

The Paradigm of Streaming in Contemporary Arts

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Technically defined, streaming is a method of distributing media data that challenges the traditional logic of the world wide web where files are transmitted as downloads. So before we can see an image on a website, it first has to be downloaded to our own computer. To ensure the integrity of a downloaded file, definitions are required in regard to its beginning, its end and total size. In the case of an audio or video stream, on the other hand, the beginning and end of the media object are basically irrelevant for the technical client and the human viewer respectively. We can join a stream at any moment it is offered and it is displayed for us with only a short delay. Whether the content of a stream is live or was recorded and possibly edited earlier is secondary. Due to its different logic, streaming requires own protocols, servers, and file formats. This explains why it has long been in the domain of special service providers and platforms. Only in the last few years has streaming been adopted by mainstream platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. This dissemination of streaming, as I claim, is also symptomatic for many contemporary art practices.

The improved ease-of-use must be seen as one reason why streaming has become attractive for artists. Another rationale is that streaming within the last decade has developed into a potentially political act. This goes from the live broadcast of demonstrations on Cairo's Tahrir Square in 2011 to recent protests in Hong Kong where people demonstrated against election regulations. To express that they were in fact not allowed to vote while a council controlled by Mainland China did, people used Facebook's live stream feature to broadcast whatever they were doing or wherever they were instead.¹ Streaming, in both cases, updates the promise of the word wide web that everybody can publish and address a global community but now in an affective and ephemeral way. As the Hong Kong protests have shown, streaming as an act does not necessarily receive its meaning from its content but rather from context and alleged intentions of those who stream.

A recent and controversial streaming project within the arts is *He Will Not Divide Us* by Shia LaBeouf, Nastja Säde Rönkkö, and Luke Turner, an installation set up in front of New York's

Museum of the Moving Image on January 20, 2017, the inauguration day of Donald Trump as US president. The installation consisted of a streaming camera mounted on a wall at eye level, the eponymous slogan painted above the camera and a website displaying the video stream and a short mission statement.² Unlike the silent protests in Hong Kong two months later, the project of LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner had a political agenda that was detached from its configuration and context. It provided people with a stage to meet and to perform their protest for a global audience. Such an act of staging runs also contrary to the real time documentation of existing protests during the Arab Spring. *He Will Not Divide Us* was supposed to be a continuous site of protest for the presidency of Donald Trump but failed in several ways. The camera quickly attracted not only like-minded people but also trolls and the confrontations between the groups started to endanger public safety. Even a severely confined version of the project that only consisted of the streaming of a white, labeled flag in an unidentified location was finally sabotaged.

The actor LaBeouf and the artists Rönkkö and Turner started their collaborative projects in 2014 and most of them were based on contemporary technologies of connectedness – as we might call them. *Meditation for Narcissists* (2014) was shown in London and offered visitors scheduled training sessions with LaBeouf via Skype. For *#ALLMYMOVIES* (2015) LaBeouf sat for three days at the Angelika Film Center in New York to screen all movies, he ever played in, non-stop in reverse chronological order while people could either join him in person or watch him watching the movies in a live-stream. His collaborators Rönkkö and Turner only became visible in their latest projects as for example in *#ANDINTHEEND* (2016), where all three of them waited on the empty stage of the Sydney Opera House for visitors who could individually provide them with sentences starting with “And in the end ...”. The artists themselves functioned as media in that sense that they both delivered the messages via a 60-meter-long LED display outside the building and by predefining a format for their service. For a current exhibition at the Kiasma museum in Helsinki they individually withdrew for one month into cabins in Lapland. During that time they could only communicate with the visitors of a similar cabin at the museum venue via video and text messages. A view of the exhibition site itself was streamed together with the text conversation between visitors and performers.³

The projects by LaBeouf, Rönkkö, and Turner feature a persistent desire for creating communities or, as Rönkkö said in an artists’ talk at CalArts, “‘intimacy’”⁴ by means of specific infrastructures.⁵ Their practice can be criticized for being populist, for exploiting the status of LaBeouf as a star and also for self-servingly appropriating canonical works of contemporary art.

This being said, what I am interested in here is how these projects are disruptive in regard to conventions of moving images in the gallery and how streaming not only as a technology but as a metaphor, paradigm or state of mind constitutes a breach of the prevalent understanding of moving images within fine arts.

Since around 1990, moving images for several, technical and non-technical, reasons have occupied more space in art venues. And they have been understood mainly with reference to cinema by scholars, curators, and artists alike.⁶ Cinema here is usually conceived as a controlled space with likewise controlled narratives; both are then critically reflected upon in the gallery where spectators are provided with an augmented power of judgment. This “other cinema,” as Raymond Bellour⁷ has called it, has not only been critical but also nostalgic, as Erika Balsom has noted: “Cinema becomes a preoccupation of contemporary art precisely at a time when it is perceived to be in crisis due to the increasingly consolidated hegemony of new, electronic media – media that would be digitized and networked as the 1990s progressed.”⁸

Streaming, on the other hand, appears as a complementary practice that no longer is based on cinema but on the internet as today’s predominant form of media. It has its own genealogy not only in the digital domain but also in practices of early video art. When video was introduced into fine arts, it was hardly seen as a possibility to examine the disposition of cinema but as an alternative to it. A primary focus was on the temporal aspects of video itself and not on the spatial idiosyncracies of sites of moving image. And video’s critical potential addressed not cinema but television. An example is Allan Kaprow’s utopian plan to establish a network of thousands of public places, each equipped with cameras and hundreds of monitors that would provide countless two-way communication channels. Kaprow was able to produce a cut-down version in 1969 under the programmatic title *Hello*.⁹ In 1977, this was followed by the *Satellite Telecast* for the opening of Documenta 6 featuring Joseph Beuys, Douglas Davis, Nam June Paik, and Charlotte Moorman, a twisted collage of live and recorded performances connecting Europe with the US, Japan, and Venezuela. Three years later, Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz showed their “Public Communication Sculpture” *Hole In Space*, a series of unannounced satellite connections between the American East and West Coast. What these works embrace and what seems to be the fascination they had back then, is a sense of immediacy through and not in spite of media technology. This somewhat contradictory promise of mediated actuality is summed up by the last sentence of the rolling titles concluding Douglas Davis’ Documenta performance: “Your image where you are is now.”

We can add that it is not only the image that exists in a specific moment but also its beholder. The fact that both mutually assure their existences within a specific situation distinguishes streaming images from merely moving ones. The issue of movement and stillness, so far, has dominated the discussion of cinema in the museum. Boris Groys gets to the point when he writes: “In our culture, we have two different models that allow us to gain control over time: The immobilization of the image in the museum, and the immobilization of the audience in the movie theater. Both models, however, fail when moving images are transferred into the space of a museum. ... It is precisely this fundamental uncertainty that results when the movement of the images and the movement of the viewer occur simultaneously that creates the added aesthetic value of bringing the digitalized moving images into the exhibition space.”¹⁰ I would reply that the problem (or challenge) is not the movement of the image but its duration. It lasts for a certain period of time, a basal but still relevant account that we all experience when biennials and other large exhibitions again feature too many videos to watch them. A specific duration implies that a moving image work has a beginning and an ending, which both may be made explicit or hidden in a seamless loop. A crucial difference between the gallery as cinema and streaming within such places lies exactly here, in the dissolution of beginning and ending.

Let me elaborate on this and some further points with the help of three recent Swiss examples.

The artist collective !Mediengruppe Bitnik in 2010 started to perform their piece *Surveillance Chess* by hijacking CCTV cameras in public spaces. Such cameras often rely on analog, unencrypted, wireless transmissions to their control monitors. It is thus possible to intercept the sent signal or, as the artists did, to interfere it with an own, stronger signal. They did so in London, a city that is notorious for its pervasion with surveillance cameras, and challenged the supposed guards in front of the hidden monitors to play chess with them. To my knowledge, nobody ever replied to their inquiries. And, of course, this is not about playing chess or even ‘winning against Big Brother’ but merely about pointing to a specific situation and moment by making technologies, images, and humans involved in it visible.

While, in general, I would argue that the application of streaming as a technical service for the sake of art is not at the core of my endeavour, my next example does exactly that. In 2014 and 2015, Selina Grüter and Michèle Graf organized a series of eleven public events, mostly in art venues in Zurich, where they used a streaming service to project the sunset of places such as Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, or Los Angeles. The live-streams were scheduled according to the actual time of the sunset in the presented locations and due to the time shift with Zurich had to

be watched at often erratic times. The contemporaneities, which Grüter and Graf were creating here, consisted of the representation of one event in another. The sunset as an event that is global and local at once was turned into an occasion to gather local networks of people who identify themselves with the idea of constantly being elsewhere. (In fact, the person who films the sunset is also part of the artists' network.) We also encounter several forms of duration in these events, which seem to nullify the very idea of a specific duration despite of concrete events that could mark such time frames: The events are announced to begin at a certain time, the stream is started and later stopped, the projector is switched off, etc. However, the dominant ending is not the one of the piece itself but the prolonged fading of a day elsewhere, which it shows. Sunsets are happenings that endure but whose duration is difficult to measure. This is what they have in common with the assemblies organized by Grüter and Graf. When it comes to social events, it is all about timing, about the scarcity that evolves between being too early or too late and about the fact of having been there.

Where Grüter and Graf use an actual streaming service to create a collective experience, the exhibition *On seen* by Hannah Weinberger in 2016 parallel and in close vicinity to the Art Basel fair comes as a more private experience. Visitors of the extensive underground space of the Freymond-Guth Fine Arts gallery are invited to drift. The architecture of the concrete walls is supplemented with long white curtains and numerous video projections in different sizes and heights. On first sight, the videos themselves merely refer to Weinberger's life as a globally traveling artists, showing an imagery she shares with other contemporary artists, mostly photographers like Wolfgang Tillmans and others. Also, the video images are by no means live. They are not streams in a strict sense but edited loops. Why I still think it makes sense to speak of streaming here is the specific way they are presented and watched. Against the authority of a single or a few projections Weinberger sets the plurality of multitudinous videos with apparently unambitious editing. There is neither an allocation of specific motives to individual projections nor do the loops of various lengths allow for any predetermined dramaturgy. We are left with an aleatoric order that only exists for us in the moment we watch it. And as we wander around, we have to recognize that the conflict between our own movement as visitors and the moving images, which Groys writes about, has completely disappeared in the emerging stream. Weinberger's installation comes across as a literal reading of Peter Osborne's concept of the digital image as a "distributed image."¹¹ For Osborne the concept of the distributed image is primarily an instrument to argue against an ontological predefinition of photography as a medium and to point to structural similarities between photographic images and postconceptual art. But

distributed images are also images without a spatial and temporal origin. And as such they have a bias towards the moment of their appearance and not towards their production – two moments that fall in one in the case of streaming.

Let me summarize my observations in 10 (partly contradictory) theses.

1. Streaming in contemporary arts is not used as an enabling technology but as a comment on the effects of that technology.
2. Streaming stands for the overcoming of the nostalgic reference to cinema.
3. Streaming replaces ‘canned time,’ i.e. durational films (Warhol, Benning, et al) because it accepts that the visitor sees only parts of it.
4. Streaming develops alternative understandings of beginnings and endings.
5. Streaming as a symptom of digital culture is not the loss of places but the emphasis of public places.
6. Streaming – maybe – has less to do with time but it defines relations between places.
7. Streaming means an end to the photographic delay – and thus often plays with other forms of delay.
8. Streaming challenges photography because it opposes the latter’s ‘now’ and ‘then’ with a blunt NOW.
9. Streaming is not about contemporaneity of representation and represented but about the concurrence of image and beholder.
10. Streaming depends on and emphasizes the presence of the beholder.

¹ Add Oil Team, accessed March 24, 2017, http://addoilteam.hk/1194only/index_en.html.

² <http://www.hewillnotdivide.us>

³ <http://alonetogether.kiasma.fi>

⁴ <https://vimeo.com/156781909>

⁵ Out of their project in Finland evolved a small community of people who met regularly at the exhibition space. <http://blog.kiasma.fi/blog/alonetogether-mita-oikein-tapahtui/>

⁶ See e.g. Raymond Bellour, “On an Other Cinema,” in *Black Box Illuminated*, ed. Sara Arrhenius, Magdalena Malm, and Cristina Ricupero (Stockholm: Propexus, 2003), Ursula Frohne and Lilian Haberer, eds., *Kinematographische Räume: Installationsästhetik in Film Und Kunst* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2012), Erika Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2013).

⁷ Bellour, “On an Other Cinema.”

⁸ Balsom, *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, 11.

⁹ Allan Kaprow, “Hello: Plan and Execution,” *Art-Rite*, no. 7 (1974).

¹⁰ Boris Groys, “From Image to Image-File – and Back: Art in the Age of Digitalization,” in *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 88–89.

¹¹ Peter Osborne, “The Distributed Image,” *Texte zur Kunst* 25, no. 99 (September 2015): 74–87.