

TOM HOLERT

TIME RESET

in:

BETTINA POUSTTCHI - SCREEN SETTINGS

128 pages english / german, Hatje Cantz 2004

The images in Bettina Pousttchi's video 'Reset' were created during the so-called millennium night, the transition between 1999 and 2000. The calendrical site of the jump of the numbers from "1999" to "2000," which was awaited with tension and anxiety, was restricted to a very specific geographical and cultural place: New York, or more precisely: Manhattan, or still more precisely: Times Square, that is, the Plaza of (the) Times. The artist filmed out of a window of an apartment in a high-rise five blocks south of Times Square in which a New Year's Eve party was being celebrated. She pointed the digital video camera at the facade of the building opposite and then – as a finale – at a grandiose nocturnal cityscape filled with smoke or steam. The camera sweeps like a brush over the surfaces of the urban motifs. Panning and turning at different focal lengths, the shots oscillate between views of the whole and views of details. The tempo and rhythm of the images and their montage are synchronized to the rhythm of the midtempo house track – the audio component of the work. The music is opulently fitted out with plush strings and open hi-hat, audibly inspired by the melodious elegies of the techno veteran Larry Heard. This soundtrack lends the casually assembled visual impressions a cinematic drama, a hint of a narration.

Although the motifs and perspectives repeat in the approximately five-minute-long work, 'Reset' is not an audiovisual loop but a kind of music clip with intro and outro, with exposition and resolution. It would have to be rewound to be seen and heard again. Images and sounds fall into place in a narrative on architecture and media, on history and the writing of history, that takes a linear path.

Almost linear. For this linearity, including its teleological core, is based in turn on images and symbols of the availability and repeatability of history, on the transformation of historical data into informational data, of historical events into entertainment, of politics into commodity. A circularity suggests itself – a circular movement with an open or not so open outcome. In the visual center of the clip: a pixel board with a moving screen, flaming orange on a black background. The glowing text, which starts off in a pulsating close-up that fills the screen, enlarged to the point of illegibility, wraps

around the facade of a building, flickering.

The text follows its path between two billboards. On the higher of the two advertising spaces one can make out one side of a female face—the hairstyle, make-up, and expression suggest that it is a historical face. One can read "Available May 2" and "I Love Lucy." That's all; only half of the poster can be seen.

Research reveals that it is an announcement for a commemorative stamp in the United States Postal Service's Celebrate the Century series. The female face is that of the actress Lucille Ball (1911 – 89), who played the main character in one of the most successful sitcoms on American television in the 1950s. The story of the overexcited and ambitious housewife Lucy Ricardo and her Cuban bandleader husband set standards not only in the genre of screwball humor but also in the interlocking of her lives on and off camera. One high point among the 179 episodes of 'I Love Lucy' produced between 1951 and 1957 was the footage of Lucille Ball alias Lucy Ricardo actually giving birth, which was broadcast to 44 million viewers on 19 January 1953.

'I Love Lucy' is one of the classics of American television history, and an exceptionally steady cult has built up around it that survives today – a circumstance that obtains particular resonance in light of the studies of subjectivity and fan cultures that Bettina Pousttchi has undertaken in works like 'Auf gute Nachbarschaft' / 'To good neighbors', 'Die Katharina-Show', and 'Laola'. Who is waiting for this commemorative stamp? Who identifies with Lucille Ball? Who loves Lucy?

In striking contrast to the poster with Lucille Ball's likeness, the lower billboard has a photograph of a contemporary Afro-American man. The rapper Jay-Z, whose third album, Vol. 3: Life and Times of S. Carter, was released on 28 December 1999, poses wearing a wide-cut jeans jacket. Another date, another culture, another cult: hip-hop and R & B, the "urban culture of Afro-American pop stars and their followers, who dance along the demographically broad spectrum of teenagers and twenty-somethings.

At least two systems of reference come into contact as a consequence of the way the decoration of the building's facade is presented: the nostalgic world of

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the marketing of a historic television series – of a national institution with “Celebrate the Century” status-and a world of the current versions of Afro-American mainstream pop culture. Pousttchi activates this constellation by means of a video that employs changing shots and zooms; rotates the image; makes extended, undulating pans; and eases and prolongs the dynamic of the images in the editing process. Perhaps it was good that the position from which she filmed did not provide a complete view of the billboard. Incompleteness produces meaning: metonymy and synecdoche develop a sensory poetics of video.

The building emblazoned with an LED ticker display and billboards remains all the more a fragment. Architecture as medium, as bearer of advertising and other messages, is merely a hint of an integral, functional architecture. And in passages the camera image usurps a dark or black surface with barely visible elements that reflect to varying degrees. It is part of another facade, and it cuts like a wedge into the semiotic armature established by the billboards and the pixel board. This results in changing arrangements of abstract, geometrical forms whose degree of representationalism is a matter of opinion. As in ‘Double Empire’ (2000), Pousttchi’s post-Warholian video reconstruction of the Empire State Building, architecture steps out of the framework intended for it – becoming autonomous, by passing utility as if on audacious architectural drawings.

Between the levels of textuality and pure visuality, between the iconographical and the graphical, zones of undecidability open up, visuality becomes textuality and vice versa: the pixel board ticker display is initially introduced as a luminous blinking pattern, as a formal event. Only later does it become evident that it is conveying data of important historical events: “Millennium Milestones.” Two selections have been made here. First, someone (who? legitimized how?) decided which of the infinite number of historical events deserved the status of Millennium Milestones; such a selection turns history into a sequence of loose data that have been found worthy of being remembered – they become canonical.

Next Bettina Pousttchi has selected from the

canonical menu that the ticker display offered her own timeline. She counters the authority of the official version of history with a subjective attentiveness, with a partiality that is not disinterested and with aesthetic strategies such as recontextualization and dramatization. From the ticker display of historical milestones the artist has selected the events in South Africa in the early 1990s. The pixel board presents emphatically sober sententiae, language and typography become facticity: “1990: AFRICAN NATIONAL CONGRESS LEADER NELSON MANDELA LEAVES SOUTH AFRICAN PRISON AFTER SERVING 27 YEARS ON TREASON CHARGES”; “SOUTH AFRICAN PRESIDENT DE KLERK ABOLISHES REMAINING APARTHEID LAWS (FEB. 1, 1991),” “WHITE SOUTH AFRICANS APPROVE CONSTITUTIONAL REFORMS GRANTING EQUAL RIGHTS TO NATION’S BLACKS”; “SOUTH AFRICAN PRESIDENT DE KLERK AND ANC LEADER MANDELA SHARE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE”; and so on.

A listless, dogged textuality in capital letters. The history of the regime change in South Africa and the abolishing of apartheid laws is reduced a common denominator of communication with the arrival and departure displays at train stations or airports: ticker display history, pixel board history, equally suited to rote memorization or immediately forgetting, transforming historical knowledge into an announcement and display, until it becomes indistinguishable from other forms of knowledge.

In ‘Reset’ the viewer’s gaze and hearing become engrossed in these arid facts, and involuntarily they obtain a kind of poetry thereby, as if they were set apart from the canonical mnemonic beat of the official representation of history – loosened up by a camera whose details and movements are dictated not by the preexisting rhythms of the historical but by the music and mood of the moment. Consequently, the video also becomes an occasion to reflect on how history in general comes to be depicted. What makes it possible to transform collective knowledge into individual knowledge, what kind of relationship is established between the historical and the aesthetical. One possible answer to such questions is that it is not least a matter of format, of medium, and of the framing – of architecture.

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That architecture serves to carry depictions of history is an art historical commonplace: from cave paintings by way of ornaments on antique pediments right up to the programs of sculpture, frescoes, and murals in the modern age – visualizations of history have again and again been projected and applied to architecture, which serves as the stage for this dramatizations of the visual arts. Architecture became the medium – indeed, the mass medium – of history. Nevertheless, ever since we have been learning from Las Vegas, architecture itself has become a stage of historical dramatizations. In postmodernism it rediscovered the historicizing citation, opening itself to nostalgic, restitutive, retrograde tendencies. The task of memory – a super obsession of the late twentieth century – was taken on by a specialized form of architecture for monuments and museums. In an epoch of theme-park historicism – in which architecture is supposed to be above all an ahistorical “event” and a spectacular display for advertisement, a vehicle for local politics, and a form of investment – it seems almost anachronistic when history so bluntly “inscribes” itself on a public or commercial building as the Millennium Milestones do on the facade seen in ‘Reset’. Consequently we also want to know what kind of a history is it that is being adapted and calibrated in ‘Reset’? How is historical time being “reset” here?

The last piece of historical data in the video also refers to 1991 but it interrupts the focus on South Africa and establishes a bridge to another venue of racism: “VIDEO CAPTURES BEATING OF MOTORIST RODNEY KING BY LOS ANGELES POLICE (MARCH 3, 1991).” The image of this text suggests various conclusions: the historical news of the end of South Africa’s apartheid regime seems to be robbed of its hopeful aspect by this sentence regarding the assault of an Afro-American driver by twenty-seven officers of the Los Angeles Police Department. If on one end of the world a racist social order is officially declared to be at an end and this political act is transfigured into a historical pronouncement of achievement – although apartheid continues to have an effect even today – in the United States, even decades after the civil rights movement, racist violence and discrimination are still on the agenda. The history of racism, like history in general, does not reach a

conclusion.

The Millennium Milestone about the Rodney King case also contains a reference to a “VIDEO”, the amateur video by George Holliday that testified to the act. The family man filmed the incident on the night of 3 March 1991 from the balcony of his apartment, and he sold the tape for five hundred dollars to a local television station that passed it on to CNN. The grainy black-and-white recording of the nighttime event lasts nine and a half minutes and was introduced in the subsequent trial as inconclusive evidence. An eighty-one-second-long fragment was constantly replayed on television. At the very latest following the severe disturbances in Los Angeles that broke out in 1992 when light sentences were announced for four of the officers involved, it became clear how historically powerful a role could be played by images and their use in the courts and the media, such that the idea of testimony had to be reevaluated in the age of digital media and omnipresent surveillance. In the meanwhile, the number of essays on this theme in theories of the law and the media has become overwhelming.

Pousttchi’s video, which is itself a kind of an essay that was completed in May 2001, reflects on and deals with the relationship of the media to history and the writing of history. But which history is it to which ‘Reset’ bears witness? The recordings of the filtered and pixilated ticker-display history document (and interpret) the translation and transformation of acts into narrative, of reality into image texts. The rhythmical flickering progress of the historical text dissolves the meaning of the sentences. The “milestones” that have been preselected for the public take on phantasmagorical qualities. At the same time it becomes clear how unbridgeable the distance between the representation of history by the media and the personal experience of historical materiality has become.

In light of this complexity, Pousttchi decided to use the hybrid genre of the documentary music video. This format / frame is “at home” neither on television nor in a gallery; it runs at cross purposes to the establish order of genres and addresses no particular audience. At the same time, the simultaneity of

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documentary functions and video-clip features makes it possible to reorganize the viewer's attention. It results in new relationships between images and music, texts and colors, sound and chronology.

This is especially true because the perception of time has to be changed. Clocks run backward; history is shown to be a construct. And the music in 'Reset' – with its moments of heightening, its chord changes that lead to a supposed emotional climax – remains in the end merely a gesture of released / releasing dedication. The analogy to this audio coda is the oscillating final image of a churning cityscape, or an ecstatic, smoking urbanism, an end of history that could be a beginning, if there were an occasion for that hope: New Year's Eve.