanying text where she describes how she met Lenn, a former opera singer. While jogging in the park, they met again and again until Schwarz began to record their conversations. She adds pictures and music from a televised *Turandot* performance that they watched together to parts of their conversations and combines them with images of the universe. Installed in conjunction with this screen projection, close-up images of a jukebox are displayed on a monitor. Together with a small model wooden boat from Schwartz's personal effects, these two components establish a direct relationship with the artist that broadens the dialog between past and present, as well as inserting a spatial element between reality and dreams. Both works are anchored to reality through their narrative structure, but are nevertheless directed towards a theatricality. Within the exhibition, this reaches its highpoint through the visual presentation and scoring. How Schwartz manages the staging of these misaligned bits of reality and thereby lends a performative character to the installation (not to mention

¹ The text was written in conjunction with the exhibition "Fly me to the Moon" in the art space "Kunstarkaden" in Munich (19 September - 27 October 2012) and will be published in 2013 in a book on theatricality and performance in the arts (published by Susanne M.I. Kaufmann.)

the interplay between traditional and contemporary video art), can be tracked to her expansive work *Fly me to the Moon*.

Projecting Your Emotion—Acts of Remembrance

By extending the video work *Fly me to the Moon* via the sailing ship, Schwartz produced a representational reference point that completely envelops the viewer. The ship here symbolizes an ambivalent space that seems as if it is both limited and tangible. Yet at the same time it is variable, dangerous and movable. This space can therefore symbolize the artist's own time and experience, which she connects with this encounter and with the work itself. However, this may also be ideal for the viewing experience within the installation. The ship then becomes an undeniably representative and a referential object, which is based on its essential dramatic tie to travel.

Fly Me to the Moon is first and foremost a journey of encounters. Here the artist takes the confrontation with exceptional individuals who have piqued her interest as the starting point for her works. Nevertheless one returns to the drama of this metaphorical trip and observes Schwartz's own written documentation of the works, therefore becoming one who encounters the artist and not vice versa. As a result, this encounter becomes much more an event in the artist's life as opposed to a story from someone else's. The perspective of the production's form thus receives a totally different character. Specifically it is not an interview with someone from the opera world or even a video work with dramatized excerpts from an opera installation. Rather here Schwartz gives their private first meeting (i.e. a very personal event) its own place on stage. This encounter then becomes dramatized as an event capable of emotionally reaching the viewer.

This experience finds its representative portrayal within the interview, which is primarily designed so that Lenn, the opera singer, discloses something to the artist. It is in no way an intellectual exchange about theatrical or opera theory, which underlies the images from the background, but instead is based more on words of memories and emotions regarding music and life. The invisibility of this encounter allows the record of Schwartz's experience to occur via the viewer. The careful and concise questioning by the artist goes almost unnoticed. Thereby space is gained for the singer's voice, which appears against the backdrop of the *Turandot* performance and the atmospheric recordings of not only the artist, but also of the viewers within the installation who themselves appear to communicate something. On the one hand these encounters thus become a collective experience in which the viewer again finds him or herself split between the visual experiences of both artists (including the opera itself.) Yet on the other hand it is a personal staging taking place before the background of the highly dramatic opera with the viewer becoming a part of the audience.

This divided viewing experience—with Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot* on the screen—establishes the explicit reference to the stage and staging methods. The absence of an actual spectacle and its transfer into another medium better imparts a witnessing character, as do the tropes of theatricality. Susan Sontag describes the transformation of theater into a performance as analogous to the transfer of films from documents as follows, "To create on film a document of a transient reality is a conception quite

unrelated to the purposes of theatre. It only appears related when the 'real event' being recorded is a theatrical performance."² This event from the reality—in this instance the performance's reality—broadens into a meta level as we encounter it in Schwartz's installation *Fly me to the Moon*. Using vintage footage of classic opera performances as a document while listening to Lenn's subjective memories, the screening transforms into a (re)projection of memory and emotions. Here Sontag's comparison between film and theater is again applicable, as she writes, "Theatre deploys artifice while cinema is committed to reality, indeed to an ultimately physical reality which is 'redeemed,' to use Siegfried Kracauer's striking word, by the camera."³ In this instance it is the emotions of the opera singer that are "redeemed" and become reproducible for the viewer via the installation.

This restoration of emotions cannot however be attributed to the use of the visual projection of the opera alone. The music itself is also a part of this staging of memory. Against this backdrop, Schwartz creates a connection to an extremely personal object. On a monitor she displays close-ups of a jukebox that she took in a bar where she spent significant time during the creation of this work. The visual experience of the jukebox is therefore for the viewer coupled with the experience of listening to the opera music that backs the interview. Here attention must be paid to two aspects in context with their theatricality and everyday sense of staging. First the jukebox itself made listening to music possible at a time when the possibility of easily consuming various media was not yet a given. This then creates a nostalgic sense for it within the context of the installation. Furthermore, the jukebox as opposed to the radio allows the user to select their own songs that cater to their personal tastes and may trigger memories of specific events. This possibility to retrieve memories thus merges itself with the performance of the opera. The music comes not from the performance that is happening on the screen, but is taken from a much older production of *Turandot*—cast with Maria Callas. Just as a jukebox plays music, one is allowed to indulge in memories. Through the *pathos* of the opera and the theatrical images, the meeting between Lenn and Schwartz receives its complexity.

Installation as a Performance?

In its form as a large-scale installation, which adjoins a monitor and an object to the main screen, Julie Born Schwartz's works position themselves within the tradition of Expanded Cinema from the 60s and 70s.⁴ Expanded Cinema tore film away from its usual single channel presentations and was therefore able to expand into the space of the audience. This expanded view of motion pictures had to face not only new questions about narrative techniques, their complete challenge, and the questioning favoring the self-reflexiveness of the medium. It also took a fundamental step toward the entry of new media and film into the canon of fine art. Expanded Cinema would like to emphasize its role as medium and eradicate traces of narrative and dramatic⁵, occurs

² Susan Sontag: *Film and Theatre*, in: The Tulane Drama Review, Voll. 11, No. 1, (Autumn 1966), pp. 24-37, here p. 25, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1125262> (29 January 2013).

³ Sontag 1966, p. 26.

⁴ See Gene Youngblood's seminal text on Expanded Cinema (Gene Youngblood: *Expanded Cinema*, New York: P. Dutton & Co. 1970).

⁵ See Helmut Merschmann: *Expanded Cinema*, in: Lexikon der Filmbegriffe, <http://filmlexikon.uni-kiel.de/index.php?action=aut#HM> (24 June 2012).

within Schwartz's works via the dissolution of narration from the image plane. Neither the performance of *Turandot* nor the shots of the jukebox enable any conclusion to the actual narration. Schwartz creates these images and utilizes these documents as visual reminders, thereby employing them more for their associative than for their narrative function.

Expanded Cinema associated with the performances of artists such as Valie Export, also offers Schwartz a link since it is her self-staging that ultimately is celebrated here, and she remains at least vocally present. This comparison between performance and installation now serves primarily to identify the specific characteristics of the installation and its performative character moments. At the end of the 80s, Friedemann Malsch wrote about the paradigmatic attributes of the artist's absence from the installation, "Aus der Sicht der Performance stellt sich die Frage nach Ort und Zeit, aus Sicht der Installation stellt sich die Frage nach dem Körper – unter der Maxime der Abwesenheit des Künstlers."⁶ While Malsch acknowledged that a joint development of the two genres did not hold true, he did see close entanglements in their properties as can be seen in James Coleman's installation *So different...and Yet* (1981). His statement can almost literally also be applied for Schwartz's *Fly me to the Moon*:

Ein zentrales Motiv der Performance, die Thematisierung individueller und sozialer Identität, wird hier auf der sprachlichen Ebene vorgeführt. Der Betrachter wird einerseits durch die Inszenierung zum komplementären Element des Geschehens, sein ‚Zeuge‘, andererseits resultiert aus der Kombination von Fiktion (des Bildes) und Auratisierung des Rahmens eine Allegorisierung der mentalen Anwesenheit des Künstlers, wie sie typisch ist für die Performance.⁷

This combination of circumstances—the integration of the viewer as well as the presence of Schwartz—gives the installation its performative nature. By eliminating the absence and the auditory presence of the artist, the paradigmatic feature of the absent artist is removed, blurring the borders to performance and spectacle.

Reality becomes Theatricality

Julie Born Schwartz's works cannot be viewed only through the tradition of Expanded Cinema and the beginnings of performance and installation art. They also stand as examples of the performative character of much of contemporary video, which itself similarly deals with staging and theatricality. Exactly five years ago K21 (Düsseldorf)

⁶ Friedemann Malsch: Das Verschwinden des Künstlers? Überlegungen zum Verhältnis von Performance und Videoinstallation, in: Wulf Herzogenrath and Edith Decker (eds.): *Videoskulptur. Retrospektiv und aktuell, 1963-1989*, Cologne: DuMont 1989, p. 27. Translation by the author: From the perspective of the performance, the question arises of time and place, from the perspective of the installation, the question arises of the body— upon the dictum of the absence of the artist.

⁷ Malsch 1989, p. 29. Translation by the author: A central theme of the performance, the topic of individual and social identity, is shown here on the linguistic level. The viewer will be one part of the staging as complementary element of the event, as its witness, but then results from the combination of fiction (of the image) and auratization of the frame an allegorization of the mental presence of the artist as it is typical for the performance.

presented *Talking Pictures*,⁸ an exhibition devoted to the phenomenon of theatricality in contemporary film and video works. The works of T.J. Wilcox, Catherine Sullivan and Gillian Wearing represented divergent positions and views of theatricality. The focus here was on the staging of literary texts within the videos. Schwartz's interviews form the basis for a new form of theatrical staging, especially since each of the respondents just by naturalness and associative narrative, that is, by production of text, distinguished but not (artificial) text studied by a reproduction. Pathos and emotions, through the visual and special staging of this interview, are generated and transported. In this way Julie Born Schwartz reveals her own form of theatricality.

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⁸ See Doris Krystof and Barbara J. Scheuermann (eds.): *Talking Pictures. Theatralität in zeitgenössischen Film- und Videoarbeiten*, Cologne: DuMont 2007.