

Mobility and the Image-Based Research of Art

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The increasingly accelerated, global movement of information, goods, and people has long since become an issue that is not exclusively examined by transport researchers and sociologists. Contemporary artists are also dealing to a greater extent with the phenomena of exponentially advancing mobility. They are often enough not only themselves drifters and vagabonds between exhibition venues, trade fairs, and periods of artists-in-residence in a globalized art business, but also explore the conditions and forms of travel, the “geography and politics of mobility,” or scrutinize the promises made by apparently boundless mobility (Biemann 2003; Kravagna 2006; Plath and Casser 2008). They examine the phenomena of tourism, migration, and mobile labor, as well as the structures, sites, and border zones of mobility movements or the influence of new communications technologies on the behavior and mapping of mobile things and individuals. In the process, artistic works can be viewed as an independent form of gaining insight. They often explore that which lies beyond the reach of scientific issues and problems, or what is overlooked and excluded by conventional scientific approaches (cf. also Mersch and Ott 2007, 29). The present publication therefore for the first time places the current artistic examination of phenomena of mobility or mobilities regimes as specific arrangements of principles, norms, and rules that control the movement and mobility of people and objects¹ alongside scientific analyses as an independent research achievement, and lends substance to visual representation.

ART AS INSIGHT

In the past two decades, a fierce debate has again erupted on the revaluation of artistic research and gaining insight, fired by increasing skepticism with respect to science’s claim to truth and a valorization of the image in the course of the so-called iconic turn. Science researchers such as Bruno Latour, Karin Knorr-Cetina, or Donna Haraway, who since the 1970s have been laboring to provide a “more realistic account of science-in-the-making” (Latour 1999, 15), have shown that

even the insights gained by the natural sciences are defined and thus culturally produced by historical, social, economic, discursive, or political factors. Their research has given cause to scientific work increasingly being viewed “as in itself one plural, cultural form of expression among others,” of which *none* of its forms “on principle [has] a privileged relationship to nature” (Rheinberger 2010, 4). In this respect, natural and technological sciences are described as cultural practices that in principle do not differ from the “symbolic, interpretive, ‘hermeneutic’ practice of the social sciences” (Knorr Cetina 1981, 137) and, in the final analysis, in the process of the depiction of reality itself they are in no way superior to the narratological and symbolic-interpretive practice of the arts. The modern self-image of science as a guidance system that reveals the truth (Rheinberger 1997, 8) seems to have begun to totter. The jolt it has experienced has led not to a social, but at least to an epistemological loss of power that is currently being recognized not only by the humanities but also by artists as an opportunity to put their own forms of the description and cognition of reality on an equal footing with scientific forms of the same (cf., among others, Sullivan 2005).

At the same time, in the past two decades the image has shifted into focus of scientific interest as a primary means of expression and medium of insight. In the early 1990s, W.J.T. Mitchell and Gottfried Boehm rang in the so-called iconic turn, which responds to the social omnipresence of images. The stipulated turn to the image not only leads to an intensified theoretical examination of images meant to do justice to the role of the image in society, but describes “the image as Logos, as an act that generates meaning” (Boehm 2007b, 29) with its own epistemic quality. In doing so, the iconic turn consciously counteracts the undisputed regime of language, which in particular since the early twentieth century equates any generation of relevance and meaning with the designation and naming of reality and thus causes insight to appear to be something genuinely linguistic. On the other hand, it emphasizes the sensuous variety and visual capacity of the image and acknowledges “imaging” as “the richest, most fascinating modality for configuring and conveying ideas” (Stafford 1996, 4). Against this backdrop, for the visual arts cognitive content or a specific form of knowledge as a primarily image-based form of expression or iconic communication is again called upon, and an attempt is made to define it with respect to its features (see, e.g., Frayling 1993; Stafford 1996; Young 2001; Sullivan 2005; Macleod and Holdridge 2006; Boehm 2007a, 2007b).

ART AND ANTHROPOLOGY

At the same time, the iconic turn also comprises anthropology and ethnography, while in the visual arts one conversely speaks of an ethnographic turn (Foster 1996, 182). The rediscovery of the image in cultural anthropology or the rapid upsurge of a visual anthropology and ethnography was supported in the 1980s by the so-called writing culture debate, which precipitated a crisis in ethnographic representation. Ethnographic texts, which had previously adhered to a positivist

ideal of science, lost the status of neutral, objective descriptions and were exposed as construed or time- and society-dependent. Yet the emphasis on their fictitious qualities undermines the privileged position of the scientific ethnographic text as compared with the image, which had hitherto been eyed with mistrust. The visual representation was consequently rediscovered as an opportunity to allow the “object of examination” to speak for itself and, by including additional sensuous qualities, expand our understanding of the human condition (cf., among others, Prosser 1998).

The interest that anthropology and ethnography have in the visual arts can be traced back to as early as the 1960s and 1970s – for instance, in the works by Lothar Baumgarten or the field research conducted by the *Spurensicherer* artists. In addition, in 1969 Joseph Kosuth published a seminal text on the subject, “The Artist as Anthropologist” (Kosuth 1991). In this he calls for art that serves cultural insight and defines the artist as a “committed anthropologist” who works within his own sociocultural context. Hal Foster, however, first diagnosed an ethnographic turn in contemporary art in the 1990s, following which artists have again increasingly applied the scientific strategies of anthropology and sociology. From this point onward, this appropriation of methods of ethnographic description and field research is decidedly associated with their critical reflection. The adapted and modified scientific approaches are not only a tool and a means to an end; rather, their claim to truth is scrutinized by an art influenced by postcolonialism and critical of institutions, and examined with respect to their social and political dimensions. It is at this juncture that art meets with the self-adulation and self-deconstruction of these sciences.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ARTISTIC APPROACH

Due, on the one hand, to the growing interest by sociology and anthropology in visual representations and in image-based research, as well as an artistic adoption and examination of ethnographic methods on the other hand, the relationships between these two disciplinary fields have become consolidated, and the number of interfaces has multiplied. In this respect, it is not surprising that direct collaborations between artists and sociologists or ethnologists have recently been reported, to which several of the contributions in this publication testify. Against this background, in the selection of the artistic contributions for the present interdisciplinary publication, it presented itself to place the focus on artistic stances that borrow methods from anthropology and the social sciences. Besides a strong imagery, such works of art also frequently work with written sources and text-based forms of research. However, these do not constitute the basis for a scientific analysis and evaluation, but stand on an equal footing alongside the image as an additional source of information, or enter into a synthesis with the image. They are part of a complex image-text arrangement – an open, sensuous structure that first requires the viewer’s interpretation and has no interest in supplying scientifically verifiably results.

This especially holds true for the works by Pia Lanzinger, Michael Hieslmair and Michael Zinganel, Lisl Ponger, Gülsün Karamustafa, Ursula Biemann, Yoo Jae-Hyun, and Farida Heuck. These resemble ethnographic or sociological field studies in which social groups or milieus are examined that are subject to the pressure of mobilities regimes. The artists document observations, collect visual material, and conduct qualitative interviews, which count amongst the classic instruments of the empirical social sciences. Differences compared to the scientific approach nevertheless come to light. In her book version of *An Enterprise in Her Own Four Walls: Teleworking*, Pia Lanzinger, for example, refers the situation of the home-based teleworkers she investigated to her own working situation as an artist in a much more explicit way than would a reflexively oriented scientific study, and identifies it as her motivation for dealing with the issue in the first place. Above all, however, the principles of a “demobilization of labor” due to new communications technologies – including the problems of social isolation and the erosion of boundaries in terms of time and space associated with it – are not presented in a representative scientific analysis of facts or an evaluation of interviews. Rather, they become understandable in the artistic presentation – be it in the book version or in the installative set-up in an exhibition – by way of the direct image- and text-based confrontation with the interviewees, without any additional commentary. The work gains a further essential quality in the exhibition space in that the video interviews can be viewed either in a stylized apartment or in combination with the home-based teleworkers’ authentically reconstructed desks. The spatial installation, which restricts and guides the visitor’s radius of movement, allows the direct physical and emotional perception of the specific working conditions in their everyday aesthetics, the restriction of mobility to the area of the home, and the “collapse of the living and working space, the vampirical relationship of work to life” (Bauer 2005, 136).

However, Michael Hieslmair and Michael Zinganel, who describe themselves as “investigative architects” and “ethnographically inspired artists” (cf. p. 115), in part work with fictitious or at least strongly typified and exaggerated elements. For the work *Saison Opening – Seasonal City*, which examines migration currents in the Tyrolean Alps, they condense statements made during interviews into nearly caricature-like key scenes in comic-book form in order to make pointed statements about the laws of and problems associated with season-dependent mobility currents. Furthermore, what is key in their works is making fluctuating migration movements and path network diagrams capable of being experienced by means of their sculptural-architectural translation. This also transforms other heterogeneous information and data collections into a descriptive model that generates such an unorthodox network of geographic, temporal, political, and individual factors.

In Lisl Ponger’s case, the cultural scientist Alexandra Karentzos analyzes the artist’s examination of different forms of mobility based on her films *Passages* (1996) and *Déjà vu* (1999). Karentzos demonstrates how Ponger opens up a productive space solely by means of a differentiated fusion and comparison of segments from touristic films from the 1950s and 1970s and fragments from interviews with

refugees in which the various regimes of tourism and migration are reflected and problematized.

Gülsün Karamustafa's major theme is time and again international nomadism. In *Unawarded Performances* (2005), which is represented here with video stills and an explanatory text by the artist, she, like Pia Lanzinger, lets images and her interview partners speak for themselves. The video features Moldavian women who, due to their catastrophic economic situation, are forced to leave their home country and work in Istanbul as illegal housemaids for wealthy older ladies. The emphasis lies on individual destinies and an aesthetic-atmospheric description of the tense relation between the migrants' precarious situation and the secure circumstances of their well-to-do employers. The camera continuously pans over spacious apartments furnished with antiques, in sharp contrast to the housemaids, who seem almost out of place, and their stories. In this way, the very inequality of what is visible already exposes the power constellations of labor migration.

In her first contribution, "Counter-Geographies in the Sahara," the artist Ursula Biemann provides an elaborate theoretical reflection on her artistic visual exploration of phenomena of migration, while her second contribution, "X-Mission," focuses on images. Her theoretical contribution makes reference to her work *Sahara Chronicle* (2006–2009), an open video anthology of the modalities of West African migration movements northwards through the Sahara. The multichannel video installation consciously does without a homogeneous, linear narrative strand. It stands out due to its incomplete diversity of voices and remains fragmentary in order to underscore the temporariness and the transitory character of the narrative. Biemann points out the essayistic character of her practice, which differs from a scientific one. She follows a subjective logic and depicts the geographies of migration or global labor as spatial-visual configurations in order to combine the narrow perspective on individual voices with a more global look at systemic issues and more comprehensive structures. At the same time, she questions the workings of and conditions for the development of portrayals of illegal migration, thus again making reference to the fact that a visual representation is also in no way innocent, but is guided by interests and highly political.

The artists Farida Heuck and Yoo Jae-Hyun conducted their field studies for *DMZ Embassy* (2009/2010 – see Chapter 13 of this volume) in the border area between North and South Korea, investigating the influence of highly restricted and strongly regulated mobility on tourism, the economy, and everyday life. The artistic result of their studies in the form of an installation, a book (Heuck and Jae-Hyun 2009), and the condensed text-photo spread included in this volume also emphasize the narratives' diversity of voices and different points of view. In addition, the filmed interviews and photographs are spatially situated within the installation. The landscape, however, is only partially visible by way of various eyepiece pairs, which addresses the interviewees' various points of view yet also alludes to the researching observer's limited field of vision and channeled view.

COLLABORATIVE ACHIEVEMENTS

The contributions by Charles Heller and Mehdi Alioua as well as André Amtoft and Bettina Vestergaard were developed in direct cooperation between artists and sociologists or ethnologists. The collaboration between sociologist Mehdi Alioua with video artist Charles Heller prompted the project *Maghreb Connection*, which was initiated in 2006 by Ursula Biemann as a “collaborative art and visual research project” (Biemann 2006) on North African migration space. Her contribution, “Transnational Migration, Clandestinity and Globalization,” deals with Sub-Saharan transmigrants in Morocco and revises the prevalent image of a massive invasion of Maghreb, which is solely regimented by state violence, by Sub-Saharan Africans. By combining the results of their sociological and artistic research, the authors demonstrate, among other things, that the transmigrants themselves become an important self-regulating authority over their mobility, the origin of their own mobilities regimes, by way of sophisticated networks and bases that are firmly established geographically. Thus, this contribution not only demonstrates what makes the concept of the regime according to Hess and Karakayah particularly significant, it also enables “understanding regulations as effects, as concentrations of social activities, and does not imply that they are functionalistic.” The image material Heller and Alioua use, by the way, for the most part stems from Charles Heller’s film *Crossroads at the Edge of Worlds* (2006), which deals with the same topic.

While Alioua and Heller present the results of their artistic-scientific research, visual sociologist André Amtoft and artist Bettina Vestergaard focus on the concept of new, interdisciplinary research praxis with respect to the theme of mobility situated between sociology and art. Starting out from the basic assumption that a change of behavior and perception generally leads to a reconfiguration of knowledge, they are currently working on a Campervan Residency Program. It is meant to make a nomadic living-working space available to artists and scientists with which they can enter into the flux of things in order to make the visual and aesthetic manifestations of the mobility and immobility of people, objects, or information perceptible in a new way.

OTHER FORMS OF THE ARTISTIC INQUIRY

The artistic contributions by Jorinde Voigt, Christoph Keller, Dan Perjovschi, and Res Ingold extend the range of artistic research in the field of the mobilities regimes that is represented here. They distinguish themselves less through their adoption of ethnographic or sociological methods, although it cannot be denied that the works by Jorinde Voigt bear a striking resemblance to scientific systems of recording, and in contrast to many of the previously mentioned artistic stances do not use time-based media such as video or sound recordings. This predestines them in particular for the book format, for which they – as is the case for Perjovschi and Ingold – in part were specifically developed. Such contributions get by completely

without accompanying or explanatory texts, while many other artists have made recourse to hybrid presentations between text and image or written explanation and image. In this respect, the boundaries are fluid between autonomous artistic book contributions and documentations of current videos or installations, which without written explanations are only understandable in the original.

In her series *territory*, *intercontinental*, and *airport study*, using virtuoso graphic notations, Jorinde Voigt explores relationships and interferences between territories and the mobility of people and energies. While the rhythmic compositions and meticulously executed diagrams she produces may resemble scientific maps, they are fictitious to the extent that they make reference not to a supposedly objective reality, but always to the actor or the acting author, who traces movements as well as surveying territories and continuously redefining them. Nevertheless – or perhaps precisely for this reason – what becomes visible in Voigt's drawings, in their patterns and rhythmic constellations of lines, is what Martin Kemp refers to as "structural intuition." By this Kemp means not only the ability of scientists and artists to recognize static and dynamic patterns in nature and to extract orders of varying complexity out of the chaos of manifestations, but also the ability to intuitively grasp and visualize fundamental structural principles of our world (Kemp 2004).

Among other things, Dan Perjovschi and Res Ingold rely on irony as a cognitive strategy – if in a completely different way. While in his drawings Romanian artist Perjovschi reduces the principles, norms, and power relations of current mobility phenomena to a salient formula, Res Ingold's work first and foremost deals with the myths and ideals of optimized mobility. The advertisements he developed specifically for this book promote the services of the fictitious Ingold Airlines, which the artist has made known, not only within an art context, over the past 30 years by means of landing strip installations, market launch campaigns, merchandising objects, stockholders' meetings, panel discussions, sponsoring events, and promotional films. In the process he has created an ironically exaggerated image of an airline company that claims not only to fulfill exclusive transportation needs oriented toward the individual customer, but also the need for happiness, social recognition, or – as the ads suggest – success and deceleration. Yet these promises admittedly reveal themselves as illusory and challenge not only common marketing strategies, but above all the cliché of the comfortable, infinitely flexible mobility of goods and human beings. Yet, in their combination with the scientific essay by Nicole Dietrich and Norbert Huchler on the mobile labor of pilots and flight attendants, its impact, and established compensation strategies, Ingold's advertisements obtain a particularly ambiguous explosive nature.

Perjovschi's drawings take up the tradition of political caricatures, but as apparently fleetingly jotted down image-text abbreviations, they also internalize formal elements of graffiti as well as scribbles on the walls of toilet stalls. Perjovschi works with stylized culminations that lead to a humorous signet-like compression and extraction of meaning, and in this way they get to the heart of typical situations and constellations in our social reality. Perjovschi's works therefore run through

all of the book's chapters as striking graphic commentaries on the various core problems and consequences of new forms of mobility and mobilities regimes. The artist creates new drawings for nearly all of the six chapters in the book. For Perjovschi, irony also serves as a skeptical challenge, as reservation, and thus gains a clearly political dimension, in particular in those drawings that address the inequality and regimentation of mobility.

In contrast, Christoph Keller's 360-degree images are first and foremost a reflection on the perception of motion. Using a converted photo camera, the artist captures moving persons and objects on film that is pulled across the exposure slot while the picture is being taken. In the process, the specific relation between the movement of the object and the movement of the light-sensitive material determines the photographic result. Keller in this way demonstrates that the perception of movement is always dependent on the movement of the viewer, and vice versa. From his works one can in turn strike an arc to the campervan project by Amtoft and Vestergaard, in which the "mobilization" of the researcher is regarded as a condition for the new perception of mobility phenomena. It is in principle noticeable that most of the artistic contributions also include a reflection on the perception of mobility, its dependency on the author's interests and personality, on the medium of representation, and location – be it moving or static. Thus, as Karentzos demonstrates, the films *Passages* and *Déjà vu* by Lisl Ponger also possess a self-reflexive structure in that the tourist's eye and the film camera that guides it are put in the picture. Finally, Hieslmair and Zinganel include themselves in their comic-strip portrayals as participant observers.

In this context, key importance is assigned to the text by American artist and media theorist Jordan Crandall, the prologue preceding all the other scientific and artistic contributions. He takes a special stance, as he primarily focuses on the act of perceiving, discovering, and coding movement. In the process, he makes a case for a new relational method that takes account of a variety of actors and their interdependencies, as well as of a nonreductive network of interpretation that does not simply produce actors but articulates programs that "orchestrate the endless recombination of micro-variations that occur below and across the surface of bounded spaces and bodies" (cf. p. 50).

"Politics and art, like forms of knowledge, construct 'fictions,' that is to say *material* rearrangements of signs and images, relationships between what is seen and what is said, between what is done and what can be done," writes the French philosopher Jaques Rancière (2004, 39). This proposition by Rancière suggests the principal equality of scientific and artistic depictions of reality, which simply represent different forms of the "distribution of the sensible." However, by "distribution of the sensible," Rancière means "a system or 'regime' of norms and habits that implicitly define the perception of the collective world" (Muhle 2008, 10). In this respect, art and science are influenced by different regimes of perception that also always have to be reflected. Yet they can complement, overlap, and contradict one another and are subject to a constant distribution and reconfiguration. In this book, the scientific and artistic "fictions" of new mobilities regimes are compared in six thematic fields in order to illustrate such a completion, overlapping, and contradiction of the

scientific and artistic “division of the sensible,” and force open the bottlenecks of the individual specialist perspectives.

Translation from German: Rebecca van Dyck

NOTE

- 1 For a detailed definition of the concept “mobility regime,” see the introductory contribution by Sven Kesselring and Gerlinde Vogl in Chapter 2 of this volume.

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