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By Pamela Crimmins ART CRITICAL January 2007

Caspar Stracke is a German new media artist who works in film, video and installation. He has exhibited internationally, primarily in the US, Europe and Japan, and has received a number of awards, fellowships and residencies, including one at Eyebeam Center for New Media in New York City. Stracke has also worked extensively as an image journalist and video editor in the commercial realm, and has acted as a curator in various new media projects. His work revolves around a variety of subjects, most recently architecture, urbanism and its sociological implications. In most recently exhibited Urban Particle Supercollider, a 2007 installation at Eyebeam in Chelsea, New York.

Born in Germany in 1967, Stracke studied both painting and Experimental film in college, turning to film and video full-time after graduation. Artists of his generation typically received beaux-arts training along with courses in new media, which continues to inform his work.

While all of his works but one are attributed to him alone as author, he has used a variety of strategies that expand the notion of artistic creation, particularly the idea of the artist as sole progenitor of the artwork. "No Damage" (2002) was assembled from clips of over eighty films that featured the architecture of New York City. "Urban Particle Supercollider" he originally began as a Flickr group, where people in Teheran, New York City, and Seoul posted images of urban street objects. In addition, comments posted with the photographs were transformed into numeric values that determined the position and trajectory of the objects in the finished work, over which he exerted no control. "Kubrick Space" (2001) was edited entirely by machine; this work he even attributed to the machine as the creator: The "SK 090 CED player" (CED Trilogy, 2001)

A number of works deal with the urban environment.

As "No Damage" is dedicated to the New York architecture in cinema, "Locked Groove" (1997) collages close-ups of the movements of urban workers. Some of the works establish connections between disparate urban environments, suggesting that the urban environment has transnational properties.

"Doppel" (2004), fuses images of monumental architecture and its exact replica, between Shanghai and Ivory Coast. "Points of Presence" (2005) cuts and pastes objects of one city into another.

Fusion and hybridity, concepts that computers address with ease, appear in his work again and again. Both "Doppel" and "Points of Presence" create new environments out of images of different cities. Similarly, in "Urban Particle Supercollider", Stracke combined images where the street objects showed evidence of commonality. For example, he fused garbage bins from two different cities into a new, singular form.

Looking more closely at "Urban Particle Supercollider", the viewer sees all of these themes in evidence. The work is presented on three separate, but joined screens, in which a sea of clustered objects cascade against a white space, all training tails of colors. Phone booths, stop signs, hot dog stands, post office boxes and garbage bins -all vernacular urban objects- join and float in a seemingly random, indeterminate space. The collected images began in the second dimension, but were digitally rebuilt by the artist as 3D objects. As already mentioned, the photographers' comments were transformed into numerical values, which determined the trajectory and position of the rebuilt and fused objects in zero gravity space. While it is, absolutely, the work of one artist, a number of participants, that is, unknown photographers in disparate loca-



LOCKED GROOVE, video, 1997



NO DAMAGE, video, 2002



top and bottom: DOPPEL video installation, 2004

tions, contributed to its formation. In addition, Stracke used, but did not ultimately control, a computer to establish at least part of the works' ultimate visual impact. The work suggests that we are swimming, or even dancing, but not drowning, in a sea of images and objects, which may be culturally situated, but are, in some ways, related, at least to the careful observer. Urbanity, as a concept of the hub, with input flowing in from many directions, is addressed here.

Stracke's work exhibits evidence of a remarkable sympathy that extends beyond humanity ("Locked Groove") to the built environment and the specific objects within it. In much of his work, juxtaposition, collaging, and fusion give life to new forms from old. In "Bump & Bump" (1986), the camera assumes the perspective of a basketball as it careens around the court during a practice session. And in "No Damage", created after 9/11, viewers are asked to see buildings as evolving life forms, with which we might have an ongoing, and intimate relationship. New media are often referred to as "cool" media, in contrast to the "warm" media associated with craft, materials, and the human hand. In addition,

machines in general, and computers in particular, often take on a menacing aspect in popular media, as in the film "2001" (whose director, Stanley Kubrick, is referenced in Stracke's work). But in Stracke's hands, or better, mind, the computer is the tool that allows both Stracke and his viewers to experience viscerally a sensual, non-hierarchical, erotic animism, and not the totalitarian dystopia that many fear.





INTERVIEW WITH CASPAR STRACKE

NY and Seoul December 2007

PC: You were born in 1967, and began college as a student in painting, turning to film and video later. Many younger new media artists are engaging with technology as an artistic medium without any beaux-arts training either to inform or constrain their work. How does your background in painting inform your work, if at all? Do you still paint or draw? What was it about film, video and new media that convinced you to turn in this direction-what were they able to do for you what you couldn't do as a painter?

CS: Ha! Les Beaux Arts ... You smartly dropped this particular term into a territory in which it appears completely alien. A drip of oil in water. If we contemplate this relationship of art disciplines historically it lets me draw a comparison to the European dilemma of having to digest (and ultimately abandon) too much heavy culture in order to work unhindered on truly modernist concepts. After entering art academy I worked parallel in both disciplines, painting and media art, but towards graduation I unfortunately gave up painting and drawing entirely. In that time I had developed some kind of mental block against painting, it always seemed to prevent me from thinking in time-based concepts and perceptible movement. I was not able to pull that off with a brush on a canvas.

As I nowadays work partially with 3D animation in a very abstract painterly style, some experience suddenly came back. It then also made me curious to see if I even had any drawing skills left. That's what you start wondering as a media artist in a time of complete abolition of any handcrafted work. So I most recently made a test and started to draw a human figure, the first one in probably 15 years. The outcome was terrible. It's not like driving a car, which always remains an acquired experience- quite a sad loss. Nonetheless, some kind of meta-experience of painting remained and has proven helpful in my film and video work.

PC: You state that you practice Digital Media and Media Archaeology. What is a media archaeologist?

CS: It was coined that way by a group of writers, theorists, cultural producers (to which I started counting myself in) that began in response to the industry-dictated light-speed development of digital tools. As we all know, one of its principal set backs is the fact that new technologies are introduced and dumped in such an insane fast pace that nobody can catch up. Formats and codes change too often, creating an unnecessary chaos of incompatibility, especially in regards to long-term archiving. A fact that the profit-driven market of consumer electronics could not even care less.

Most importantly, brilliant technologies with too little demand disappear entirely. For many theorists it was time to remind media art culture of certain pieces of history within itself which tend to become forgotten in favor of the recognition of the new, hip and innovative. Media archaeology doesn't mean to turn entirely backward but rather to dig up, recognize and re-contextualize - but also preserve. This effort helps to re-link these fragments of media art history with its own present. People like Erkki Huhtamo, Siegfried Zielinsky and even the SciFi author Bruce Sterling (who initiated the brilliant "Dead media archive") are some of the key thinkers in this field. In a way they help to clean up the mess that trend-hungry curators and critics leave behind.

Media archaeology also became a resource of inspiration to my own work. After all, diving in the world of over 100 years old cinema has always been the origin and a central theme in many of my works.

Finally, it is a concept which eliminates hopeless debates of new vs. old technology - just by contemplating them outside its context of time. All that is in turn highly stimulating for artistic ideas on media-reflexion

PC: Looking over your body of work, I see pieces created through sampling and re-contextualizing of other artists' work (No Damage, 2000 and Urban Particle

Supercollider, 2007), collaging (Locked Groove, 1997-9), and editing by a machine (Kubrick Space, 2001), all postmodern strategies for questioning notions of originality and, specifically, the myth of the artist as lonely genius. How do you see yourself as an artist and creator? Are there any theorists, critics or writers whose work has influenced you in this regard?

CS: I would not file these concepts/strategies under postmodernism, and I must admit that I never put these four works in comparison because their origins and work processes were entirely different. The first I began with nothing but a pure movement-oriented cultural study of street workers in Hull, North England. Others were created by a technical malfunction that accidentally reassembled a specific style of 70s video art. (and became a parody of such) A third one was a classic found footage piece. Ultimately on all works I pushed the buttons on the output--which united them in terms of questions on authorship - they remain conventional creations by a single artist.

However, I am becoming more and more interested about the concept of entirely giving up authorship in the artistic creation, which I only did a single time, admitting that the machine had done the work entirely, so I gave it the credit. The strongest impulses I received from another camp: the rapid development of electronica music culture in the mid 90s, in particular here in New York with a nomadic venue called "Soundlab" and a group of ambient music composers. One of their innovations was to radically give up authorship. No name of individuals. A large number of impressive artist collectives were born in that time. I worked on several collaborative initiatives, some better, some worse, but realized ultimately I am too much of a control freak and switched back. Nonetheless, this time brought me out of the ivory tower. Maybe I wasn't able to collaborate in the same area of my previous work, but I found new connecting points and remained socially involved in -almost too many- group activities ranging from dance performance, live video to curatorial projects, plus my work with THING.NET and since two years co-directing a festival for video art. (video_dumbo)

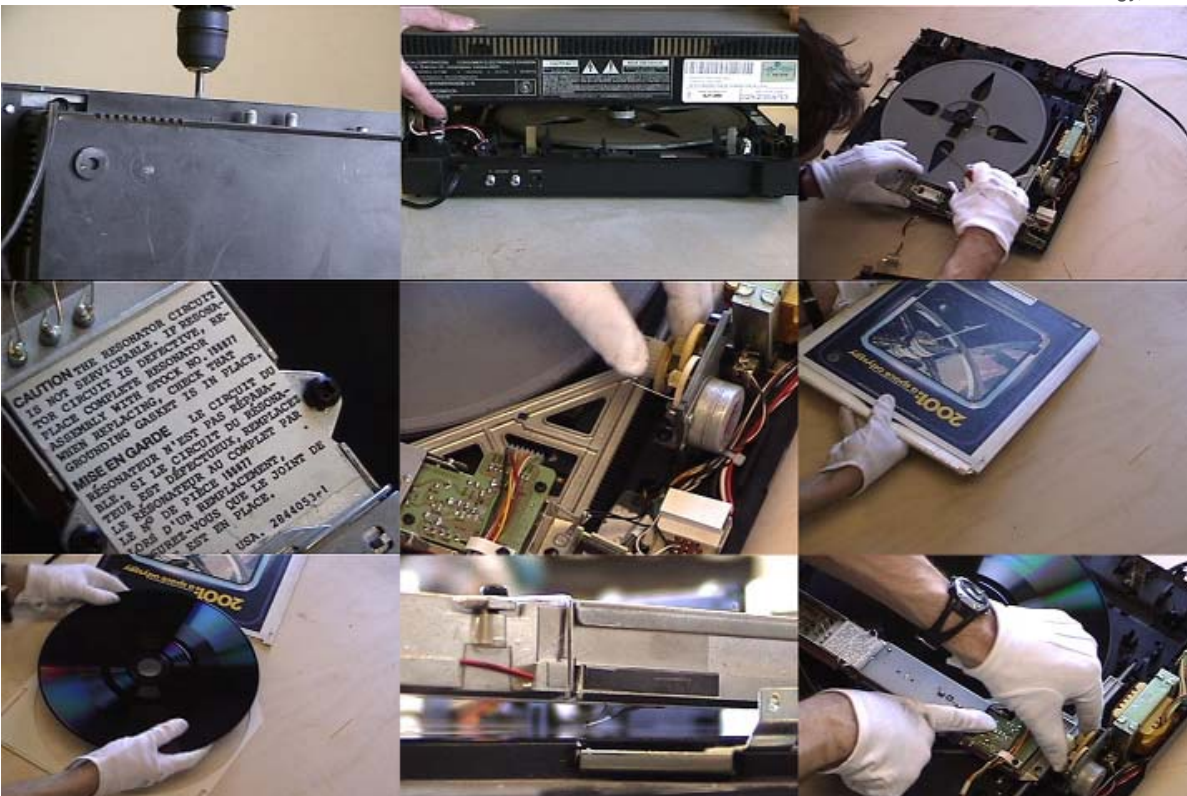


POINTS OF PRESENCE, installation, 2005



ZUSE STRIP, installation, ZKM , Karlsruhe, 2003

CED Trilogy, 2001



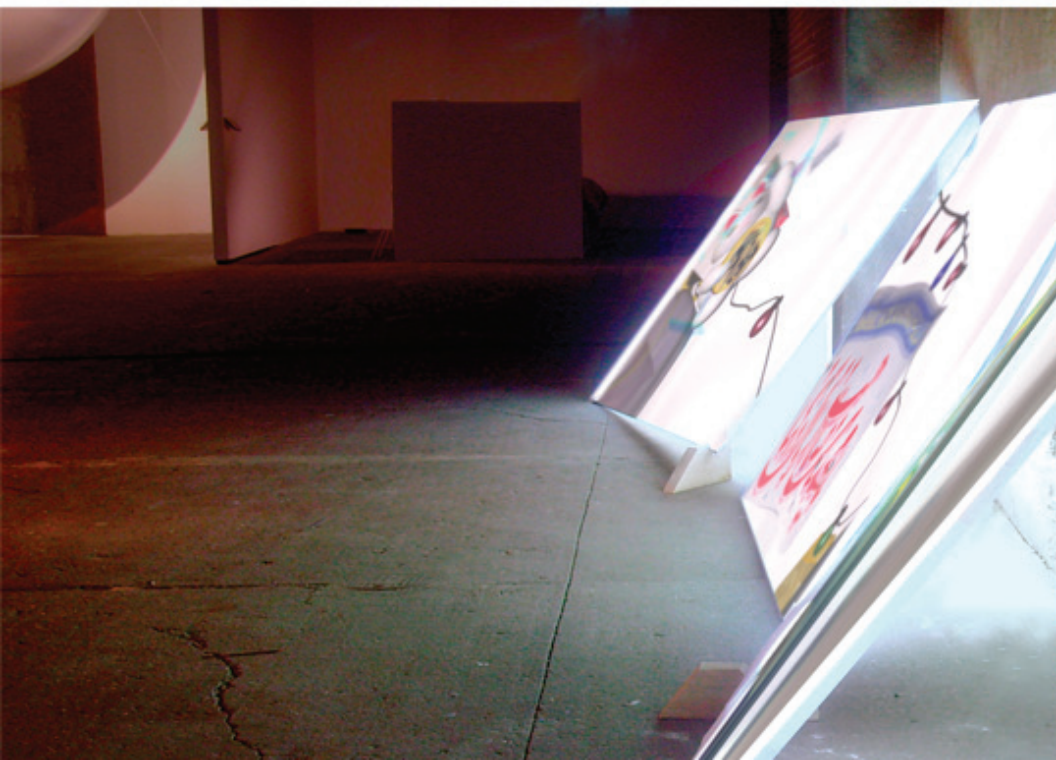
ZUSE STRIP, video, 2003



CED Trilogy, 2001



top and bottom: Urban Particle Supercollider, EYEBEAM, 2007



PC: Your work often reflects on the urban environment (No Damage, Urban Particle Supercollider, Doppel, 2004, and Points of Presence, 2005). You yourself have lived in Hamburg , New York City, Mexico City and Korea. What is it about the urban environment and urbanity that intrigues you? As an urban nomad, do you see yourself as a post- or trans-national artist?

CS: In regards to the political facettes of transnationalism, I never would dare use this term. Lets put it this way: I am very grateful having the privilege to travel and to be able to change my home base several times to different countries where I started from scratch. Art residencies don't really count here, as one just remains a well-protected visiting art tourist.

But it's true that I probably belong to this group of uprooted people that have a certain restlessness and keep moving. The biggest side-effect is that you cannot help but constantly compare life and culture. Everyday. Now with the third country involved that sometimes really propels me on the verge of schizophrenia. At the same time it proves to be an endless source for new contemplations, new projects. Especially in connection with urbanism.

As for Influences - or inspirations, Primarily sociologists and urbanists , the usual suspects from France, such as Paul Virillio, Miche Maffesoli and Pierre Bourdieu. Most and, -more recently- Nestor Garcia Canclini and Saskia Sassen. As far as the idea of an altered notion of nationality, I guess that is a concept that Germans might be good at. Simply because my generation -the second post war and children of the 68 Generation- was treated with some sort of anti-nationalist vaccine. Everything that let Germans associate with Nationalism and Patriotism was genuinely considered bad and dangerous. With that slightly truncated Identity you are easier motivated to adapt to or assimilate a foreign one.

PC: Urban Particle Supercollider began as a Flickr group, with images posted from New York City, Teheran, and Seoul. Who posted the photographs? Friends? Artists? Did you guide the nature of the imagery that was collected-that is, urban vernacular street objects? Who digitally rebuilt the images? Is this the sort of task that you might farm out to someone else? Did you have an idea of how this work might turn out, or did it evolve without a firm preconceived idea in place?

CS: I have worked with several cities in direct comparison



Korea Way (New York), T'eheran-ro (Seoul) and Se'oul St (Tehran), Urban Particle Supercollider, 2006

and often decided on a trigonal juxtaposition simply to escape a sort of trivial polarization that a city pair would provoke. In the case of Urban Particle Supercollider, New York and Seoul were determined by my time of living in these cities, yet for these cities the personal experience was not relevant. No expert knowledge in city history and cultural sensibilities needed, rather the religious cultural diversity was the issue here. With the inclusion of an Islamic culture, the choice of Teheran seemed most appropriate as the political tension opened another field of comparison.

On Flickr I had once noticed how many photographers already do comparisons of cities and street culture. To found a specific Flickr group (tehranseoulnewyork, <http://www.flickr.com/groups/tesony>) took a few mouse clicks. Flickr turned out to be a great tool, despite the fact that it is over-organized, and one of the current pushy social network spaces in which each possibly member activity is premeditated in categories and pop-up windows. It certainly had its flaws: I only learned after establishing contact to Teheran photographers that Flickr is officially blocked by the Iranian government and all the members are the ones that managed to hack it. Ironically there is more blocking by Flickr itself, they started censoring content in Korea, as well as a few new "axis of evil" candidate: Germany, Hong Kong and Singapore. Luckily there were many established through Iranian friends in New York. Korea was less of a problem, since I now have several friends over there.

During this summer I met Marc Garrett of Furtherfield and discussed many of the strategies under which this London collective operates. This inspired me to a follow-up project of Urban Particle Supercollider that would completely open up the project and involve people not as the kindly exploited contributors but active collaborators. It would also mean bypassing myself as the quality controller, in fact even that kind of authorship elimination as discussed earlier. And finally it would require people that write the right lines of code to develop an appropriate interface through which image/objects are not only uploaded but also positioned in "orbit". (as a conglomeration of floating street objects).

PC: One piece takes on the point of view of a basketball (Bump & Bump, 1986) and another asks us to see buildings, and the city as a whole, as evolving life forms (No

Damage, 2002). Other works join together images of disparate buildings (Doppel) and cities (Points of Presence). Urban Particle Supercollider fuses images of related objects into hybrid forms. When considering your work, I was surprised to find that, despite your reliance on technology and machines and your focus on the city, it seems to be characterized, above all, by a sort of pansexual erotic animism. Do you agree? Would you care to comment on your spiritual orientation, if any?

CS: I am glad that you are able to read some of these undertones. So far I have never directly approached spiritual issues - with the exception that art production itself possesses its own spirituality. However, you certainly will find a lot of elements directly related to sexuality. My experimental film work from the Eighties dealt with sexuality, gender issues and transgression. Now when I look back it is not such a surprise that this happened in exactly that time period. It really was in the air and things were shaking. It was right before the AIDS crisis and long before the emergence of an "established" queer culture. It was in that time I began studying, searching, and got caught in this stream.

What followed was a long transition period mainly informed by subjects dealing with all sorts of reflections on cinema. From there my interest eventually shifted towards architecture, urbanism and socio-political issues. The reason for that is - I strongly believe- a "parental boomerang-effect" - being a child of an architect and a sociologist.

However there were always some thematic side excursions into different territories: a collaboration with the composer and writer Terre Thaemlitz on his album "LOVE BOMB" (2003) re-introduced me to gender politics.

In 2004 followed another collaboration with Gabriela Monroy under the name MOSTRA, first a work we entitled "Kulchov Sukiyaki", a cut-up collage of 70s erotic and soft porn movies applying the so-called "Kulechov Effect" a cinematic editing device of juxtaposing portraiture. In 2005 followed "Coma Erotique" a found footage film collecting the cinematic depiction of coma and trauma issues.

In retrospect I could say that things started to shift from micro to macrocosm.

But then, arguably- once you have found your language of expression you keep working with the same vocabulary, even if it looks like the topics have changed entirely.

I believe we constantly keep carrying our older content

baggages with us, occasionally embedding or interweaving this content into current topics, which is causing an assimilation of bigger and bigger chunks. It can sometimes feel like walking on an avalanche. I mean that in a positive way, actually.

And I wouldn't want to limit this metaphor exclusively to art and artistic creation.

Pamela Crimmings is an art critic and regular contributor of ArtCritical, based in New York.



BETWEEN EMPATHY AND SYMPATHY IS TIME (Apartheid), video, in collaboration with Terre Thaemlitz, 2002

