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LAUDATIO ON DANIEL BURKHARDT, WINNER OF THE DEW21 ART PRIZE 2010

What is it we find so fascinating about Daniel Burkhardt's video installations? What is it that so completely absorbs us, so enchants us and, even after we have turned our backs on them and set off for home (after watching we don't know how many loops and repeats of the video), still keeps our minds busy for days on end pondering about what we have seen, or, to be more precise, pondering about the meaning of what we have seen there? Astonishing, too, is the fact that these installations are so highly technical and ingenious and yet we do not immediately query the skills behind their making. On the contrary, it is the magic of the work or, rather, the magical effect of what takes place before our eyes or, better still, of what we are drawn into that is much more important. One might compare it to watching an excellent feature film and forgetting that the blood is only ketchup ... The video installation "spalten" ("split") – the absence of the capital letter rendering the German title more verbal than substantival – may serve us as an example of what it is that distinguishes the work of Daniel Burkhardt.

What one actually sees when one looks at "spalten" is difficult to describe: countless (there are actually 500) narrow white strips (of canvas) are arranged side by side and behind one another in irregular clusters to a depth of about one and a half metres. Hanging from a delicate scaffold of metal rods, the canvas strips divide the room, their top ends almost reaching the ceiling and their bottom ends almost touching the floor. A video is projected from two projectors onto the canvas strips or, to use a description more in tune with the title, onto the "split" canvases.

The projected video is likewise "split", so to speak, for it is projected both onto a surface – the ceiling above our heads – and onto, or rather into, the vertical space formed by the roughly 1.5 m deep clusters of canvas strips. "Split" into 500 fragments, these clusters are neither flat at the front nor flat at the

rear but rather feature vertical interstices of different widths and depths that “split” the projected image. The result is both a sculpture in space and, since it is the projection surface for a moving image, a sculpture in time.

At the same time, however, this sculpture is also a non-sculpture, for the formal attributes traditionally associated with sculpture – materiality and solidity, homogeneity and continuity, shape and tangibility – are missing. Indeed, if we attempt to recognize anything – recognize in the sense of identifying real objects – we fail totally, for we can recognize nothing at all. While we can make out patterns and combinations of shapes and colours, which are spatial rather than flat, they are fleeting, ephemeral and have no definite contours. The images are spatial because they are not only illusorily but actually so by reason of the physical depth of the space created by the suspended strips of canvas onto which they are projected. All the same, they are not solid bodies but are rather four-dimensional images that magically flit past us on the canvas strips, while what we see on the ceiling are three-dimensional images as functions of two dimensions and time. We are confronted by an ever-changing combination of image, film and sculpture. Although – or perhaps precisely because – everything remains abstract, we suspect that somewhere “behind it all” there is a real object or a real video image, but we cannot make one out. Here, too, we are “split” between what we see and what we wish to see.

Not every projection element – perhaps this is a more apt term than “image” or “sculpture” – fills the projection space: sometimes the projection flickers across its entire height and width, sometimes it is reduced to just a narrow stripe no wider than one’s hand, sometimes it covers a whole cluster of canvas strips, sometimes most of the projection space is left black. But no matter how much of the projection space is filled, no matter what is projected, the projection is always “split” vertically by the gaps between the suspended strips of canvas, such that one cannot really use the word “image” to describe what one sees.

Indeed, it is much rather the case that *I*, the *viewer*, set out in *search* of the image or images projected by the artist – and this sets another time frame in motion, namely the entire subjective time of my viewing, the time during which I watch the projection, inwardly digest it, get carried away by it. It is, to use Bergson's terminology, my own "spalten"-duration, "durée" and depending on where I stand I always see something different, and not least a different quasi-corporeality of the projected "image". At no point in time, however, do I get to see an actual depiction of external reality, a complete, self-contained image or a logical and/or narrative sequence of images.

I do suspect, however, that the image or images I am seeking are neither computer-generated nor fictitious. Nonetheless, I am totally unable to identify what I see. I ask the questions but the answers elude me: I suppose, I speculate, I interpret, I compare what I see on the ceiling with what I see on the canvas strips, I try to view things from a different perspective – and while all this guessing assumes the aspect of a pleasant yet challenging game, not once does it come up with the desired result, namely a recognizable image. Fragments of images, yes, but fragments that have already been "split" a dozen times or more, fragments that defy being pieced together to form an image or series of images, no matter what way round I put them, and even as separate pieces they cannot be identified as anything at all. Everything remains as abstract as before, a game of colours and shapes in space and in time, in my "durée".

But all this "splitting" can hardly have come about just through the canvas strips and gaps that form the projection space. Given a normal projected image, I could quite easily have reconstructed it with the aid of my general knowledge and experience of the world. But this knowledge and experience fails me entirely here. I must ask the artist. And this is the moment when we begin to take an interest in the technique, in how the video was made: Daniel Burkhardt filmed two everyday scenes from Cologne's transport network – a cargo ship on the Rhine and three trains, a regional, an interregional and an intercity train, crossing one another behind a busy street scene in the

foreground. This minimal starting material was then digitized, fragmented, cut into narrow strips and rearranged. This digital fragmentation of the image is then repeated analogously, so to speak, by the 500 canvas strips arranged by the artist at varying depths to form the projection space.

Thus the video installation is not about images and their creation but rather, or so it seems to me, about the perception of images, about the perception of the "strips and gaps" themselves as images and about the struggle of waiting for the moment when the image shows itself as such.

The staging of this moment, the showing of the time gap in which an image can appear and also disappear, the staging of the boundary, the line of demarcation separating the one from the other, the creation of the image purely as a construct of the mind – this is in fact Daniel Burkhardt's main theme. By deconstructing the image, the artist makes it possible for us to experience how we ourselves create our images. He splits the image so that we can put the pieces back together or mentally fill or bridge the gaps. This staging of the gap, the borderline, is the staging of transcendence. In this regard, therefore, the ultimate splitting is clear: only when we are entirely with ourselves in our creation of images and in our meditation over what we are doing and in our marvelling at what we have done do we at the same time become at one with them.

Is this not a secular form of what was once the human being's religious quality of transcendence, and hence one of our highest abilities? I do believe that it is no accident that my experience with Daniel Burkhardt's installation "spalten" puts me in mind of my experiences with stained glass church windows, and not least with Gerhard Richter's window in Cologne Cathedral, for it is not the human being's experience of the world that is central to Daniel Burkhardt's work but rather the human being's experience of self, naturally in a structural, not a Narcissistic, sense. Thus it is about my perception, my definitions, my demarcations of image and fragment, body and surface, time and space – it is about my transcendence into the other, about my possibilities of "splitting"

the other, about my possibilities of its emotional and intellectual construction. Daniel Burkhardt stages the process of perception as an enjoyable game of splitting apart and joining together, a game in which I take an emotional and intellectual delight in images that are not actually images and enjoy and reflect upon my human existence, this being transcendence as a construct of the other from "strips and gaps" of perception.

Or perhaps all this talk of "splitting" has triggered some slight epistemological doubt? What if the other were not my construct at all and hence forever remained alien and distant and inaccessible? What if this other fascinated and enticed me – like the installation "spalten" – and made me change my perspective, made me leap towards it across the gap, into an actual transcendence, into *another* other that remained itself, remained as it was, unchanged, basically elusive, and, precisely for that reason, retained its magical attraction?