Volker Pantenburg:
»Post Cinema?« Movies, Museums, Mutations, in: SITE magazine 24 (2008), S. 4-5.
Post Cinema?Movies, Museums, Mutations

Volker Pantenburg

I. Expand? Resist
Two events to my knowledge, the Forum Expanded and the International Festival of New Cinema launched a new initiative called Forum Expanded aimed at fathoming the possibilities of what one of its curators described as "showing different films differently." Installation work by filmmakers and other cinema-related artwork were to be shown in the biennial exhibition for contemporary art as well as at the Arsenal Cinema, which traditionally showed the Forum. At the same time, a "black box" was installed at the cinema to complement the two existing conventional movie theaters. The aim was an alliance of different spaces and different forms of presentation, a combination of differing concepts of time and space.

This way of habituating cinema to a specific challenge is one of the various modes of reacting to the contradictory, flexible and yet unclear "battle of the images" that Raymonde Bousis has described and analyzed on numerous occasions during the last two decades. Depending on your set of assumptions and on how you understand the rhetoric of "expansion," Forum Expanded can be interpreted as a signal of compromise, a sign of defeat or a straightforward attempt to let the art world take over discussions and theorization borne along by the digital revolution and the contradictory, flexible and yet unclear "performative turn" of the visual arts.

Dependent on your version of the image, what is at stake is an assimilation of the "performative turn" of the visual arts to the contradictory, flexible and yet unclear "performative turn" of the visual arts. What spectator? The spectator's attention turns from the illusion on the screen to the surrounding contexts rather than within the discourse of the cinema.

ii. Le mouvement des images.
Centre Pompidou, 2006
One way of tracing the tensions and various orientations between cinema and museum would be by attempting a historiography of crucial institutions and individual curators, as well as the size of the curator as such. During the last fifteen to twenty years, the Centre Pompidou has been paramount in developing strategies to exhibit and theorize the various transitions between different image-systems. More recently, Hirschcock et l'Art, Cinémathèque suisse (2006), the Godard exhibition Vingt et un 110mn (2001), and the recent Eileen Kramer. Correspondences (2007) show that the project of the Centre comprises the re-appropriation of classic cinema positions as well as a broader perspective of moving images. 1956’s Paisagem de Filme, curated by Raymonde Bousis, Christine Van Asche and Catheline David, is one of the exhibitions that will retrospectively be remembered as a potential starting point for a genealogy of canonical exhibitions. It displayed work by Jeff Wall, Bill Viola, Gary Hill, Theo Undant, amongst others, and put them into a broader perspective of image-work. In Bellour’s introduction to the catalogue, "The Double Helix," video has the utopian potential of embedding the "betweenness" that characterizes the field of what Bellour termed "entre-image": the intermedia-mixtures, migrating forms between photography, cinema, visual arts and text.

Fifteen years later, Le mouvement des images looks like a sequel to Paisagem de Filme. Some changes, however, can be grabbed from its title: the spatial-geographic "movement" has become a genre:scape. In the new "movement," the idea of a coherent concept of an "image" has turned into the plurality of "images." Yet the argument remains more or less the same, as curator Philippe-Alain Michaud writes in the catalogue: "Nowadays, at the dawn of the 21st century, while we are witnessing a massive migration of images in motion from one screen to another, the exhibition rooms to exhibitions spaces, a migration borne along by the digital revolution and the merging of short formats with a world of full-length features, a reaction to the theatricality of the art scene, it becomes possible, not to say necessary, to resist the experimental conditions which governed it in the 20th century—that is to say, no longer from the limited viewpoint of film history, but, at the crossroads of live spectacle and visual art, from a viewpoint expanded to encompass the whole history of representation." Michaud’s diagnosis is typical: it combines a general reference to the "digital revolution" with the demand for different forms of distribution and presentation. In line with notions of "visual culture" and the academic habit to speak of images rather than of specific image-engines like cinema, photography or painting,Michaud opts for a general notion of the image. What is at stake is an assimilation of cinema to both Michaud’s "pictorial turn" and the "performative turn" of the visual arts.

Yet the advantage of matching cinematic expression with other forms of image production has its flipside. One of the potential problems revealed itself right from the start when entering the exhibition, which was subdivided into four sections: Unwinding, Projection, Narrative, and Montage. In the Montage section, Len Lye’s film Klychev (to be more precise: its DVD-loop-version) was shown face-to-face with Matthias Müller’s Hone (toos); Fernand Léger’s Keller wassanur provided a bridge in between. No doubt that these examples of repetition and alternation allowed for a smooth passage between Montage and Narration. Yet to do this, Len Lye’s film (as most of the works displayed) had to remain silent. Its historical context. While the single screen-cinema model represents an authoritarian model of cinema represents an authoritarian model of cinema and theorizes the various transfers between different image-systems. More recently, Hirschcock et l’Art, Cinémathèque suisse (2006), the Godard exhibition Vingt et un 110mn (2001), and the recent Eileen Kramer. Correspondences (2007) show that the project of the Centre comprises the re-appropriation of classic cinema positions as well as a broader perspective of moving images. The year 2006, or, a little more generally, the year of the Venice Biennale, launched a new initiative called Forum of New Cinema, which made the biggest exhibition of contemporary art that gallery-goers are often forced to bring the black box at his own will. Nor is she constrained to sit still in her seat, as she can wander through the exhibition space and modify her spatial relation to the screen. As Christos Xilos, curator at the Whitney Museum puts it: "The cinema becomes a context in which a crowd of relaxed, idle bodies is fixed, hypnotized by simulations of reality projected onto a single screen. This model is broken when a new screen space of cinema is folded into the white cube of the gallery." And she goes on to say that "[t]he darkened gallery space invites participation, movement, the sharing of multiple viewpoints, the dismantling of the single frontal screen, and an analytical, distanced form of spectatorship that removes the illusion on the screen to the surrounding
and advocate the traditional movie theater as a medium. In its bluntest form, this critique of documenta 12 decided to follow a different model of the gallery space as a free, post-ideological space that has overcome the restraints and the flexibility of the spectator strolling through the exhibition without middle and end, the supposedly rigorous arrangement of fixed starting times and screening schedules may rather trigger a certain concentration. In this respect, Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Costa has recalled a very simple argument: “I'm not a video artist, I am a filmmaker and film is a construction. Pieces are made to fit together, if they don't the whole thing will collapse, or worse, will lack movement and tension. Every shot or scene does depend on the one that comes before and on the one that will come after.”

This insistence on a certain structure and architecture that relies on notions of “before” and “after,” and of “beginning” and “end” holds true not only for narrative cinema; it is also crucial to experience films by James Benning, Sharon Lockhart and a whole tradition of structural filmmaking. This brings us back full circle to the early seventies, when a constellation of “mixed media” - “expanded cinema” and television was already at stake. Horwath’s provocative gesture was to show and stress what he called “normal case of cinema,” a term that echoes Raymond Bellour’s description of the “other cinema” encountered in the museums and galleries.

It is therefore interesting that Horwath’s approach encompasses ideas of his predecessor in the Austrian Film Museum, Peter Kubelka. Interestingly, Kubelka promoted and realised his concept of an “invisible cinema” stripped down to its essentials, mixing and distributing the programmes or videos projected on objects. These are loops, multi-projections, image environments: “the cinema as a Result of Cinematic Thinking.” This has to crystallize now if it is going to survive. And this holds true particularly for the conservatory film industry. They should throw out the old chairs and the flamebeaux; they should create a decent cinema. In such a movie theatre, the situation will change because the sensual pleasure will be raised incredibly; so that people will again start to go to the cinema.”

there is no doubt that there are a lot of forms that demand being shown in museums and galleries: loops, multi-projections, image environments or videos projected on objects. There are not the forms that Horwath or Kubelka might aim at. Their point is that the supposed “post cinema” condition sensitizes us for the capacities of the “normal case of cinema.” So when bending, mixing and different forms become the muse, the strolling spectator in a commonplace protagonist, it might be interesting to reconsider the varieties of aesthetic experience within the paradigm of classical cinema. *

This text was originally presented at the SCMS-conference, Philadelphia, March 2008.