

Text Christoph Doswald in <there is no life jacket under your seat>, monographische Publikation Edith Flückiger, Hrsg.: Kommission für Kunst und Architektur des Kantons Bern, Vexer Verlag, 2002

## **Edith Flückiger**

# **Shadows in Stone**

The value of visual images is continually decreasing. At the same time, their volume is increasing. In other words, never before have so many useless images been produced for the general public. This is mainly because we live in a period where we want to assure ourselves that, should we cease to exist at some stage, we will survive through images. The leading media in this dominantly visual culture are video and photography. Our relationship with these images has already been described by Roland Barthes in his early essay *The Light Room, Comments on Photography*: "When I pose before the lens (I mean, when I know that I am posing, be it only temporarily), I do not take any great risk (at least not for the moment). [...] Yet however imaginary this dependence may be (and it is purest imagination), I nevertheless experience it with the apprehension that a person would feel when facing an imponderable parenthood: a visual image – my image – is going to be created."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Die helle Kammer, Bemerkungen zur Photographie*, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp (publ.) 1985, p. 19

Apprehension may also take hold of us in the face of the increasing mass-media treatment of the mundane. Everywhere around us we can see normal everyday life of very ordinary people flickering across our screens or churned out of printing presses. This, in turn, affects a person's attitude to their own self. Any knowledge of the (potential) effect of a visual image plays an eminent and at the same time paradoxical role in the way we will present ourselves. Thanks to the propagation of images through the mass media, our minds are full of countless subjects that assume the functions of prototypical, model-like images. Every time we enter the public arena (before a camera that may be present), we refer back to existing visual images. Images are within us and we are in them.<sup>2</sup>

The Swiss artist Edith Flückiger, who largely works with videos and video installations, examines this loss of value of mundane images, while at the same time reflecting upon the opportunities and limits of the medium with which she operates. This artistic strategy is particularly apparent in her video "erst hell, dann leicht, dann himmelhoch" (First Bright, then Light, then Sky-high) of 1999. Her three-minute video shows two girls. It seems to be summer, because they are barefooted, wearing light clothes, and they have a healthy sun tan. The two girls are lying on the ground, sunbathing motionlessly. If the shadows of their hands and feet on the ground were not moving very slightly from time to time, we might think that their bodies were totally lifeless — frozen into images, like a photograph.

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<sup>2</sup> See also: Christoph Doswald, *Missing Link, Menschen-Bilder in der Fotografie*, Edition Stemmler (publ.), Zurich and New York 2000

Yet it takes some time before our perception, which is normally geared towards fast cuts and dynamic action, registers this subtle slowness of the visual images, an effect which is further enhanced by a slow-motion effect. A video for John Franklin, as it were — the hero of Sten Nadolny's *Discovery of Slowness*.<sup>3</sup> After a few minutes our eyes begin to realize that the stony ground, on which the bodies are lying, is shimmering in the heat. This, in turn, makes the pixels vibrate in an odd sort of way. While our eyes are still wondering whether or not they are dealing with a still picture, the ground begins to get darker. Very slowly the light — almost blazing — grey turns iridescent and changes into a dark, dull anthracite. Suddenly, as if this change of colour were releasing a visual signal, the two bodies rise up and shake themselves briefly, indicating to the viewer that a summery thunderstorm has put an end to their sunbathing. Then they are physically absent — and only the outlines of their shadows, drawn on the floor by the rain, still reminds us of their existence.

This subtle synthesis of different immediate and media modes is one of the most outstanding qualities of Edith Flückiger's videos. The thread that runs through all her works is the removal of borderlines between media, the readjustment of our perception and the continuous questioning of familiar image genres through new perspectives. Take, for instance, her mundane treatment of Bill Viola's heroic video installation "The Arc of Ascent" (1992), where the male body diving into the water is replaced by children happily jumping from a diving platform and

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<sup>3</sup> Sten Nadolny, *Die Entdeckung der Langsamkeit*, Munich, Piper (publ.) 1983

romping around in a swimming pool ("und vergesse an guten Tagen, dass wir kopfüber ins Leere hängen"/Forgetting on Good Days that We're Hanging Head Downwards into the Void, 1996); or her motif of a merry-go-round from Hollywood detective films, which she lets us experience in a new way through contemplative slow motion ("gedankenverloren 1"/Lost in Thought 1, 1999); or her latest video "if" (2002), where she plays with motifs from science fiction movies. Again and again, her choice of imagery is set against the background of cultural image archives which are deeply ingrained in our minds.

This reflection upon the media and their presentation is particularly striking when we look at her installations which are specially tailored to suit the relevant spatial setting of a given exhibition. In "gedankenverloren 2" (Lost in Thought 2, 1999), for instance, which Flückiger showed in an attic with an oblique wall, she developed a projection that doubled the screen area, limited by the three sides (roof and floor). She did so by continuing the projection triangle on the floor. In this way, the viewer perceived the jellyfish, hovering poetically in the water, as an experience that was corporeal on account of its three-dimensional character, as it occupied the entire room. Flückiger's approach was similar in a work of 1997, "ohne Titel (Schwimmende)" (Untitled (Swimmers)): here, she gives us the perspective of observers standing on a bridge, where we watch people drift along a river, below. The swimmers enter the viewable space at the top and leave at the bottom. This is continually repeated, for the simple reason that our position is of a static kind. In

this video installation, Flückiger decided to leave the conventional mode of projection and to set up the visible area not on a wall but on a plastic sheet on the floor, pulled up into a vertical position at one end. As a result, the swimmers shoot, as it were, from the void at the top into our range of vision, drift across the vertical mini-screen into the horizontal area on the floor and eventually appear to be swallowed up by the beam of light coming from the video projector. What is demonstrated to us here is a paradox that characterizes the discussion on perception: the image-light simulation does not turn into a world, but de-constructs itself, so that it is revealed as a cheap and simple trick. The "Agony of the Real"<sup>4</sup> is shown up by a simulacrum in all its absurdity.

Christoph Doswald

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<sup>4</sup> See also: Jean Baudrillard, *Agonie des Realen*, Berlin, Merve Verlag (publ.) 1978



„gedankenverloren 2“, Boden/Wandinstallation, DV, 1999