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A New Space for the Finnish
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Ympäryspuisto³⁴

I got an opportunity to do an interview with Caspar Stracke, Kuva's brand new professor of moving image from Germany. Caspar has been working on moving image and media art scene. He's done a wide range of artworks from installations to feature-length films. He's been also a director of Dumbo film festival in New York. I had a talk with him about these projects and – most important of all – his new professorship of moving image here in Kuvataideakatemia.

How did you end up as an artist? Or more likely, how did you get involved with art scene and moving image?

It's funny that you use the expression "ending up" because in this context it could easily have a slightly negative connotation. It could suggest a social downfall, as in 'started an ambitious career and ended up on the street...'.
A highly interesting subject to discuss in-depth with art students. The ultimate pressing questions are: On what road am I on? What are my options?

Many artists make that difficult decision to be full-time artist very early, hence no reasonable back-up plan. When I started to study art, I had already made this decision. I was enthusiastically making S-8 experimental films in high school, but at that time I certainly had not found my community yet. My first contact with a more radical form of contemporary art was a book on Fluxus I picked up at a flea market as a 17-year old. This is when things began to move.

You've been witnessing digitalization in arts from the very start and this "media transformation" is often present as a theme in your work. What are your feelings on this process analog-digital when concerning especially the field of moving image. Where are we heading?

Well, there is my work Zuse Strip (2003) that is based on a short text by Lev Manovich, as well as a Sci-Fi short story by Arthur C. Clarke that incorporates a lot of questions on encrypting and deciphering of both, analog and digital code. It's true, I belong to the generation that

TEXT
JOAKIM PUSENIUS
PHOTO
PETRI SUMMANEN

Super-8, 4k, Electric Jolts and Jumper Cables

An Interview with Caspar Stracke



was right in the middle of this transformation, but maybe because of that fact, my work deliberately hardly ever points towards the differences between analog and digital. In my investigations on various aspects of cinema (personal, sociological, political) these distinctions are irrelevant.

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My point is that a very unique cinematic language (consisting of a developed vocabulary of expressions) can be lifted off from its original medium and translated into another, for instance a digital one.

For the last 20 years, one of the main topics of the ongoing media art debate has been the obsessive preoccupation with the highly speculative topic future.

But aside from thoughtful concerns about media preservation and sustainability, it was mostly fueled by the innovation-hungry IT industry, which also meant too much technology-driven. Throughout the 90s in particular, one could argue that there was hardly any thematic approach towards the immediate past (late 70s, 80s). Luckily the next generation didn't buy into that – the wake of the makers movement has not only brought back materiality and tangibility in media art but is now digging up some hastily skipped chapters of moving image/art production and cultural phenomena that are currently re-contextualized, relinked with contemporary art practice of the present. The outcome is surprisingly fresh, they have neither a retro-character nor is there any nostalgia attached to it. The works of the emerging artist Julius v. Bismarck would be a good example.

You talked in your presentation last autumn about ongoing digitalization and the loss of artistic boundaries (material or immaterial). I was very happy that you brought up this idea. Because usually you hear people speaking only about the other side of the phenomenon. Usually the supporters of new media

are praising the possibilities the digitalization has brought to the relation of production (cheaper, easier, more possibilities etc.). If there is a criticism towards this process, it is always from the cinefilia/cine-research point of view concerning only the problem of origin(ality) of cinema in digital age. Could you elaborate more on this artistic practice point of view.

A good point. But, again, I would like to point out something about phrasing here – you repeatedly emphasize on the “ongoing digitalization” which also reveals a clear position: You state quite a conservative viewpoint, because it evokes the impression that digitization implies something “being taken away”.

There is some truth to it on the technical, microscopic and bit level (digitizing always involves compression) but then there is too much of an opposite force prevalent in this world.

First of all we have to put in consideration here that the buzzword digital allowed completely ridiculous and unnecessary makeovers of existing cultural artifacts, so in this regard I agree with you on the negative implication of digitalization.

With regard to the material character of film, your viewpoint reminds me of the dramatic case of the 15 million still photographs and negatives that Bill Gates' firm Corbis “preserved” by burying them deep underground in an iron mine while licensing the rights to the digital facsimiles of these “fortified” originals.

But let us now put the other aspects into consideration. For instance, creation. Here the “process of digitalization” oversees the type of art that is genuinely created in the digital realm, with neither a direct transfer or adoption from analog media. This is the reason why net.art, software art, but also new digital collage forms became so incredibly popular in the 90s – From John Simon Jr.'s Every Icon to Jeremy Blake's abstract moving image paintings.

The emergence of the so-called “4K” Ultra High Definition filmscan technology in the late 90s finally put an end to the old, redundant film vs. video/digital media discussion. But in the digital realm the question of origin

and original is a Benjaminian boomerang, no matter what type of technology is involved.

In my own art production it had simply been wonderful when the original and its digital simulacra became absolutely indistinguishable, completely questioning the singularity, the unique character of an art work.

Then there is also the cheaper and faster argument you mention, which was the core aspect of the so-called digital revolution. For the first time ever, filmmakers, photographers and musicians had independence. Let's not forget, this all happened just a bit more than a decade ago. And while a lot of older artists – who during the major part of their career depended on big studio technology – celebrated this freedom, younger ones had to look for new challenges which is an interesting psychological paradox – It seems that in this kind of art production, nothing is more boring than total freedom – consequently we do deliberately look for new obstacles – in order to overcome them. The art work almost becomes a mere byproduct of that catalysis.

How do you see the contemporary art field developed from the 80s to this day. Do you see any change in the post-modern paradigm? How do you see the future of contemporary arts? Most of all I'm interested in its overwhelming irony.

That is a tremendously wide-ranged time period to contemplate here in one answer, but I can see why you included the 80s since you relate the art development to the big (post-) post-modernism question. There is a dramatic paradigm-shift but it's still in the middle of happening. When exactly Postmodernism faded out (or simply became historicized) that is maybe a question we have to ask Alain Badiou.

As for new -isms in the art context, the massive return of conceptual art still functions like a fertilizer, helping to re-contextualize a number of forgotten genres, movements and practices. Also Experimental Film and Expanded Cinema had been re-discovered in the light of Conceptual Art. Over the past two decades you can locate a couple of immense “jolts” propelling contemporary thought and art movements forward into new (old) territories. But they usually quickly turn out to be small turbulences, reaction to current situations.

That brings me to your point of the childish playfulness. I remember that post 9-11 art in America turned into almost the opposite of what critics would have predicted – it became for a short period completely apolitical, silly and even a bit trippy. The less reality involved the better. In the Whitney Biennial and PS1's Greater New York show (the two barometers for American Art trends, emerging and established, respectively) you suddenly found psychedelic, feel-good art – also lots of humor – this distraction was much needed at that time.

The Occupy Movement on the other hand was completely different, regarding the way the Financial Crisis stirred an unadulterated anger that resonated like a power boost throughout numerous activist and art projects alike.

These all are perfect indications for the big unpredictability, there is no formula and nobody knows where we are heading. Needless to say, what is being called trends has always been the most deceiving. The art world as multilayered candy store tends to always feature the most diverse approaches, styles and genres, side-by-side. But this has some positive sides-effects. After you have spent time with a politically motivated, deep, text-heavy art piece it is only healthy to see some lighthearted genius silliness. I always enjoy this kind of dichotomy and admire the few that are able to combine these oppositional forces in one single work.

Can you tell something of your upcoming film about time reversal. You did it with specialists in different fields of science. I understood that Manuel DeLanda is interviewed there as well as many others. Can you describe the process of that film a bit. Will this film be also seen in the gallery space?

Allow me to pass on this question. The film is *almost* finished but still needs some time and I don't like to talk too much about un-

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finished work. About this one I have already talked a lot (rough cut, test screening, etc.) but I am getting superstitious – the more I talk about it the longer it will take to finish it.

That 's totally ok. I'm looking forward to seeing it.

You've also organized a film-festival in New York. Could you tell us something about that. Is it still going on? What do you think is the future of distribution for art film. Cause there 's been lot of on-demand services etc. But the reality is too often that those videos on the internet are being watched from the 17 inch laptop computer screen in between some YouTube -clip.

Right. Big Problem. On the other hand, all those lonely people (Lennon) are eventually re-discovering the event and impact of a screening in a larger group as an irreplaceable social experience. We like to watch and we like to watch others watching. The group experience is magic. This is the reason why cinemas and festival culture will never vanish. This is why performance art is back on the map. And this is why these lonely laptop people at some point will throw their laptop out the window, or carefully take it apart and then join Pixelache/Trashlab who is doing group expeditions like visiting a electronic waste sorting station in Konala. (happening as we speak/write).

As for the festivals, they are still a highly important platform for like minded, it means exchange, feedback in general film discussion, etc.

video_dumbo is a project we have dubbed festival-within-a festival, because it was born into a giant art festival in

Dumbo (the name of neighborhood in Brooklyn, right at the waterfront facing Manhattan)

Before my partner Gabriela Monroy and myself became directors in 2005, it already had been directed by video artists as well. (LesLeVeque and Daniella Dooling)

Over the past seven years it grew from a small screening with a handful of mainly lo-

cal video artists into a three-day event with an average over 120 works of international video artist, live video, and – most importantly – a massive exhibition of video art, last year curated under the title *Quasi Cinema*.

(<http://www.videodumbo.org/11-video-installations.html>)

There is a lot to say about the role of artists-as-curators. We always point out that taking on such a stressful work load has not only such noble reasons like creating a platform for emerging video artists – it is much more. For us, as artists, makers, the creative process of curating is comparable with editing a giant found footage film. (With the only difference we are not allowed to make any CUTS in the included segments!) All in all, curatorial efforts like this turned out to be extremely beneficial for our own work – something that will therefore definitively be incorporated in my course work.

Who are the most influential artists to you ever?

Ah, the classic. Why do I have to think of mediocre rock bands now, those who list their mixed bag of big stars and positioning themselves with a "crossover " style in-between?

Let me reduce it to one single person I would like to mention here: Liz LeCompte, the director of The Wooster Group.

I don't think anybody else has had such a tremendous impact on the molding of my artistic vocabulary.

Now some questions concerning teaching and your new post. Do you have any agenda already thought over for the up-coming semester. What kind of themes are you going to bring up? What do you think of as essential point of today's videoartist/moviemaker.

Yes, indeed there is an agenda in place. First of all there is a screening series I entitled *CINEMA ZERO*, which will be part of the *FILM FORUM*, taking place every Monday at 6 pm in the auditorium. It is not only a back-to-zero approach to essential cinema but also includes proto-cinematic work, or, as Werner Ne-

kes, one of the featured filmmakers entitles it "Film before Film".

For this semester there are 13 screenings of better and lesser known outstanding silent films masterpieces, (Feuillade, Kirsanoff, Murnau, Dovzhenko, Flaherty, a.o.) In my Moving Image seminar, the day after the screening, they will all be taken apart and analyzed but – most importantly – compared with contemporary moving image work that either had a direct influence or drew from common phenomena and cinematic languages. So far on my list are works by Omer Fast, Christian Marclay, Ceryth Wyn Evans, Nicholas Provost, Deborah Stratman, Leslie Thornton, Mike Hoolboom, Mark Lewis and others.

As the professor of a study program that is simply called "Moving Image" within a framework entitled "Time and Space" I cannot be more grateful for such a smart and open and timely categorization which elegantly bridges so many related genres. (You hardly find these combined in any art academy)

My teaching will follow exactly that: A very broad approach, nonetheless a very selective one, simply to avoid drowning. Having already touched on a few points regarding Cinephilia, my teaching will certainly include historical crucial positions from Avant-Garde Cinema, but also try to shed light into those positions that were simply skipped as I mentioned above. This practice has its part of a science, called *Media Archeology* and we are very happy to have invited one of its principal creators, (who happened to be Finnish, but living in LA) Erkki Huhtamo from UCLA who is giving a block seminar in November.

In addition, there's the on-going Nordic Sound Art initiative of which I am now part as well teaching a course on image to sound and sound to image conversion here at KuvA. Then there are the forthcoming Arts University pilot programs. The latter will help to put sound art more into focus – headed by my colleague Pia Lindman our department will be very active this area.

And ultimately a quick word about what I have in mind to include on the praxis level. I am introducing some extreme pairings. For instance there will be chemical processing – and Processing. (The latter is a object-oriented programming toolkit). There will be op-

tical lens experiments and there will be also 3D kinect-hacks.

I would claim that this is a very unusual dualistic approach in art/film/media academies and we are very excited about this first two semester test run.

Then little bit deeper. How does one teach the arts? What are the most important things when considering teaching arts to people?

As we all know, creative process in Fine Art is known to be impossible to teach, we art teachers are simply there to give electric jolts with jumper cables – In reality it certainly means a bit more than that – I see it as a well-tuned process consisting of consulting, coaching, evaluating and comparing. My main inspirations for that approach have always come from art teaching/mediation and collective knowledge-gathering processes outside the academic institutions, because this is where things are on the reality-test run. (This is the outside-the-academy-artist speaking)

There are for instance these completely independently developed public art school projects such as *Unitednationsplaza* by Anton Vidokle and Julieta Aranda (e-flux) or designer/artist duo Dexter Sinister's radical approach to academic art teaching. These people are kick-ass. Strong inspirations, especially when unleashed inside art academies.

What has been best "teaching" in your own career?

The New York School (of Hard Knocks!) ×

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