MOVING IMAGES AND VISUAL ART: REVISITING THE SPACE CRITERION

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During the 1990s, moving images were increasingly included in large-scale exhibitions, with more and more filmmakers entering the museal domain. In many cases, the works took the form of installations, presupposing a rather literal "spatialization" of the cinematic temporalities at hand. Images were dispersed through the space and projected on multiple screens. The filmic cut was frequently taken as literal *spacing*, allowing the visitors to wander around, between what otherwise would be integrated into a single linear movement. In this way, moving images became images to move in-between. In fact, the spatiality of the work sometimes even served as a (proclaimed or hidden) criterion to decide whether a moving image work belonged in an art space rather than in a cinema. The spatial form of the installation certainly made it easier for filmmakers to be recognized as "visual artists". This was hardly a new development: even before the proliferation of the video projector, determining the character of many installations from the 1990s onward, the "space criterion" was already at work to enable the distinction between video art and other moving image practices.

Considering the pre-histories of end-of-the-century installation art, one could take some of the historical discussions and developments in the Netherlands as a point of departure. Regarding early (monitor-based) video art practice in the Netherlands, Madelon Hooykaas, of the British-Dutch artists' duo Hooykaas/Stansfield, has stated:

> *During the first stage, there were numerous debates on the difference between video and film. If it was shown in the context of an installation, it was clearly art. [...] we fervently argued that video should remain within the bounds of the fine arts. Elsa* [Stansfield] *also sat on the advisory board for the Council for the Arts* [Raad voor de Kunst]. *In other countries, film and video were often isolated from the fine arts because of the expense involved. But a completely different type of audience is interested in this kind of work. […] But, of course, it meant that video did not become a separate category parallel to the fine arts. In the end, it became fully integrated here. Now, video is everywhere and it's hard to imagine the discussion ever took place – and that video would ever appear in a museum! In 1981, we made the first work for the "video stairs" in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. [...] It was just about acceptable. The other exhibitions that had been held there were of Nam June Paik and Nan Hoover and also entirely consisted of installation or performance. Installation played a pivotal role in the fine arts*[1].

The statement actually shows an uncertainty at the core of this criterion and the way it was applied. It basically served, as Hooykaas implies, as a legitimation tool in the context of policy making. That is, the distinction between video art and film practice was closely related to institutional policies and the struggle for funding. At the time, there were many players, artists

and initiatives alike, who had personal interests in fighting for the recognition of video as a particularly *artistic* medium, a medium that had to be considered within the tradition of fine art rather than emerging from the history of mass media[2]. This struggle was not limited to the context of the Netherlands, but played a role on a more global scale as well[3]. The battle to give video art its own distinct history, purified from the contaminating influence of the entertainment industries, resulted in various projects to "prove" video's intrinsic tie with art history, starting with the rather modernist focus on medium-specificity. Strikingly, at that moment analogue video had been recognized as a "proper" artistic medium, it already faced its decline, as it was challenged by the rise of digital technologies. The turn to spatiality or site-specificity as an alternative to medium-specific approaches could be seen as a symptom for video art's looming disappearance, representing a last, desperate attempt to give video an institutional grounding as a museal art form, soon to be swallowed by the more extensive category of the "installation", which it had once used as a vehicle to legitimate its existence.

Strangely, in all this, film somehow appears as an almost placeless medium, as if, in one way or the other, it did not have a space, a location or setting, and as if it was not bound to a particular screening situation. It is not entirely clear whether Dutch video artists around that time had any consideration for the cinema as an institution and for film as a site-related event[4]. The implications of Hooykaas' statement seem at least a little odd if one considers that, already in the 1960s, the Netherlands gave home to various artists involved in "expanded cinema" experiments, such as those of the Eventstructure Research Group around Jeffrey Shaw. Works such as their inflatable cinema structure MovieMovie, which was presented at the experimental film festival in Knokke-le-Zoute, Belgium, in 1967, must have surely been known to some of the people involved in policy-making in the 1970s and 1980s. From the perspective of this antecedent history, distinguishing video art from film practice by means of criteria such as the spatiality of the work does not only appear a little forced, but also theoretically inconsequent. But maybe this was also due to a lack of (academic) discourse around the medium of film and the history of cinema; film studies had not been established as an independent discipline yet in the Netherlands (which could have served as a ground to rethink cinema in relation to other media). And it was only in the 1980s that art historians started to reflect on the medium of video. There was maybe not so much a lack of challenging practices, but in consistently examining the ties *between* these practices. This might have contributed to the fact that video was considered as being implicated in "site-specificity", whereas film was actually not, at least not in certain contexts[5]. From a technological angle, the initial divide between video and film might be explained by the fact that video projections only became widely used from the beginning of the 1990s onward, renewing video's ties with the cinematic apparatus. But this seems rather unsatisfying as an argument, as it glosses over the fact that the cinema actually did play a role in early video art, perhaps almost as much as it did in the early film installations of the 1960s and 1970s, both of which could be seen as a reference to early cinema, especially considering the reinvestment in alternative viewing situations that differed from the standard multiplex experience, or the use of unedited shots in video art, not exclusively being related to the real-time logic of television, but also to the documentary logic of Lumière's *La Sortie de l'usine* (1895).

With a tentative gesture to trace some of the missing links between (early) video and (early) cinema and the ways video practice could be seen as a (at times strategic but at other times rather involuntary) response to the history of cinema, one might also have a look at Hooykaas/Stansfield's own work. One of the artists' duo's first video works presented in the form of an installation (or "environment," as it was called back then) was *Split Seconds*, shown in 1979 at De Appel in Amsterdam (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 – Hooykaas/Stansfield, *Split Seconds*, installation view of studio, 1979.

A small monitor is placed in front of a larger one, as they synchronously show the same video material of the instant of wood being cut by an axe. The image imperceptibly freezes before and after the wood is split. By being spread over the two monitors, as it were, the instant is spatialized, exhibiting an internal self-difference. In this way, the unseizable nature of the instant is made "evident" while remaining invisible as such, since it is always already "too early" or "too late" to actually perceive the moment of the cut itself. As a video work, *Split Seconds* takes a distance from both cinema and television. It spatializes and radicalizes the cut – literally, by distributing the image over two monitors, and metaphorically, when aligning the cutting of the wood with the filmic cut, referencing the materiality of celluloid through the meta-medium of video. The work thus appears as a commentary on the mechanisms of cinematography. To create an illusion of continuously moving images and the impression of homogeneous space, cinematography depends on the possibility of delayed perception as well as on the driving force of the cut, while both frame-line and cut remain invisible in themselves, functioning as instants of pure difference. In this sense, *Split Seconds* could also be considered critical of the naturalization tendencies of classical Hollywood cinema and the role the cut fulfils in this context, as it marks the invisible space between "shot" and "counter-shot", serving the construction of spatial homogeneity[6].

Hooykaas/Stansfield's monitor structure seems to perform a critical movement similar to what avant-garde artworks were instigating around that time, crossing the boundaries between arts and disciplines while confirming their existence, questioning existing parameters and categories while in the end affirming their unavoidability. Not only is *Split Seconds* reacting on other moving image contexts, but it also references the logic of aesthetic experience after Lessing, according to which visual art is characterized by its ability to be perceived "in the blink of an eye". According to the famous argument Lessing develops in his *Laokoon* essay, fine arts, such as painting and sculpture,

are spatial arts (*Raumkunst*), because they do not presuppose a lengthy recapitulative understanding in order to perceive the totality of the artwork, as do temporal arts (*Zeitkunst*) such as literature and theatre. While spatial arts are determined by the mode of a "side by side", temporal arts can only be experienced in the mode of "one after another"[7]. On an ostensible level, it might therefore seem as if Hooykaas/Stansfield use the cinema as a reference point to implicitly render the instantaneity of aesthetic experience in the Lessingian sense problematic. One's first intuition would therefore possibly be that *Split Seconds*, as a typical example of 1970s installation art, actually announces the temporalization of the spatial arts, i.e. the irreducibility of temporality in perception.

However, in her Derridean re-reading of Lessing, the German philosopher and art critic Juliane Rebentisch comes to the conclusion that installation art is not indicative of a temporalization of the spatial arts (by the introduction of the moving image to the art museum, for instance), but a sign of an increasing spatialization of the temporal arts. In her 2003 book *Ästhetik der Installation*, Rebentisch discerns two different temporal modes, an infinite temporality, associated with what she calls *Verweisungsgeschehen* (event of association), and a finite one, related to the aforementioned reconstructive or recapitulative understanding (*Nachvollzug*). The first replaces or reformulates Lessing's notion of "instantaneity", and hence promotes an alternative definition of the category of *Raumkunst*[8]. If one takes into account the 1960s' and 1970s' tendency to turn artworks as well as other configurations into open-ended and ephemeral events (such as the art object becoming an idea or process, theatre becoming performance and cinema becoming installation art), the thesis of increased spatialization – in the sense of an event of ongoing association versus a finite, sequential temporalization – does seem plausible. In that respect, the work by Hooykaas/Stansfield seems to perfectly illustrate this argument, last but not least because the video material is invisibly and infinitely looped. Through spatialization, it makes a double movement of both critiquing the temporality of television, reducing its endless flow to a repetitive chain of "split seconds", and implicitly challenging cinema's narrative conventions based on temporal linearity. Once again, spatialization would serve as a criterion here to decide when moving images become "visual art" (even if it is yet another type of space criterion than the notion of site-specificity mentioned above). Thus, although many of the works from that period are rather critical of the art historical and institutional contexts they are located in, they secretly subscribe to them by taking a distance from the media technological logic of the entertainment industries. They seem to submit themselves to aesthetic regimes considered "proper" to fine art, paradoxically effacing their disciplinary unframing (*Entgrenzung*) through a reconfigured notion of "spatiality", related to the possibilities of the museum space or White Cube.

Meanwhile, it would not be very interesting if this were just the end of the story, merely exposing the love-hate relationship of visual art with the mass media. At this point, it seems noteworthy that in Rebentisch's discussion of what she calls cinematographic installations (including both video and film), too, there is a sudden amnesia concerning the site-specificity of cinema, not unlike what I have described before in the context of Dutch art policies in the 1980s. The idea that video had to differentiate itself from film (Hooykaas) or that cinematography distinguishes itself from cinema (Rebentisch) through the form of the installation seems to be based on particular assumptions about film and cinema that appear at least questionable, especially with respect to early cinema and the so-called cinematic prehistory (which is a rather problematic notion in itself, as it already presupposes a particular teleology)[9]. As I have indicated before, it seems to exclude all those accounts of cinematic history, which address event-character of cinema and, even more so, the different types of sites cinema is involved in. Film is more than just linear-narrative film, and cinema more than just the multiplex, one could say. If one thinks

of the 19th century panoramas, for instance, or the early film screenings by the Lumière's and the way both facilitate ambulatory movement, one could make up a counter-argument that cinema is in fact "spatialized" from the very beginning, and that it is through cinema and its early configurations – rather than through installation art – that the boundaries between spatial and temporal arts become blurry. Cinema is not identical to the dispositif of the classical darkened cinema space. Its history includes situations that already deal with a mode of perception characterized by a "side by side", as much as there is the "one after another" associated with the cinema of narrative integration, most prominently represented by classic Hollywood cinema.

It is therefore the question whether seeking further legitimization for the distinction between spatial and temporal arts, even on a historical level, is really the task that awaits us – which Rebentisch still seems to assume, even when shifting the boundaries between the two categories. Her redefinition of Lessing is motivated by her attempt to reinstitute the "autonomy" of aesthetic experience as the basis of artistic criticality even after the disciplinary unframing (*Entgrenzung*) of the arts, which installation art appears most symptomatic of. Which is not to say that there is no difference between installation art and other cinematic contexts; there are actually important institutional and configurational differences between the different sets of practices. Nonetheless, I simply state that it might not be that favourable to commit oneself to such a "space criterion" when analyzing the differences between cinematic installations and other media configurations, since both might be determined by the mode of the "side by side" as much as by the mode of "one after another". In fact, the history of early cinema provides important clues about how to conceptualize installation art – not only video and film installations, but maybe also installations in a more general sense. Vice versa, installation art might be one of the contexts to re-address media archaeological questions concerning early cinema and contemporary cinematic practices as well as other constellations. There is actually an epiphenomenon of spatialization – as it is described by Rebentisch or suggested in Hooykaas – that, in my view, is far more interesting in that respect: the equally radicalized temporalization of the work, a fact that one tends to loose from view when unilaterally emphasizing the way the temporal arts have been incorporated by the spatial arts. This temporalization is not only based on the introduction of time-based media in the context of the museum, but is actually closely related to the mobility of the spectator. Many installations that use multiple projections provide an indefinite amount of possible trajectories for the museum visitor to take, who randomly moves around between the images. This randomization of movement points to a temporal excess at the heart of the configuration: there will be literally never enough time to watch the work in its totality, i.e. including all possible combinations.

Even in *Split Seconds*, which partly relies on the relatively frontal orientation of the spectator when facing the television screens, there is more to it: as the qualification "mixed media environment" already says, there are also other materials involved than the monitors and the video footage alone – photographs, for instance, adding yet another discursive layer in the discussion of time-space-relations and the role of the "instant". The viewer has to move around to comprehend the work. Thus, there are multiple options to position oneself in the space. Moreover, as I have mentioned before, the "second" is also "split" between the monitors, appearing as spatialized on a rather literal level. The "instant" becomes visible as *spacing*, as spatial interval[10]. As much as the work addresses the spacing between a "here" and a "there" on a conceptual level, it performatively enacts it by physically occupying the gallery space. Opening the space of the cut does not only stretch the instant ("in the blink of an eye"), but leads to a situation, in which the time of the work becomes indeterminable, co-conditioned by the very possibility of mobility; it always already escapes the control of the visitor. That is, in a much more systemic way than

suggested by Rebentisch's potential experiential indefiniteness, one might speak of a virtual endlessness that depends on the infinite possibilities of spatial re-positioning. This virtual endlessness could actually be the key for understanding how installation art reworks the spaces of the cinema as well as the museum.

1 Madelon Hooykaas, Jennifer Steetskamp, "Interview with Madelon Hooykaas on the History of the Jan Van Eyck Academie Video Workshop", *JVE*, 2007, http://www.janvaneyck.nl, July 9, 2008. Moreover, from the early 1950s to the early 1970s, the Stedelijk Museum was actually in charge of the collection of the Dutch Film Museum, which subsequently became a separate institution. Only a few years after the film collection was moved to its new location, the Stedelijk Museum started to collect moving images again, that is, in the form of video art, including works by Nam June Paik, Bruce Nauman, and others. The so-called "video stairs", located in the museum, was a relatively small, dark space with big steps to sit on. Visitors could walk in and out as they liked. In 1984, the museum organized a large video exhibition, *The Luminous Image*, which mostly consisted of installation work (in some respects, it is rather ironic that the soon-to-be-director of the museum, Wim Beeren, writes in the catalogue: «The Film Museum originated in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam had to move out for reasons of space, but nobody seems to miss it»). What was rather unique for the situation in the Netherlands then was the fact that the Stedelijk Museum had commissioned the production of work for the exhibition, not unlike what Centre Pompidou was already doing at that time. Centre Pompidou actually also lent one of his own productions to the Stedelijk Museum even before it was shown in Paris (a work by Thierry Kuntzel). The question of preservation did not come into focus until later, when, at the beginning of the 1990s, Montevideo (now Netherlands Media Art Institute) started to preserve the video collections of the major Dutch museums.

2 The essay by Wim Beeren in the *The Luminous Image* catalogue bears witness to this line of thought: Wim Beeren, *Video and the Visual Arts*, in Dorine Mignot (ed.), *The Luminous Image*, Stedelijk Museum/Gary Schwartz, Amsterdam-Maarsen 1984, pp. 24-35.

3 Here, one could repeat the famous words uttered by Bill Viola (who was actually quoting someone else on the issue): «Video may be the only art form ever to have a history before it had a history». Quoted in Marita Sturken, *Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History*, in Doug Hall, Sally Jo Fifer (eds.), *Illuminating Video*, Aperture, New York 1990, p. 102.

4 Another paradoxical fact was the tendency of video art to distance itself from film by simultaneously associating itself with television, which mainly served as a cultural and technological anchor point, but also an institutional frame of reference, especially in the time before video became "museum art". This does not only apply to the situation in the Netherlands, but seems also valid from a more international perspective.

5 Madelon Hooykaas actually mentioned to me later that, in her view, there were not many film installations around that time. Nevertheless, one of the earliest activities in the field of moving images in a museum context was the *Video & Film Manifestatie* at the Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht (1977). Here, both media were still considered in terms of the overarching category of "artists' film and video", as it was also practised in the United Kingdom, for instance. However, the probably earliest European video exhibition was in 1973 at the Lijnbaancentrum in Rotterdam. See also Alexander Grevenstein, Ton Quick (eds.), *Video & Film Manifestatie*, Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht 1977.

6 At the same time, *Split Seconds* challenges the real-time mythology of television by exposing the ineffaceability of delay.

7 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, Reclam, Stuttgart 1987.

8 See Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation*, Surhkamp, Frankfurt am Main 2003, pp. 146-206.

9 See Thomas Elsaesser, "The New Film History as Media Archaeology," in *CiNéMAS*, vol. 14, no. 2-3, 2003, p. 104.

10 See Jean-Christophe Royoux, *Towards a Post-Cinematic Space-Time (from an Ongoing Inventory)*, in Sara Arrhenius, Magdalena Malm, Cristina Ricupero (eds.), *Black Box Illuminated*, Propexus, Lund 2003, pp. 110-111.