

Seductive images featuring... Erotic aspects in Alexandra Maurer's animated paintings

At first they seem colorful, joyful, and wildly animated. They are entitled *la chute*, *muro*, *escape* and *jump*. The artist, Alexandra Maurer, describes the mostly short, expressive video sequences that were created in the period between 2004 and 2007 as "peinture animée" - and even though they are presented as videos, they are in fact not pure films, but some kind of blend or overlap of different artistic techniques, from video to painting to computer aided animation, that are finally installed as three dimensional compositions on monitors or as projections. Bottom line: Alexandra Maurer's works are suspended between different media. The dissolution of traditional media has been seen before and has actually become such a common phenomenon in modern art that it is not necessarily worthy of a detailed explanation, were it not, in this case, for the combination of content and the precise formal transformation in such a meaningful way. Therefore, we must go back to the beginning of every artistic observation, to the initial (hopefully unbiased) viewing of the piece, of those (seemingly) so colorful, joyful and animated images.

Erotic signals

An (almost) empty courtyard, turned into a stage. We see a few dimly lit amplifiers randomly arranged in the room. In the background a figure that looks like a keyboardist: in this scene a blond woman in a glowing red dress slides down on the ground, rolls forward, turns her face quickly toward the camera, gets up and disappears into the darkness of the room, falling to the ground and rolling around the stage again. After about a minute, the sequence is repeated in a juxtaposition of a few filmed and many painted images... As seen in *la chute* the other pieces of this artist feature a similar, precisely choreographed and dense sequence of movements, based on a recurring rhythm through animated video images, painted over video stills and expressive paintings (acrylic on paper). However, more than the artistic transformation of the sixty filmed, painted or painted over images, our eye is caught by an element that has been ignored, maybe even denied by most critics so far: the simply intoxicating sensuality of Alexandra Maurer's images. The sensual moments are not only evident in the expressive, flowing lines of acrylic on paper, but in many other signals that convey a distinctly erotic expression in her work. It features mainly young protagonists whose accentuated physical presence is always tangible and, in seemingly archaic, choreographed movements, becomes more and more suggestive, an eroticism that has always been inherent in any dance movement with its raw, bundled and unleashing energy. This physical sensuality is emphasized even further in the paintings through the use of strong, luminous colors for the clothing, just as the video camera zooms in shamelessly and almost seems to physically caress the actors, occasionally offering a provocative glimpse of intimate body parts. In Alexandra Maurer's short "peintures animées" the camera as well as the painted images combined with erotic signals play an endless game of seduction and engage in a permanent artistic striptease, without ever disrobing anyone or turning the seductive sequence of images into a catharsis of classical narration.

In space and time

Besides (almost) empty stages as in *la chute* or in a part of the two-channel video piece *escape*, the settings for the short features are narrow wall openings – or was it a bathtub? -, a long hallway (*muro*) or a trampoline in an amusement park, covered by a circus tent (*jump*). These are anonymous, but at the same time familiar places. Due to the lack of detail, the short sequences are not anchored and never come together as a story. Alexandra Maurer's pieces all feature a focus on physical movement. The best example of this is *muro* where a young woman and man struggle against a wall that separates them, created with the two-channel technique, they softly lean against it, slowly slide down along the wall to the ground, gently roll over, passionately run into it... More so than in the other piece, the setting here contributes significantly to the oppressive atmosphere. The deserted hallway, lit with a cold light, turns into a personal prison without any possibility of escape. At the same time, the dance movement clashes with the virtual (video) architecture and turns into the hopeless struggle of man and woman against a separating wall. A strangely harsh and clinical sound, computer generated from original tracks, provides the obvious atmospheric breaking points in *muro* that, little by little, obliterate the seductive moments.

But more than the setting itself and the ambient sound, it is the artistic transformation that vehemently underscores an exaggerated, erotic interpretation of the piece. The transfer of individual video stills to free painting almost forcibly leads to the dissolution of individual shapes and bodies: arms and legs become freely painted expressions, facial contours are suggested in a caricature-like style, while the thinly applied paint runs its course and ends up as drops on the paper. In the past, these traces of color have often been interpreted as drops of blood or tears, and thus the piece on the whole was (mis)understood as a bold,

violent artistic statement. At the very least such a linear interpretation demonstrates the potential of violence and pain that represent another aspect of eroticism and intimacy – an intensity that is enhanced through the familiar MTV-style juxtaposition of images. But here computer animation adds another rhythm to the filmed or painted movements, by adopting their rhythm and at the same time chopping it up. The dance movements, the jumping on the trampoline do not flow, but are rather abrupt. In addition, the constant zooming in on the protagonists seems to add to the dense, hectic rhythm.

The most radical aspect is the resolution of intimate play and erotic movement in a permanent loop of short sequences – and thus basically in a process of perception of time.¹) If one or two loops may lull the senses, the permanent repetition of the same juxtaposed image sequences evokes compulsion, hopelessness and inevitability, which is captivating yet repulsive. In *muro* and *escape* the movements of the dancers are not only trapped in the rooms, but even more so in the repetitive film medium. Falling becomes a permanent condition, rolling off the wall a manic movement, joyful jumping an endless instability. Therefore, the use of the technical tool of looping in Alexandra Maurer's pieces is not just a result of institutional presentation conditions, as simple repetitions without delaying pauses, but it generates a basic meaning and allows an alternate interpretation by radically disrupting the initially sensual atmosphere and turning the erotic energy of the images into disturbing impressions of potential violence. In a nutshell: The artist seems to reclaim her seductive work in order to deconstruct it and to permanently prevent visual seduction in an ongoing loop.

Between weapon and erotic play

Since the beginning of the video art female artists have used eroticism as a "weapon" in order to answer centuries of male fantasies in art. In dealing with their own physical presence they initiated and demonstrated prominent feministic positions. The pioneer generation of Valie Export (*1940) and Friederike Pezold (*1945) was followed in the 1980s by younger artists, such as Pipilotti Rist (*1962), who – based on liberation and achievements in feminist art – discovered their feminine side again and celebrated their own body as a sensual experience. What was crucial for this step into visual opulence was not least the accessibility of color film material and digital editing techniques which allowed them to generate video images that emanated the sensuality of paintings. Alexandra Maurer represents a third generation of artists that stands for a strong, but vulnerable female image, and can thus make unscrupulous use of an entire spectrum of solutions in form as well as content of their artistic predecessors. Colorful, joyful, and wildly animated: she shares the joy of playing with sensual seduction and eroticism with her artistic "sisters"²), but knows how to transform them with precise, formal techniques into disturbing images that – without becoming anecdotal – evolve into a narration of existential captivity and the human condition.

Konrad Bitterli

Footnotes:

The piece *muro* is a special case where image sequences are continuously and randomly shuffled by the computer. Based on the limited number of images there is still the impression of permanent repetition. The 2008 exhibition entitled *Ladies Only* at the Kunstmuseum St.Gallen presented *la chute* by Alexandra Maurer in the context of artists such as Valie Export, Ulrike Rosenbach, Friederike Pezold, Pipilotti Rist, Elodie Pong, and Katia Bassanini, and demonstrated the importance of video as a medium for feministic art, which was just in its infancy in the late 1960s.