Københavns Universitet

Attention and Distraction

Petersen, Anne Ring

Attention and Distraction: On the Aesthetic Experience of Video Installation Art

Anne Ring Petersen

Abstract

This article aims to examine the interrelationship between attention and distraction in the reception of video installation art, a genre which is commonly associated with "immersion" and an intensified feeling of presence in the discourses on new media art and installation art. This tends to veil the fact that the behaviour of many visitors is characterised by a certain restlessness and distraction. The article suggests that, in contradistinction to traditional disciplines of art like painting and sculpture, video installations seem to stimulate a "reception in distraction" (Walter Benjamin) that is at odds with the ideal of a reception in concentration that governs the institutions of fine art as well as aesthetic theory. It intends to demonstrate how the experience of video installation art can only be understood by recognising that the close connections between, on the one hand, video art and, on the other hand, the cultural formations of television, film and computers have fundamentally re-configured "aesthetic experience."

Contents

Experiencing Video Installation Art

> Reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise.[1]

[1] All regular visitors to exhibitions of contemporary art know this: Video has become a ubiquitous medium. A major group exhibition which includes several media will usually present several video works, some of which will be more or less spectacular video *installations* with several projections forming a spatial environment that may or may not include other objects. The fact that the total running time of the video works in an exhibition often vastly exceeds the daily opening hours cannot in itself explain the curious, restless, and distracted pattern of behaviour of many viewers. Nor can it be explained solely by the fact that the average visitor only spends a very limited time in an art exhibition. Either you have to stay for about 10 minutes in a video installation, to really sense the atmosphere and impact of its environment of moving images and to get an idea of its thematics, or you have to stay and watch a loop from beginning to end. However, many visitors stay only briefly in video installations that obviously demand a

---

[1] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in: *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, London 1992, 211-44, here 233.

prolonged viewing for the works to unfold as a meaningful sensory and intellectual experience. As a habitual exhibition-goer I have often caught myself behaving in exactly this way and wondered: Why do I – and visitors in general – relatively seldom become absorbed in these works? Why does it seem so hard to mobilize the necessary amount of interest to stay the time needed to really "experience" the work? Why do you so often become impatient and inattentive after a short while and leave? And why do you, in spite of that experience, enter the next video installation just to repeat the ritual of frustrated reception all over again?[2]

[2] Such elements of distraction and frustration are rarely mentioned in the writings on video art, not to mention taken seriously as an object of investigation. Why this lack of interest among art critics and scholars, despite the fact that the discourses on art have never centred so much on the viewer's reception and participation as today; the heyday of "the performative viewer," "interactive art," "relational aesthetics," and various kinds of reception studies?

[3] Before proceeding, I wish to make clear that I am not saying that video installations dictate one particular mode of reception that inevitably leads to distraction or boredom. On the contrary, I think that they enable a number of different modes. In a previous article I have tried to account for three of the most common: "navigation," "interaction," and "immersion."[3] Thus, this essay is an attempt to identify a fourth aspect of reception, which has a tendency to mingle with the others or interrupt them, and which has been more or less ignored in the discourses on art. In theoretical support of my argument, I turn to art historian Jonathan Crary's insightful analysis of the historical changes in perception in the late nineteenth century and to the notion of "context-awareness" that has been circulating in computer science since the mid-1990s.[4]

[4] According to media theorist Mark Hansen, the spread of embedded, context-aware computing entails "a new paradigm of media" that abandons an "object-centred" model of media in favour of an "environmental" one.[5] As to the visual arts, this is of course old

---

[2] As always, you should be aware of the variations that underlie such general observations. The level of distraction among visitors is of course not only dependent on the works themselves but also on their surroundings, i.e. the character of the institutional site (museum/gallery), the size of the exhibition and the curatorial set-up. In a small exhibition comprising only a few video works, visitors are more liable to give a fair amount of concentrated attention to (some of) the works whereas large exhibitions – e.g. biennials and mixed mega-shows of contemporary art – will usually increase the distracted behaviour.

[3] Anne Ring Petersen, "Navigation, immersion og interaktion i videoinstallationen," in: *Kroppen: hinsides posthumaniteten*, eds. Ulrik Ekman and Arild Fetveil, Online-anthology, 2008, 232, http://www.turbulens.net/Temaer/Livkropogteknologi2/?article=188 (last accessed 25 September 2010).

[4] Ulrik Ekman, "Introduction," in: *Throughout: Art and Culture Emerging with Ubiquitous Computing*, ed. Ulrik Ekman, Cambridge, Mass., forthcoming 2011.

[5] Mark Hansen, "Ubiquitous Sensation: Towards an Atmospheric, Collective, and Microtemporal Model of Media," in: *Throughout: Art and Culture Emerging with Ubiquitous Computing*, ed. Ulrik Ekman, Cambridge, Mass., forthcoming 2011. The term *embedded computing* refers to a present development in which computing seems to be moving on from existing primarily as discrete units (e.g. personal computers) so as to be pervasively and sometimes invisibly integrated in our living

news: installation artists have employed environmental models of media addressed at context-aware viewers since the 1960s, and "contextual art" has been an integral part of the visual arts for nearly just as long.[6] I am not mentioning these facts to build up to a sceptical art historian's verdict that the issue of context-awareness has become old hat. Nor am I ignoring the evidence that some artists are already exploring how context-aware systems can transform the human subject's sensory interface with technology.[7] Like all modes of perception, context-awareness is subjected to historical change. The point I want to make is that art does not need to use the latest technology to be able to reflect on the cultural and sensory impact of new technology. Just as one can learn a lot about the sensory transformations brought about by the new production and transportation systems of the industrial age by studying Futurist paintings, so one can learn something about the sensory impact of the "ubiquitous computing" and "information overload" characteristic of our age from analysing video installations.[8] Thus, the works of art discussed below do not employ context-aware devices that exchange information with their "user-environment" in a continual feedback-process that reflects the users' activities and interaction.[9] Nevertheless, they could very well be characterised as environmental media operating on the threshold of attention.[10]

[5]   The fact than an environmental model of media in the visual arts predates that of computer science and theory, indicates that technological development is not in any simple sense the *cause* of transformations in the visual arts. Rather, both models seem to be linked to a more encompassing desire for stronger environmental awareness and connections that may, or may not, amount to an historical, epistemological turn. We still know too little about how the pervasive spread of digital information technologies and media will affect human life forms and societies, to flesh out causal explanations connecting technology-related causes with their wider effect on the aesthetic foundation of art. I will, therefore, confine myself to pointing out a remarkable historical synchronicity.

and working environments. The term *context-awareness* correlates with notions of embedded computing and mobile computing (like the GPS and the cell phone). It is used to characterize devices that are aware of the contexts in which they are run and can sense as well as react to their environment. Thus, context-aware systems are capable of interacting with other devices and applications as well as with the (changing) environment and (mobile) human users.

[6] Peter Weibel, ed., *Kontext Kunst. Kunst der 90er*, exh.cat., Cologne 1994.

[7] Christiane Paul, "Contexts as Moving Targets," in: *Throughout: Art and Culture Emerging with Ubiquitous Computing*, ed. Ulrik Ekman, Cambridge, Mass., forthcoming 2011.

[8] The terms *ubiquitous computing* and *pervasive computing* are nodal points, i.e. key concepts, in the discourse on the possible spread of computer technology throughout the urban environment and to all aspects of people's life world. By some computer theoreticians "ubicomp" is claimed to be the primary characteristic of a third epoch of computing (after the mainframe and the personal computer). Whether computing is actually moving towards such global diffusion and penetration or the notion of "ubicomp" is just a techno-optismistic/techno-fobic vision is at present hotly debated.

[9] For an introduction to the problematics of ubiquitous computing, see: Ekman's "Introduction"*.*

[10] See Hansen's discussion of the microimpact of ubicomp on human perception in Hansen, "Ubiquitous Sensation".

[6]   Roughly from the mid 1990s, we have seen the development of invisibly embedded 'calm' computing as well as an increasing information overload, which also affects our experience of the world on a level below the limit of conscious perception. Simultaneously, video artists have been using multi-screen installation art as a means to explore attention as a threshold phenomenon: attention as something that only occurs intermittently, when the endless stream of unobtrusive sense impressions change into a focused and conscious act of perceiving.

[7]   Multi-screen installations demand that their visitors adopt an "environmental" or "context-aware" approach. Moreover, much information will remain either outside perception or on the "periphery" as something the visitor knows is available without attending to it directly.[11] Thus, their sensory impact deviates radically from traditional art. To unpack this issue, this article resumes a theme from Walter Benjamin's essay on the technological reproducibility of the work of art, reconsidering Benjamin's notion that distraction and concentration "form polar opposites." Benjamin argues that in contrast to a traditional work of art that demands "concentration," modern technology fosters new media and cultural formations, such as Benjamin's paradigmatic example, the film, that are "consummated by a collectivity in a state of distraction."[12]

[8]   The German word for distraction, *Zerstreuung,* figured in many critical analyses by the Frankfurt School. Here *Zerstreuung* referred to a dispersion or scattering of perception which in Benjamin's essay is defined as the opposite of concentration (*Konzentration* or *Sammlung*).[13] The concept of *Zerstreuung* was coined within the framework of still influential accounts of modernity, as a process in which pre-modern forms of wholeness and integrity were fragmented and broken up by the technological, economic, and urban reorganisation of society. Thus, in this critical tradition there is "an overriding sense of distraction as the product of 'decay' or 'atrophy' of perception within a larger deterioration of experience."[14] Consequently, distraction is not only regarded as the antithesis of concentration, but also as the shallow antipole of the profound aesthetic experience one can have in the realm of art.

<top>

---

[11] Mark Weiser, "The Computer for the 21st Century," in: *Scientific America*, September 1991, http://www.ubiq.com/hypertext/weiser/SciAmDraft3.html (last accessed 25 September 2010).

[12] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 232; Walter Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit (Zweite Fassung)," in: *Walter Benjamin. Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser, vol. I.2, Frankfurt am Main 1974, 471-508, here 504.

[13] Benjamin, "The Work of Art," 232-234; Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk," 504-505.

[14] Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception. Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, Mass., and London 2001, 49.

Distraction and New Perceptual Terrains

[9]   Excluded from the discourses of art, the experience of distraction is inevitably constructed as "the other" of attentive aesthetic contemplation. The aim of this paper is to question this dichotomisation of attention and distraction in order to promote a better understanding of the reception aesthetics of video installation art. It is my contention that the symptoms of distraction should be recognised as something intrinsic to the genre's structure and conditions of reception; a predisposition which artists can counteract, but basically not prevent from interfering with the reception of their works. The reason for this is that video-based art is as closely related to the digital "screen media" that permeate our everyday environment as it is to the traditional disciplines of fine art, both in terms of visuality and modes of reception. Reception in a state of distraction should therefore be understood as an effect or a mode of response that can be triggered by the aesthetic means of expression used by the artist, as well as by the habitual patterns of reception that visitors bring with them into the exhibition: above all the habits of watching TV and films and the habits of browsing on the Internet or filtering information from a database.

[10]   Increasingly, these habits will also include the routinized perceptual behaviour evolving from the familiarity with new perceptual terrains. The perceptual terrains in question are produced by the spread of digital visuality in urban environments – e.g. the visuality of the "media-architecture" emerging in streets, squares, airports, stations etc. "Media-architecture" superimposes a varying layer of information on the physical buildings as their fronts or walls are faced with digitally manipulated images and, increasingly, digital screens whose fragmentary messages and diverse commercials dynamize the otherwise static architectural surroundings. Visiting such places, you become a mobile and intermittent observer, passing through an environment characterised by visual, and usually also auditive, cacophony. Due to the nature of the environment the observer is subjected to the continual change between the best and the worst possible viewing and listening positions, and will have to adopt a more or less automated perceptual procedure of letting new things come into focus while other things slip out of focus, and many things are not even perceived at all as they remain in the periphery of attention or beneath the threshold of awareness.

[11]   Another new perceptual terrain is the monotonous stream of images transmitted from the countless surveillance cameras, installed in indoor and outdoor urban environments, to monitors which are sometimes hidden from the public eye, sometimes visible like the ones placed at the counter in some shops. Contrary to film, such video-recordings convey the impression of dull "everydayness"; a state of "eventlessness" where nothing out of the ordinary happens. Watching such recordings over a period of time will eventually make the viewer respond with inattention or even boredom.

[12] Andy Warhol's nearly unwatchable early films, e.g. *Empire* (an eight hour recording of Empire State Building with a stationary camera) and *Sleep* (six hours of a man sleeping), anticipate how later artists have consciously exploited this particular cultural use of the video camera for surveillance to create an aesthetic effect that includes monotony, loss of attention, and boredom. Wolfgang Staehle's exhibition *2001* at the Postmasters Gallery in New York featured three web-cams that captured and transmitted images from three different sites during September 2001 which were then projected onto the walls of the darkened gallery (fig. 1).

1 Wolfgang Staehle, Untitled, 2001, installation shot from the exhibition
2001, Postmasters Gallery, New York, 6 September – 6 October 2001,
webcam installation with live video projections from 3 webcams. The
webcams captured and transmitted images from three different
locations during September 2001: the television tower in Berlin, the
medieval Comburg monastery, and a panoramic view of lower
Manhattan (photo: Wolfgang Staehle)

[13] Each of them symbolized a specific historical notion of time management and time consciousness: the Comburg monastery near Stuttgart symbolized the standardization of the workday by means of the clock, the TV tower in Berlin's Alexanderplatz indicated a similar standardization of the structure of everyday life following media schedules; and the downtown New York skyline represented the round-the-clock schedule on a digitally supported network.[15] The panorama of New York consisted of two joined frames like the two towers of the World Trade Center, a "hub site of television transmission and telephonic communication, the architectural expression of the city itself as transmitting tower of global control. All of this is devised as a live program, as in itself a transmission."[16] The fact that the work did not only function on a perceptual and visual level, but also on a general phenomenological and ontological level was emphasized by a monitor placed at the entrance to *2001* displaying a quote from the German philosopher Martin Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1939):

[15] My presentation of Wolfgang Staehle's installation is indebted to Mark Hansen's thought-provoking analysis of this work in his keynote address "Time's Obsolescence (or the Irreducible Technicity of Temporalization)" at the conference "*Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*. Aesthetics of Pervasiveness," held at the University of Copenhagen, 6-7 November 2007.

[16] Alan Moore, "History Asks, 'What Then?'," in: *artnet Magazine* (29 September 2009), http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/reviews/moore/moore9-29-01.asp (last accessed 25 September 2010).

> At a time when the farthermost corner of the globe has been conquered by technology and opened to economic exploitation; when any incident whatever, regardless of where or when it occurs, can be communicated to the rest of the world at any desired speed [...] when time has ceased to be anything other than velocity, instantaneousness, and simultaneity, and time as history has vanished from the lives of all peoples; when a boxer is regarded as a nation's great man; when mass meetings attended by millions are looked on as a triumph – then, yes then, through all this turmoil, a question still haunts us like a specter: What for? – Whither? – And what then?[17]

[14]   In the exhibition context, the strangely topical Heidegger quotation from 1939 seemed to point to the profound transformation of the human experience of temporality and history brought about by the accelerating effect of modern communication technology and the colonizing effect of economic globalization. Transformations that affect our time consciousness, but "still" leave the "haunting" question of the ontological nature of human time, as something finite and ending with death, unanswered. However, the meaning of the work was transformed altogether because it accidentally captured the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11, but this does not alter the fact that the work originally offered a "panorama of eventlessness."[18] Even though the vast projected images of the installation were continually subjected to minimal transformations because they were updated every four seconds, they gave the impression of capturing a state of undifferentiated sameness where nothing really happened. Wolfang Staehle used surveillance technology as an instrument to reflect on time consciousness and time management. Chantal Akerman's *From the Other Side* (*Documenta11*, Kassel, 2002) also exploited surveillance equipment, but for another purpose, namely for an investigation of the vexed issues of surveillance and migration, which used the illegal immigration across the border from Mexico to the U.S. as example. This video installation spread over three rooms, eighteen monitors, and two screens. It contrasted blurred video images from the infrared surveillance cameras that catch the immigrants with Mexicans' saying farewell before the border crossing, and a monotonous live feed on the freeway to Los Angeles where the experience at the border has become a part of the immediate past.[19] Contrary to Staehle's *2001* exhibition, the simultaneity of the many displayed videos created a situation where the visitor was likely to be overwhelmed by the fragmented visual bombardment. One invariably bumped into the various videos at random points in their individual loops without any chance of embracing the whole installation as a coherent narrative, at most as a focused thematics. As a matter of fact, the visitor was left to "browse" rather than "contemplate" the work.

---

[17] Quoted in Alan Moore, "History Asks, 'What Then?'." I am indebted to Wolfgang Staehle for drawing my attention to the Heidegger quotation in the exhibition.

[18] Alexi Worth, "Wolfgang Staehle, untitled, 2001," in: *Artforum* XL.3 (November 2001), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_3_40/ai_81258062/ (last accessed 25 September 2010).

[19] Yvonne Spielmann, *Video: The Reflexive Medium*, Cambridge, Mass., and London 2008, 4.

[15]   According to professor of film studies Patrice Petro, boredom as an aesthetic and phenomenological response has to do with "both too much and too little, sensory overload and sensory deprivation, anxieties of excess as well as anxieties of loss."[20] Staehle and Akerman must have been well aware that their works offered too much and too little at the same time: too much video footage for anyone go through, and too little action for anyone to dwell on the individual projections/monitors for very long. Hence, they structured distraction and boredom as integral to the mode of reception of their video installations. As Alexi Worth has remarked in a review of Staehle's exhibition, the projections "dared us to find them boring."[21]

[16]   I would maintain that contrary to Warhol's films these examples do not repeat the avant-garde impulse of provocation and calculated assault on the viewers' senses, intended to test how long one can stand the tedium. Instead these works explore the temporal and cognitive structures of a perception exposed to a combination of informational overload and sensory deprivation. Due to the irritation and tedium that they may cause, these works not only enable an awareness of looking as a temporal process.[22] They also invite viewers to alter their perceptual approach to the work of art. As the literary scholar Kristin Veel has observed, the contemporary media situation exposes the paradox of how attention can arise in the midst of an informational overload. Veel concludes that the cognitive processing of large amounts of information has become manageable by becoming automatic, and that we have become wholly accustomed to this condition and the oscillation between sensory automaticity and conscious attention that it requires from us.[23] Or, to use Benjamin's terminology, we have become accustomed to reception in a state of distraction: the "medium" of our reception is not conscious attention as such. Rather, attention is mediated by another medium or mode of perception: that of distraction (*Zerstreuung*).

[17]   The fact that artists such as Staehle and Akerman use *video* to create a particular aesthetic and phenomenological effect is of historical significance. As Crary and Petro have shown, distraction and boredom are not merely subjective states of mind, somehow situated beyond historical forces or social change. They have a history and are subject to historical change.[24] Approached in this way, the study of the reception aesthetics of video installation art also becomes a study of the historical transformation of perception and visuality at work specifically in contemporary culture.

---

[20] Patrice Petro, "After Shock/Between Boredom and History," in: *Fugitive Images. From Photography to Video*, ed. Patrice Petro, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1995, 270.

[21] Worth, "Wolfgang Staehle, untitled, 2001".

[22] Petro, "After Shock/between Boredom and History," 276.

[23] Kristin Veel, "Attention! Automaticity, Pervasive Computing and Information Overload in *Signs of the City*," in: *Throughout: Art and Culture Emerging with Ubiquitous Computing*, ed. Ulrik Ekman, Cambridge, Mass., forthcoming 2011.

[24] Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*; Petro, "After Shock/between Boredom and History".

[18]   As Howard Eiland has pointed out, Benjamin regarded distraction as a touchstone of the ability to perform new tasks of apperception because:

> […] successful reception in distraction presupposes that a mastery of certain tasks has become habitual. What is at stake here, it would seem, is a dialectical mode of reading that effectively masters the technological apparatus – as the film actor masters the recording devices on the set – with the aid of the apparatus itself.[25]

[19]   What Benjamin's essay on technological reproducibility suggests is, first, that the relationship between distraction and concentration, in a modern context, must be understood dialectically rather than as a clear opposition; and, secondly, that the successful cultural use and mastery of new technology also entails a new kind of learning. Consequently, there is no absolute opposition between sheer distraction and what Eiland calls "productive distraction," that is to say, distraction as a spur to new ways of perceiving.[26]

<top>

Questioning the Social Conventions of Spectatorship

[20]   If people had been sitting at home watching TV, zapping between channels and occasionally diverting their attention from the program to the sounds and incidents of domestic everyday life, the heterogeneity of attentive reception described in the beginning of this article would not have been considered curious at all. On the contrary, in the sphere of television consumption this heterogeneity of attention, and the kind of multifaceted subjectivity to which it belongs, is taken for granted. As Félix Guattari has observed:

> When I watch television, I exist at the intersection: 1. of a perceptual fascination provoked by the screen's luminous animation which borders on the hypnotic, 2. of a captive relation with the narrative content of the program, associated with a lateral awareness of surrounding events (water boiling on the stove, a child's cry, the telephone …), 3. of a world of phantasms occupying my daydreams.[27]

[21]   In the context of art museums and galleries, however, reception in a state of distraction is strangely at odds with the social conventions of spectatorship. Late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century aesthetic theory construed the "aesthetic contemplation" of works of art in contradistinction to the "distracted" or "dispersed" modes of reception of the commercial mass media and urban popular culture. In the classical notion of "contemplation," formulated by Arthur Schopenhauer, the usual perception of an object (in relation to a who, when, why, and purpose) is broken off, and the nature of the object is perceived directly. Thus, the perceiving subject is absorbed in a pure and self-forgetting concentration on the empirical object,[28] immersed in "an interest without interest," that is to say, not mingled with subjective desire. The notion that "aesthetic

---

[25] Howard Eiland, "Reception in Distraction," in: *boundary 2*, vol. 30.1 (2003), 51-66, here 57.

[26] Eiland, "Reception in Distraction," 60.

[27] Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: an ethico-aesthetic paradigm*, Sydney 1995, 16.

contemplation" was synonymous with an intensified attention to sensory stimuli is epitomised in Greenbergian modernism and its notion of perception as a pure form of optical and reflective concentration; a privileged experience of an "all-at-oneness." This notion still echoes in Michael Fried's essay "Art and Objecthood" from 1967 – a key text of the discourse on the bodily activated viewer of contemporary installation art. Fried defends a modernist ideal of the art experience as one in which "a single infinitely brief instant would be long enough to see everything, to experience the work in all its depth and fullness, to be forever convinced by it."[29]

[22]   Although the postmodern critique of modernist formalism and essentialism has been devastating, the notion of reception in concentration has survived as an unspoken ideal. This may explain why frustration, boredom, and lack of attention have been ignored as dimensions of the experience of art. These negative affective responses are simply considered out of place. As a result, many art critics would be inclined to dismiss them as effects produced by a sloppy work of art of a poorly talented artist. More so in the case of video installation art, because distracted behaviour is at odds with the dominating notion of this genre as the phantasmagorical and hypnotic art of the "black box" that lures people into a prolonged, self-forgetting "immersion." This association of video installation art with engulfing immersion has gained currency through its dissemination by several major studies of installation art: In her widely read *Installation Art. A Critical History*, art historian Claire Bishop claims that the dark rooms of video installations facilitate an "over-identification" with the space of the work. As a result, it "engulfs and penetrates us" as it "'glues' us to the screen."[30] Or, to put it differently, the work is claimed to be so captivating that it colonises the viewer's attention completely. Director of the Museum of Installation in London, Nicolas de Oliveira, argues that many installations structure an "immersive mode" of reception for the viewer that "create a sensation of a new, more powerful, experience of totality."[31] Correspondingly, art historian Graham Coulter-Smith stresses the immersive capabilities of those types of installation art that approach "the multimedia nature of film" by including moving images, sound and narrative. He also defines a special category of "deep immersive installation" capable of eliciting "total sensory immersion."[32]

---

[28] Sven Spieker, "Zerstreuende Versenkung: Walter Benjamins unterbrechende Sicht auf die historischen Avant-Garden," in: *Walter Benjamin Kongress,* Berlin 2006, http://www.gss.ucsb.edu/faculty/spieker/research/portfolio.html (last accessed 25 September 2010).

[29] Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in: *Minimal Art. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1995, 116-147, here 146.

[30] Claire Bishop, *Installation Art. A Critical History*, London 2005, 87 and 95.

[31] Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry, *Installation Art in the New Millenium*, London 2003, 49.

[32] Graham Coulter-Smith, *Deconstructing Installation Art: Fine Art and Media Art, 1986-2006*, 2006, online-book, Casiad Publishing, http://www.installationart.net/, chapter 2 (last accessed 21 May 2010).

[23] Considering the persistent exclusion of distraction from the discourses on the aesthetic experience of art, it is no wonder that the viewer of video installations is giving critics and scholars a hard time. In an attempt to define the characteristics of video installation art, film and art theorist Raymond Bellour has complained about the difficulty of defining its "dissolved, fragmented, shaken, intermittent spectator."[33] The present essay argues that the real theoretical obstacle is not the viewer's behaviour, as Bellour suggests, but the no longer tenable dichotomization of attention and distraction that underlies the discourses on art; perpetuating the naturalised assumption that aesthetic experience is synonymous with an uninterrupted and heightened state of sensory and intellectual attention.

<top>

Low-Level Attentiveness

[24] In the following, I will bring in additional works of art, and construct part of their context in order to establish some appropriate connections between art and the technological environments of our time. I hope to demonstrate that one of the things that video installations can teach self-reflective viewers is that video art is part of a cultural and technological continuum, comprising all the digital media that permeate contemporary everyday life. This inevitably means that the aesthetic experience is not the noble and transcendental "other" of everyday experience – a stance taken by modernist art theorists like Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg and, it seems, by many contemporary critics and scholars. Aesthetic experience and everyday experience are connected in the sense that they are historically determined by the same ongoing and overall reorganisations of society, although this common determination does not have the same effects everywhere. Just like artists can use the self-reflexive nature of modern art as a tool to create alternative forms of attentiveness in art, so they can employ it as a means to develop other types of distraction where inattentiveness and boredom can mingle with daydreaming, trance, fascination or flight of fancy in highly ambivalent ways.

[25] Jonathan Crary's far-reaching exploration of the transformations of perception in the late nineteenth century demonstrates a fresh approach to the elusive viewer of video installation art. Opposing the widespread notion within critical theory that modern perception is fundamentally characterised by fragmentation, shock, and dispersal, Crary argues that modern distraction must be understood through its reciprocal relation with the emergence of "attentive norms and practices."[34] In the late nineteenth century, attention became a fundamental issue in the human sciences and in particular in scientific psychology.[35] By means of the disciplinary organisation of labour, education,

---

[33] Raymond Bellour, "Of An Other Cinema," in: *Black Box Illuminated*, eds. Sara Arrhenius, Magdalena Malm and Cristina Ricupero, Lund 2003, 39-58, here 42.

[34] Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 1.

[35] Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 13.

mass consumption – and aesthetic spectatorship – Western modernity has imposed the demand that individuals define themselves in terms of a capacity for concentrated attentiveness. As a result, states of distraction like inattention, absentmindedness, daydreaming, and the dispersed, fragmented perception of the urbanite have been defined in negative terms as a disintegration of experience.[36]

[26]   What is interesting in Crary's argument, is his rejection of the general critique of distraction as a deterioration of an idealised, natural wholeness of perception. Instead, he insists that modern distraction was – and still is – an *effect*, and in many instances also a constituent part, of the attempts to produce attentiveness. According to Crary, attentive norms and practices that demand disengagement from a broader field of visual or auditory impressions, for the sake of focusing on a reduced number of stimuli, still reign supreme in the age of pervasive computing. Many technological arrangements require that the individual develops a capacity to deal with huge amounts of information and images in a quasi-automatic way. At the same time, the transformations brought about by the ubiquity of digital media and the general information overload have also highlighted the limits and deficiencies of attention and imposed on the individual, what Crary calls "a permanent low-level attentiveness that is maintained to a varying degree throughout large expanses of waking life."[37] If Crary is right, there is reason to believe that the encounter with digital projections and screen environments tends to trigger the viewer's habitual "low-level attentiveness," also when the encounter takes place in an art context that traditionally dictates the highest level of sensory and intellectual attention. Attention and distraction must then be understood as a continuum in which the two continually mix with one another. Or, to put it differently: video installation art is not only a "mixed medium," a cross-over between the visual arts and the visual media of the common culture. It also produces a mixed and heterogeneous experience. As works of art, video installations often give high priority to meta-reflection on the historical nature of perception.

[27]   A prime example of this is Joachim Koester's *Pit Music* (1996), which can be interpreted as a meditation on how the medial transformation of the interrelationship between attention and distraction has affected the reception of art (fig. 2-4). Koester's *Pit Music* was originally designed as a site specific video installation for the Galleri Nicolai Wallner in Copenhagen in 1996. It was subsequently shown the following year to an international audience at the exhibition *documenta X* in Kassel. In *Pit Music* the visitors step onto an empty platform from which they can look out over an 'orchestra pit' at a video, showing a chamber orchestra's performance of a Shostakovich string quartet. The audience at the concert is not sitting down, as they normally would, but is standing on a platform

---

[36] Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 49.

[37] Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 77.

identical to the one the visitors have stepped on to. On closer inspection, one discovers that the platform in the video is actually also in a gallery, during a private view.

2 Joachim Koester, *Pit Music*, site-specific video installation for Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen, 1996, video projection and stage (variable dimensions). Certificate, instructions, and Betacam SP master, VHS-PAL or NTSC exhibition copies. Duration: 14:00 min. Statens Museum for Kunst (The National Gallery), Copenhagen, Denmark (photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy: Galleri Nikolai Wallner)

[28]   Most of the audience is listening to the music, but there are also many signs of distraction: guests and cameramen shift a bit or move around, while people sip their wine and exchange remarks. Even the camera seems to be distracted, from time to time running its symbolic eye over the neon lights in the ceiling or zooming in on the backs of the musicians, the lower part of the listeners' bodies or a single musician, seemingly by accident cutting off the upper part of her head with the view finder. While the continuity of the soundtrack strengthens the documentary realism of the video and the viewer's concentration, the video tape cross-cuts images in time and space. There are also abrupt changes of tempo, where the visual flow of the video tape is suddenly halted by still close-ups and slow motion, thereby interrupting the parallel course of sound and image in a way that may provoke a scattering or fragmentation of perception. At the end of the videotape, the concert is drowned by the conversation, while the music continues unaffected on the soundtrack. In this part Koester is continually cross-cutting between the opening party and the concert to amplify the difference between the concentration of the quartet performing classical music and the young audience whose behaviour becomes emblematic of contemporary spectatorship.

3 Joachim Koester, *Pit Music*, still from site-specific video installation
for Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen, 1996, video projection and
stage (variable dimensions). Certificate, instructions, and Betacam SP
master, VHS-PAL or NTSC exhibition copies. Duration: 14:00 min.
Statens Museum for Kunst (The National Gallery), Copenhagen,
Denmark (photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy: Galleri Nikolai Wallner)

4 Joachim Koester, *Pit Music*, still from site-specific video installation
for Galleri Nicolai Wallner, Copenhagen, 1996, video projection and
stage (variable dimensions). Certificate, instructions, and Betacam SP
master, VHS-PAL or NTSC exhibition copies. Duration: 14:00 min.
Statens Museum for Kunst (The National Gallery), Copenhagen,
Denmark (photo: Anders Sune Berg. Courtesy: Galleri Nikolai Wallner)

[29]   *Pit Music* is intended as a mirror for the live audience of the video installation. The interrupted montage hinders the live audience's identification with the one on the video tape, thus establishing a reflective distance to the mixture of attentive and distracted behaviour of that audience. In contrast to a cinema audience, a video installation audience is in motion; something that the standing and perambulating audience in *Pit Music* reflects. *Pit Music* also portrays its audience as a distracted audience, dividing its attention between the experiences of listening, watching and socialising. Hence, in Koester's interpretation contemporary viewers seem more closely related to the guests at a private view than the hyper-attentive viewer that most aesthetic theory takes for granted.

[30]   As works of art, video installations often give high priority to meta-reflection on the historical nature of perception. However, the most obvious emblem of the transformation of "aesthetic contemplation" into something much more complex is not the art audience, but the television audience. It is no coincidence, then, that Pipilotti Rist has arranged her installation *Dawn Hours in the Neighbour's House* (2004-05) as a living room that invites the visitor to take a seat in the sofa and watch the video shown on the TV as well as the video projection on the wall. As a result, one is literally interpellated as a TV viewer. In their collaborative work, *So genannte Wellen und andere Phänomene des Geistes* [*So-called Waves and Other Phenomena of the Spirit*] (2003-04), Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski have recorded Althamer's attempts to reach spiritual levels beyond the tedium of everyday life under the influence of various drugs or hypnosis (fig. 5).

[31]   What interests me here, is not the subjective and intense states of mind reflected in the videos. Basically, they capture spiritual journeys that are not accessible to the viewer. My main concern is the way that the work structures and mediates these journeys for a viewer as an equally subjective, but at the same time very different experience. The footage of eight different experiments were shown on eight different monitors connected to head phones and mounted on a partition wall, with four monitors placed on a line on each side of the wall.[38] In front of the monitors were either a huge bean bag or small benches that one could sit or lie down on. The fact that the eight videos were to run simultaneously and right next to each other indicated that one was not supposed to watch every bit of footage. The task of the viewer was rather to zap casually between the eight videos as if one were zapping between TV channels, spending only a brief moment on each to get an overall impression of what the work was about, before selecting one of them for closer scrutiny. However, the attempt to concentrate on a particular screen was easily disturbed by the screens next to it. The impetus to break off the contemplation of a particular video to seek out another was all the stronger because so little happened apart from Althamer's endless talking. Hence, the mode of reception structured for the

---

[38] I am referring to the way the work was installed at the exhibition *Reality Check*, Statens Museum for Kunst (The National Gallery), Copenhagen 2008.

viewer was a strange mixture of perceptual concentration and dispersal, fascination with and indifference to the repeated ritual of drug experimentation.

5 Paweł Althamer and Artur Żmijewski, *So gennante Wellen und andere Phänomene des Geistes* [*So-called Waves and Other Phenomena of the Spirit*], 2003-04, video installation (8 parts, variable dimensions). Duration: 11:10-19:58 min. Collection Bonnefantenmuseum, Maastricht (photo: © SMK Foto)

<top>

A New Model of Environmental Spectatorship?

[32]   Contemporary material and informational environments challenge previous twentieth-century models of spectatorship. This also means that art must reconfigure itself and develop a more adequate framework for understanding contemporary conditions of cultural creation and reception. One could even argue that contemporary works of art that do not sufficiently reflect and reflect on the present conditions of awareness and reception risk losing their viewers as well as their grasp on how people's relationship to reality is being transformed by media and technology. As Crary has pointed out:

> We must begin to understand the strange kind of dislocations and associations that now constitute subjective reality. Unavoidably, our lives are divided between two essentially incompatible milieus; on one hand, the spaceless electronic worlds of contemporary technological culture and, on the other, the physical extensive terrain on which our bodies are situated. Much installation art affirms that experience (and art) is constituted out of the paradoxes and discontinuities of this mixed heterogeneous zone.[39]

[33]   Although none of the above mentioned works include interactive or context-aware digital systems, they seem to deal with a related thematics: they are testing out new ways of

---

[39] Jonathan Crary, "Foreword," in: *Installation Art in the New Millenium*, eds. Nicolas de Oliveira, Nicola Oxley and Michael Petry, London 2003, 4-9, here 8.

assembling and presenting (visual and auditive) information suturing digital and physical worlds. The way they do this potentially sharpens the visitor's awareness of how (perceptible and imperceptible) data is generated and exchanged between technical devices that are *spread out in an environment*. This implies a new status for the human subject. It is of course the artists who have initiated the process of environmental information exchange, by including several monitors/screens with different content in their works, but the artists cannot fully control this complex process. Thus, to the visitor, it *appears to be* partly 'machine-generated': the videos on the individual monitors/screens have been coordinated so that they "respond to" each other, weaving an intertextual tapestry of meaning seemingly without the intervention of a human subject. This effect was particularly strong in Ackerman's *From the Other Side* where the ceaseless intertextual weaving lead the visitor back and forth between the many different sources of information.

[34]   As a means of selection, distraction and boredom become interesting as avoidance behaviour, perhaps even an instrument of resistance. Confronted with video installations such as those of Ackerman, Staehle, or Althamer and Żmijewski, one suspects that the technological apparatus of the video installation is designed to exert a certain power over the viewer, by taking up time that one does not necessarily want to spend on it. In this particular context distraction becomes *productive distraction*. It turns into a defence mechanism that prevents the viewer from falling prey to the "immersive mode" of reception as well as the information overload of the multi-screen installation. By drawing on the distracted quasi-automatic mode of perception that is essential to much cultural life with information technologies, the viewer can shrewdly avoid being subjected to an experience of being mastered by the technological apparatus instead of mastering the apparatus with the aid of the apparatus itself.

[35]   To conclude, I think it is crucial that these artists have chosen *video* as the medium through which they communicate their messages and articulate their models of cognition and experience. One of the merits of video is its great potential for merging certain cultural oppositions – art and television, art and issues of social change, and, in particular, art and technology.[40] Not only does video represent the qualities of mechanical reproduction, it also signifies the electronic and digital factor, which through television and computers has come to symbolise information and the pervasiveness of information technology. Hence, I propose that one of the factors that these multi-screen installations are reflecting on, is a historical transformation of sensory experience, caused by the pervasiveness of computer devices and media, and the "permanent low-level attentiveness" that their information overload tends to produce in human subjects.

---

[40] Marita Sturken, "Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form: Great Expectations and the Making of a History," in: *Illuminating Video. An Essential Guide to Video Art*, eds. Stuart Hall and Sally Jo Fifer, New York 1990, 101-25, here 108.

Beyond the differences between the works there seems to be a common goal: They all aim at creating what Benjamin calls an "*Übungsinstrument*"[41] in that they function as a means of exercise for *an emergent type of spectatorship* where focused concentration is smoothly alternating and merging with distraction without the viewer paying any particular attention to it.

<top>

How to cite this article:

Anne Ring Petersen, "Attention and Distraction: On the Aesthetic Experience of Video Installation Art," *RIHA Journal* 0009 (7 October 2010), URN: [please add, see Metadata], URL: http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2010/ring-petersen-attention-and-distraction (date of access: [please add]).

---

[41] Benjamin, "Das Kunstwerk," 505.