The Allusive Eye. Illusion, Anti-Illusion, Allusion

Peter Weibel
Center for Art and Media (ZKM) in Karlsruhe

In 1969 an exhibition was held at the Whitney Museum of American Art with the significant title Anti-Illusion: Procedures/Materials, at which works of Andre, Asher, Benglis, Morris, Nauman, Reich, Ryman, Serra, Snow, Sonnier, Tuttle and others were shown. This exhibition summed up an important tendency of the neo-avant-garde, but especially of the avant-garde of the media of film and video. The 1960s saw a paradigm change from illusion to anti-illusion. All the achievements of the avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s drew on the development of materials, not only of artistic but also of extra-artistic materials. In the 1950s Jean Dubuffet smeared his canvasses with sand and stones. Robert Smithson and Michael Heizer went into the countryside and created huge sculptures of earth. The inner world of materials formed the canon, issued the directives for the development of processes. Processes of materials, whether of lead, felt, fat, oil colors, water, ice, air, fire, earth, etc., shaped the form and non-form of the picture or the sculpture. These processes of materials replaced the work of art as a product, and created at least the conditions for the product. From avant-garde music, Fluxus and happenings through Action Art, Body Art and Arte Povera to Land Art, Process Art and Conceptual Art, artists have been testing the possibilities and options of materials, whether of the piano, of light, of oil paints, of texts, and so forth, in order to create from these their ephemeral works. This obsession with materials not only went along with a refusal of illustration and representation, but was in general characterized by the gesture of the Enlightenment and anti-illusion. Avant-garde film in particular proceeded from the conditions and materiality of film, from the conditions of perception, of projection, of the movie theater, the celluloid, etc., and developed from these "structural film", "material film" and "expanded cinema" (Hollis Frampton, Tony Conrad, Paul Sharits, Steina and Woody Vasulka, Birgit and Wilhelm Hein, Michael Snow, Peter Gidal, Ernst Schmidt Jr., etc.). Avant-garde film and with it media art, formed, so to speak, the vanguard of this avant-garde of anti-illusion, and it also then gained entry into the classical art forms of painting and sculpture.

The 1960s thus formed a watershed between the epoch and practice of illusion and the epoch and practice of anti-illusion. In the 1970s, the art of anti-illusion came to an end in the public consciousness, for in the 1980s the painting of illusion ruled the roost. Under the pressure of

the mass media, which had developed into the central site for the generation of illusion, the avant-garde favored all the more vehemently destruction, deconstruction and anti-illusion, the exit from the picture. With the return of figurative and expressive painting, illusion too returned to the realm of art. The reward was as momentous as it was astonishing: the mass media passionately applauded this phenomenon and covered it excessively. The tabloids and illustrated magazines thanked art that they no longer were the sole players in the theater of illusion, and that the artist had shown himself to be a fellow actor on the same stage. Thus the art of the 20th century can be squeezed not only into the binary oppositions of figurative and abstract, material and non-material, representational and non-representational, but also into that of illusion and anti-illusion, in which the avant-garde defined itself as anti-illusionary.

It was the media artists of the 1960's and 1970's (avant-garde film and video art) who were mainly responsible for the anti-illusionary mentality, and after their bitter experience that the return of the art of illusion in the painting of the 1980s pushed them to the sidelines, marginalized them and in many cases even wiped them out, the younger generation of media artists of the 1990s learned their lesson. They no longer placed themselves in the anti-illusionary tradition of the media avant-garde, because they saw in this tradition the cause of the avant-garde's failure, but rather directly in that of mainstream illusion, for example of Hollywood films or music videos, which these artists then appropriated or deconstructed with the techniques of the slowing down or acceleration of shots and sound-track, taken over from the media avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s. The names of Pipilotti Rist and Douglas Gordon may be named here for such tendencies. This tendency to illusion is the real cause of the narrative trend of the media art of the 1990s, of that triumph of the eye which places itself at the service of the storyteller. Yet instances of resorting to the avant-garde as well as to forms of the mass entertainment industry of Hollywood and MTV are so numerous and mixed that it would be wrong simply to assign the younger generation to the realm of the dream factory. Precisely through the mixture of practices of narration and illusion, as we know them from the mass media of film and television from psycho-dramas to talk shows, with the practices of anti-illusion and anti-narration, a new practice has in the best cases (for example, Gabriel Orozco and Anri Sala) arisen, which we would like call "allusion".

The media generation of the 1990s assumes that every viewer already has a library of visual experiences, fed by the mass media from films to billboards, stored in his head. On this visual conditioning their works draw directly or indirectly. They don't need to tell names, because the viewer knows who is meant. They need only briefly suggest topics, places, subjects, and

the viewer knows what is being spoken of. Mere hints, explicit or symbolic, elliptical or concealed references, are sufficient to charge the images with meaning and significance. Little is mentioned explicitly, and the story is still comprehensible. This universe of multiple references is that of the famous post-modernism, from architecture to music, from art to film. Quentin Tarantino's Pulp Fiction (1994) is a classic example of these numerous references to the visual experience of the film goer. The charm of these references is that they form a common set of assumptions possessed by both viewer and author. Supposé is the key word of the aesthetic of allusion. It is assumed, it is presupposed, that the viewer knows this and that.

An aesthetics of the "given", which assumes and presupposeshas become the central dogma of a whole visual culture. In the post-modern universe of allusion it is assumed of any viewer that he knows all the images, and the charm of the reaction lies in the reference to these images, in the deliberate disappointment of expectation, in the deliberate parallelity and conformity, or in the deliberate omissions and ellipses (see Pierre Huyghe's film L'Ellipse). This allusive technique permits the Scylla and Charybdis of illusion and anti-illusion, of narration and anti-narration, to be circumnavigated. The author can narrate, but through the allusive techniques of not naming names, of indirect references or of covered-up identities, he can also rupture the narrative. The author can illustrate figurative and concrete scenes, but through the allusive technique also lend them a degree of abstraction and unreality. The methods of allusion thus allow the artist to regulate the degree of narration and anti-narration, of figuration and abstraction. In this way it is possible to create works animated by an incredible pleasure in story-telling, by an excessive urge to jump into the thick of a narrative plot, into the flesh of a story, and at the same time to make visible the bones of its structure and the grid of its script. The techniques of allusion permit stories about the state of the world - for example, by Gillian Wearing, Sam Taylor-Wood, Aernout Mik - that at the same time continue the anti-illusionary and conceptual tendency of the media avant-garde.

The fifty-one media artists of the Goetz Collection presented at the ZKM exhibition take us on a journey into the heart of the present. Most of the works come from the period of the 1990s up to today. Like no other collection, the Goetz Collection offers a survey of contemporary media art. This survey is not only more extensive than that of any other European museum, but it is also less arbitrary. The merit of the Goetz Collection is deliberately to have assembled the phase of allusory art which came after the illusory and anti-illusory phases and which has been decisive for the development of media art today. The

Collection not only offers an insight into contemporary media art, but through this window we can also gain an insight into the contemporary world. Not, however, the kind of insight that we have grown used to seeing on television, in the press and in film, but one enabled by media artists who show the mass media as a part of the world and as a part of the eye and of the camera with which the world is viewed. The allusive eye tells of the media and of the world, and its artists tell of the world in other ways than do the mass media. These are dismayed views and dismayed images into the global illusion of neo-liberalism. These are images of an art whose visual vocabulary has a high degree of complexity. This complexity is the core of allusion. The danger of anti-illusory art was simplicity and tautology. The dangers of allusory art are complexity and mannerism, but never the flight from the world or the flight from the viewer. The allusive technique of narration in the visual media signifies a further development of the literary plot and almost a break with it, with the literary structuring of a narrative. The visual narrative does not follow the arc and path of a verbal narrative. It does not run on rails. Nevertheless, the allusive narrative follows a script. It could be said that the media art of the 1990s up to the present follows a script, is scripted. It does not follow the plot of a story. A story is something other than a script. A script means rules or codes. There are today not only dress codes, but also codes of behavior; not only an obsolete code of honor, but above all codes of articulation. In the mass media, in politics, in TV news, we experience daily the subtleties and finesse of the code of articulation, how something is formulated. How something is said is more important than its content. The content is precisely how something is said and with what words. News is scripted, behavior is scripted, the world, especially politics, follows a script, an allusive script, where names are not mentioned, where references are indirect, where what is most important is not explicit, where information is concealed, where much is only assumed. This scripted world corresponds in art to the scripted method. An aesthecis of assumption is supposed to uncover a world of assumption respectively. The essence of allusive media art consists of offering the artist the possibility of rendering the script of the world recognizable through his own script. Ideally, the allusive eye should make the script of the world visible. Ideally, the allusive narrative should counter this script, or create better, truer, profounder narratives about the world. Like no other collection of contemporary media art, the Goetz Collection offers the opportunity for a first encounter with this world of the allusive eye and of the world as script.