Galerie Mot & Van den Boogaard

rue Antoine Dansaertstraat 46
B-1000 Brussel/Bruxelles
tel : 02-514 10 10
fax : 02-514 14 46
e-mail: mot.vdboogaard@skynet.be

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NARRATIVE, TIME AND SPACE: TWO OR THREE THINGS JOACHIM KOESTER KNOWS ABOUT

By Catsou Roberts

Gentofte Bibliotek/The Birds and Rocent/Dawn of the Dead are the titles of two early works by Danish artist, Joachim Koester. While the works' titles make obvious reference to film, these site-specific installations are also elaborated fictional spaces – the kind of mise-en-scene which is so critical to cinema. Another work by Koester, Weekend, entails a reenactment of Godard's 1967 film of the same name. Starring the artist and some friends, the mini video version recasts the events of the "weekend" within the context of Copenhagen's notorious squatter's community, Christiania. Christiania reappears in Koester's photographic series, Day for Night, Christiania, 1996. Koester's images of this self-governing territory are photographed through a bluish filter, a technique used by François Truffaut in his La Nuit Américaine. The color infuses each scene with an uncanny atmosphere – vacillating between fact and fiction. Koester will be represented in this year's upcoming Documenta X, organized by the French curator Catherine David, with his most recent work, Pit Music, a video projection of a string quartet performance. His way of documenting the event explores the narrative possibilities inherent in duration. The camera, positioned in and around the audience and musicians, captures the concert from several angles. In editing the footage together, Koester manipulates the temporal elements, juxtaposing sound and image, and dramatizes a familiar event.

Catsou Roberts: *You recently had the occasion to interview New York artist, Paul Miller, aka, D.J. Spooky, whose "urban sound collages" draw on found music, and on sound found in the city at large. Can you discuss how D.J. Spooky's work may, in some ways, be analogous to your own?*

Joachim Koester: My interest in D.J. Spooky stems from the way in which his music – and in fact, a lot of other experimental/electronic music – contains narrative, and how it multiplies space. The narrative, of course, is derived from transforming and contextualizing sounds found in the street. In New York City, where space is at such a premium – where there are only vertical spaces – Dub Music is particularly relevant. Through its echoing effects, it creates another dimension. So, in Illbient music (New York City's sinister version of Ambient music) I can see traces of Dub in its continuously generated deep, horizontal sound collages "Music concrete" also deals with these issues of narrative and space, and the transformation of sound – the borderline between the sound of music and the music in sound. I mean, the constant flux in and out of these two notions.

CR: *Much of your work seems to situates itself in such moments of reversibility – the edge between sound and music, for example, or between fiction and reality.*

JK: Yes, I am extremely interested in the seamless slide between seemingly opposing points, such as the documentary and the dramatized.

CR: *What Godard refers to as "research" and "spectacle"? ...the way in which Godard uses actual documentary footage, as in Vivre sa vie, or treats a subject as a sociological study – prostitution, youth culture, or film making.*

JK: Godard dramatizes what the camera depicts; he takes a site and stages fictional characters, like in Two or Three Things I know about Her, or in Germany Year 90 Nine Zero. I feel very connected to the documentary tradition, to realism – the tradition of the everyday, as it is found in Nouvelle Vague or Cinéma Verité, or even to Proust, perhaps. I am interested in how something is described.

CR: *...in the act of description itself, rather than the actual object described.*

JK: Yes, of course, that's why Godard is so important. It's about reality, and about the power of retelling and depicting reality.

CR: *And always at the expense of conventional narrative. (You knew we'd have to get to narrative, sooner of later....) Take for example, Godard's refusal to permit any intelligible narrative line to determine the film; his use of ellipses and digressions which render the story intelligible. Your work on Christiania is particularly articulate about the "seamless slide" between the documentary and the dramatized – the fiction of site and the reality of site.*

JK: In terms of narrative, Christiania is very interesting. It's a former military base. Traces of the political change, and even the wars of Europe, can be found in this site. There have been so many plans for this place. It was originally part of Copenhagen's ramparts, and so, the history of the site can be read as a narrative, on an archeological level. Celebrated as a "utopian" community Christiania has been thoroughly documented – in film, in television programs, and in photographs. Yet, most of these documentaries, completely uncritical and unreflexive, have pictured Christiania from a Social Realism side, and have left plenty of room for an alternate interpretation.

CR:*Whereas your images of Christiania – as art, of course – attempt to slide between artifice and documentation, with their patently unstaged compositions.*

JK: My photographs create a different space within the images; they have another dimension. My intention is to generate a dialogue between the original intention of Christiania – its utopian "drive" – and the actual place as it exists today. These photographs operate between reality and fiction, and between the site itself and the dramatization of the site. For example, one of my photographs in the series contains virtually nothing of note. It's a view into a dead end path. But there, one spies a stick to which a thread is attached. It's a random intersection of two objects – a thread and a stick – but the viewer cannot help reading into it...to assign meaning to it.

CR: *Sounds like Witold Gombrowicz's Cosmos, the story of two students who concoct elaborate theories out of the most ordinary and arbitrary configurations. In your work, isn't this achieved, in part, by your use of the day for night technique – and also through the evacuation of nearly all human subjects. The viewer has tendency to read the image more carefully.*

JK: Exactly. This characterizes the entire series. If the photographs were in ordinary color, or in black and white, such objects would seem less significant...serendipitous.

CR: *Unlike fiction where, within a story, nothing is gratuitous, everything is constructed, and contains relevant information. Information which points back to a plot – in order to satisfy this narrative urge with which we all seem to be saddled .*

JK: Well certainly, the "central conflict theory" is pervasive. A major question for me is: How is it that this way of telling stories has so totally conquered the world?

CR: *A human need for catharsis?*

JK: Perhaps "central conflict" is the only universal language that exists. I wonder if this need we have for narrative is biological or, maybe we are conditioned to respond to this narrative model, and are thus so easily exploited by it – from novels and mainstream movies, to the news media.

CR: *Well if religion, mythology or psychoanalysis are any indication.....*

JK: It's a wide area of investigation, and art provides many possibilities for approaching it; in art, one can manipulate different narrative fragments – using the beginning of a story, or the middle or end – to arrive at issues of how to narrate the world. It is the retelling process that allows us to learn about ourselves. As in Freud's case of the Wolfman. What is crucial is the retelling of the story, regardless of whether it is fact or fiction – it's how the story is perceived.

CR: *Your video work, Weekend, is relevant here.*

JK: Yes, Godard's Weekend has to do with the perception of an event as real, even if it isn't. What is important is the way it is experienced – as fact or fiction – which expands from the personal level – the retelling of one's own story – to the macro level of recounting history. His film is remarkably prophetic – so, it's a fiction; it's a prophesy of the 1960s. The film, then, is a fictional prophesy, in 1967, of the actual events of '68. Godard's prediction of what would happen in '68 completely undermines the dichotomy between fact and fiction. Consider the scene of the lone drummer playing in the woods. It's uncanny how accurate this vision is.

CR: *Pit Music then, also functions in this gap.*

JK Pit Music, like the day for night photos of Christiania also entails the retelling of an event in a slightly different way. The scenario of Pit Music is common enough: some people watching a concert. Yet, the positioning of the camera, the mise-en-scene...conspire to render another version of that scenario. Robbe-Grillet expresses this kind of thing in some interviews recently collected in, The Erotic Dream Machine. Robbe-Grillet is not interested in realism, but in narrative as a self-contained structure, which is not bound to reality. He is simply not interested in realism – he is interested in the tension in the quotidian event (such as the concert in Pit Music) which can be transformed into something else. Yet through that transformation, there always remains something recognizable, something understandable, which prevents it from sliding into total abstraction.

CR: *Your 1994 work Rocent/Dawn of the Dead, another work about a site, similarly holds onto the concrete; it addresses the shopping mall, while exploring the relationship between the actual sound from the site and dramatized sound from the film it references.*

JK: Yes, an overlaying of the ambient sounds of the film track...

CR: *(....that indispensable item in mainstream film...)*

JK: ..with the actual sound from the shopping mall itself. It seems to me that there is so much interesting work that could be done in the sound/image area. Godard and a few others have done quite a bit, yet it is truly an area waiting to be explored.

CR: *You mean the way Godard challenges our sense of continuous narrative – interrupting the diegesis by jamming the conventional parallel between image and sound? Is this part of your interest in contemporary music, such as Ambient or sound collage – getting back to where we began?*

JK: The idea of the D.J. as a metaphor for the artist is too obvious for me, but what is interesting is the way the D.J. presents disparate things together.

CR ...the idea of orchestrating?...the manipulation of given materials?

JK: The way that sampling melodies, for example, recontextualizes them, and how, once they are factored into the work, all the associations that people have with those melodies get folded into the mix. My interest in this "collage aesthetic" and the idea of D.J.-ing, is also connected to the use of time – how time is stretched or compressed, or folded in onto itself, lending a density to each moment. John Oswald's CD Grayfolded, for instance, is a brilliant example. On the CD, he samples countless renditions by the Grateful Dead of their song, Dark Star. On one track, Jerry Garcia starts his guitar solo in 1969 and ends it twenty years later. On another track, one hour of music is endlessly folded, creating a very dense whoosh! lasting all of 3 seconds or so.

CR: *This reminds me of the projects by certain contemporary artists that I've been working with who manipulate the temporality of a given narrative. I suppose new technologies have a lot to do with it. One has to appreciate the more "hand-made" experimental music of the 1960s and 1970s...and before. The repetition, looping and phrasing works, etc. of certain composers.*

JK: Well, through this folding, John Oswald achieves a very disturbing sound. Actually it's reminiscent of David Lynch's sonic trademark sound which is found in most of his films, including Lost Highways.

CR: *Well speaking of mainstream movies, can you discuss the proposed project your currently working on – a work in collaboration with the film maker, Matthew Buckingham?*

JK: Well, actually we're not even in the "pre-production" stage yet; we haven't begun. However, this project would certainly be, among other things, a continuation of my interest in working between the two dimensional and three dimensional. It's an exploration of the possibility of creating a totally different viewing experience – with multiple screens which juxtapose elements of image, sound and text.

CR: *Well, you know, I have to ask: So...what about a plot?*

JK: I guess I just can't help myself! I keep going back to disrupting narrative.

This article was first published in: Siksi, no. 2, 1997
Catsou Roberts is a freelance curator based in New York and London.

Joachim Koester will exhibit at Galerie Mot & Van den Boogaard from February 11 till March 21.

Agenda

Dora Garcia: (légende), Centre Régional d'Art Contemporain, Sète, tot/jusqu'au 4/1/98

Douglas Gordon: Een installatie/An installation, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, tot/jusqu'au 7/2

Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster: 88:88, Kaiser Wilhelm Museum, Krefeld, 15/2-19/4/98 (solo); Cities on the Move, Wiener Secession, tot/jusqu'au 18/1/98

Joachim Koester: Nuit blanche, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 6/2/98 - 10/5/98.

Uri Tzaig: Loplop /re/presents: the im/pulse to see, Museum Boymans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam, 20/12/97 - 8/3/98

Wouter van Riessen: Imponderabilia, Stichting KW14, 's-Hertogenbosch, tot/jusqu'au 18/1

'Art-Market-Value(s)'. Seminar at the Jan van Eyckakademie, Maastricht. Deelnemers/ Participants: Paul Andriesse, Jennifer Flay, Martin Janda, Jan Mot, Anthony Reynolds 30/1/98.

advertentie/annonce

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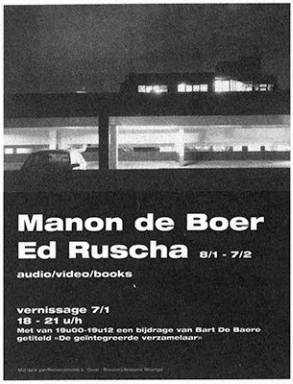
Renée Kool. A Sunny Summer Sunday Afternoon in Paris

«Het werk *A Sunny Summer Sunday Afternoon in Paris* dient zich bijna aan als een glas-in-lood-visioen. Het is een opening van licht aan het eind van de donkere, tochtige gang van dit gebouw, de vierkante vakken waarin het raam is opgedeeld, versterken het glas-in-lood idee. In de ruimte achter het raam, de nu onbereikbare galerie, worden vijf dia's geprojecteerd van een park. Alhoewel de projecties hier en daar over elkaar heen vallen en ze niet loodrecht geprojecteerd worden waardoor er schaalvertekeningen optreden, blijven de beelden helder. Je ziet mensen lopen, zitten, liggen, kunstjes vertonen; de zon schijnt, het gras is groen, de schaduwen intens, de kleuren zomers. Is dit een geënsceneerde werkelijkheid, vraag je je af. Zijn die mensen, is de omgeving zelf in stelling gebracht?»
Fragment uit de lezing van Lex ter Braak gehouden op 11/12 n.a.v. de tentoonstelling van Renée Kool in de galerie (20/11-20/12/97)



C: Je me souviens d'arbres deux par deux et évidemment des deux derniers, très allongés très, très longs, très, très minces et je me demandais pourquoi ils poussaient comme ça et l'un était beaucoup plus courbe que l'autre et ça me faisait penser à la différence entre l'élégance et la sévérité et je me disais qu'il y avait un composant de la sévérité dans l'élégance, mais que, je me disais que l'élégance était un peu la sévérité courbe, la sévérité ayant quelque chose d'extrèmement rigide. Et puis un deuxième couple d'arbres dont je me souviens, c'était une espèce de famille de cactus dominé par un individu beaucoup plus grand que les autres, il fait cinq fois la taille des autres et c'est sans doute parce que je suis, j'étais et enfin je ne sais pas je pensais à une famille. Et je trouvais que … et je me disais que les petits cactus auraient du mal à résoudre leur problème d'Oedipe avec un père pareil. Et alors, oui c'est ça, je me souviens aussi de deux cactus qui avaient l'air de, c'est comme des exercises de gymnastique à l'école, il y a des exercises où on doit se mettre deux par deux et puis joindre ses pieds et ensuite tirer, se tirer les bras comme ça et j'avais l'impression que ces petits cactus étaient comme ça face à face en contemplation éperdue. Ça me faisait penser à une image de couple. (…)

O: Sunset to me is the image of … It's classic of Los Angeles but you really find it in any American city at least in certain parts of American cities. I guess that sunset boulevard in this kind of, well driving down the street with all these buildings with storefronts and kind of low one story shops… The icecream-gallery, that's what I remember. There's this one spot, I guess it's this icecream shop that was turned into a gallery in 1966 I don't know. That's right now what I'm thinking about it's this one image that is recurring. A small storefront, looks like that it could have been one of these icecreamstands where you don't go into the store. The kind of bar where somebody is standing behind the counter and you get your icecream. And I saw that there was gallery next to it so I don't know. I don't know why that one stuck out in my head but that was one of the images which was reccurring. Coloured people doesn't seem to have anything with coloured people in it but it's various photographs of cactusses, particularly cactusses, in colour, like one of the, what's the name of the book, like various palmtrees, I guess, all taken facing the west. Big, tall, thin, palmtrees, short, fat palmtree, coupled palmtrees all shapes and sizes just like people. (…)

C: Wat aardig is bij deze en ook bij enkele andere dat de datering zo duidelijk te zien is aan de auto's. Daaraan zie je het meest, de huizen kun je zo nog wel aantreffen, maar aan de auto's kun je zien dat het een vroeg jaren zestig geheel is, met allemaal van die bulky auto's, allemaal een beetje rond en veel chroom, zoals mooie amerikaanse auto's toen waren. En wat verder opvalt bij deze maar ook bij veel van de andere boekjes is dat je nauwelijks een sterveling ziet. Je ziet wel auto's maar geen mensen lopen en dat is misschien opzichzelf ook wel typerend voor Los Angeles dat iedereen zich per auto verplaatst en dat de straat dus nauwelijks voor mensen lijkt te zijn. (…)

A: Het gekke is dat de dingen die je daar meemaakt hebben veel meer met mensen te maken en heel weinig met het landschap, want het landschap dat is er gewoon. Het doet er ook niet zoveel toe. De sterkste herinneringen van L.A. gaan voor mij over mensen. Ik kan een portrettenboek maken met enorm eigengereide vrienden en mensen. Alles wat ik heb meegemaakt wijst daarheen. En het landschap, ik dacht altijd dat het heel belangrijk daar was, omdat het heel groot was, maar dat heeft eigenlijk niet zoveel rol gespeeld. Niet direkt in de betekenis van dingen of van bepaalde evenementen. Aan de andere kant kun je misschien juist zeggen, dat het landschap zwijgend misschien juist de hoofdrolspeler is, maar er is ook iets enorm zinloos aan het niet specifieke. Er is een soort anoniem landschap tussen de zeer specifieke punten, de landmarks die er dan zijn, maar omdat je tussendoor zoveel moet rijden, vergeet je weer wat je daarvoor had gezien, wat wel een soort karakter had. Dat karakter vergeet je, dat komt in een soort grijze luchtbel terecht. Zo heb ik dat nog nooit in een wereldstad gezien, in Europa of in Amerika. (…)

A: I can talk a little about the clubs and bars in L.A.. That's really interesting, just because everything is hidden. It seems in L.A. anyway that all quality all the beautiful things, they're not spread out on the street for you, they're just completely hidden. You have to walk through all sorts of labyrinths to have acces to the spaces where it is really happening and quality is blossoming and I find that really in the music-scene. I find that there is so much there. You can go just to any little shack just completely like a rundown music-joint and it's all painted black, way to small. And then there will be this fabulous show. It would probably be brought with a lot of bombast in worldcities or in Amsterdam. Here it's just a happening matter of factly. It's like a surprise, you happen to be there at this moment and there's like three other people there in the club and just for you there's a really interesting band doing some interesting stuff. There's a lot of jazz and alternative rock and combinations of that. It's almost a waist … That makes you think that there's so much there, so much talent, but it also makes you think that the real inhabitants of the place they don't really appreciate it. Everybody is watching MTV. It seems that only the big things that you can watch from your couch on video or just the more glamorous places where people like to go to see music, that's what gets appreciated, but not just the fact that around the corner you have these tiny little places and talent is just being thrown at you. (…)

Met dank aan/Remerciements à: Otto Berchem, Carel Blotkamp, Annemiek de Haan, Chloë Martin, Hélioscope

Manon de Boer
Ed Ruscha 8/1 - 7/2

audio/video/books

vernissage 7/1
18 - 21 u/h
Met van 19u00-19u12 een bijdrage van Bart De Baere getiteld «De geïntegreerde verzamelaar»

Met dank aan/Remerciements à: Duvel - Brouwerij/Brasserie Moortgat