

Bert Rebhandl

Staccatoed Ideas

Anna Jermolaewa, Adaptations Of The Movie Apparatus

We are dealing here with a five year plan for eternity: two escalators running parallel to one another in opposite directions. One is going down and there are people on it; the other is going up and carries the camera. There is no safe point from which to observe, just as there is no moment of arrival – neither at a platform for the Metro nor into daylight. Everything is governed by the rules of the loop. Anna Jermolaewa pursues the issue of historical progress linked to the term ‘five year plan’ under Socialist regimes in a video installation where linear movement is conveyed in a loop, which is in principle the escalator itself here. The people who traverse the image are a random crowd, something which first became interesting for cinema during the 1920s when films were made showing average people in typical situations – films about everyday life in a town or community that didn’t aim to focus on the extraordinary anymore but on everyday things, the rhythm of communal life. *The Man With The Movie Camera* (1929) by Dziga Vertov effectively provided a stocktake of revolutionary Soviet society. The installation *Five Year Planis* based on a camera perspective that could have been inspired by Vertov himself as Anna Jermolaewa films using a discrete camera; she moves between the people with an interest in ‘cinematic truth’. Even if they are not explicitly identified as such, these people are still recognisable as the descendants of Soviet citizens from the 1920s. It is the montage that closes in on the differences in epochs between the emergence of Soviet society and its end, towards which Anna Jermolaewa left, moving from Leningrad to the West. It turns out that totality can be more easily shown with a short video sequence than with a documentary of epic proportions. It is its privilege (and ironic) that art can translate something that is extensively represented in the history books or by sociologists, by documentary films too, into a single trope. The end of Socialism is a fact that cannot be stated without producing contradictions. In this sense, the installation *Five Year Planis* a full realisation of what Deleuze described regarding *The Man With The Movie Camera*, i.e.: that the most charming farmer’s wife or the most heart-warming child are transformers that recorded movements and caused changes that no longer stood in any relationship to their own dimensions.¹ This (euphoric) lack of proportion was of course linked to Vertov’s political utopianism. For Anna Jermolaewa it is part of what is (counter-euphorically and laconically) the dispositif of art. All of her video pieces work on a redefinition of proportions, and if she alludes to Eisenstein as well as to Vertov then this presumably has to do with the great value accorded to every single shot in the Soviet revolution film. An ‘empty’ image would have brought the dialectic to a standstill, would have put ‘the staccato montage’ out of action and with it the subject matter itself. The steps of *Odessa in The Battleship Potemkin* (down which a pram rattles) is a metonym for this dialectic. In Anna Jermolaewa’s video these steps become an escalator, an image (of) going nowhere. All of her video sequences consist of images that have been emptied. The toys that form a small band in the exhibition space for *Quartet* are primitive mechanical devices. The toy figures in *Trying To Survive* are in something of a dire predicament, they keep going until they just cannot hold on anymore, trying to remain upright to the last, but despite this suggestion of a narrative thread they are too similar to one another for the viewer to feel concern for the fate of any one figure in particular. The background remain monochrome and un-specific, it is as if the images were keeping themselves open for a maximum number of readings. *The Hendl Triptych*, three shots of an exceptionally evenly rotating chicken grill was explicitly compared to Vertov in a Sunday colour supplement by Harald Szeeman: “Everyday processes, geared to satisfy basic needs, filmed as if by Vertov.”² This observation is somewhat too general to adequately ascribe the true value to the piece. For something that no longer stands in any proportion to its own scale is not only an industrialised agriculture where chickens forfeit their material worth and become abstract, it is also the history of art and images itself – which generates a context with the mere use of the word ‘triptych’ that goes well beyond the limited visual information provided in the image. Presenting proletarian enjoyment as something sacred, elevating forms of advertising while simultaneously rendering their strategies of auraticisation profane. The chickens glittering in their own fat are immaculate but in a disconcerting way. All of this is a form of montage. The staccato is more radical than Eisenstein’s though, to the extent that language (connotations) plays an essential intrinsic role. Here too Jermolaewa tends to be following the same path as Vertov, whose Agitprop anticipated many of the strategies employed in advertising. The plays on the body in *Curvaceous*, *Flower Bed* and *Motherhood* could also function as commercial spots, as paradoxical interventions in line with the pioneering Humanic shoe commercials just as readily as humorous deodorant commercials based on William Wegman’s work. The implicit ‘abolishment’ of the difference in species between human beings and dogs in *Motherhood* takes its motif from the adventures in anthropomorphism staged by Wegman with his dog *Man Ray*.

The vulnerable buildings in the work of Gordon Matta-Clark (exemplified in the film documentation of *Splitting* and *Bingo/Ninths*) are a further motif in the reassessment of comparative dimensions being undertaken by Anna Jermolaewa in her revision of classical positions of

conceptual art. She takes the body as a landscape, just as Matta-Clark saw the architecture in a radical sense as Lebenswelt. Curvaceous suggests a position that lies between Vertov's materialistic optimism and the media-technocracy from whose grasp the artworld has been trying to liberate the documentary image in recent years. This position, though, is immediately thrown into question again. The installation Shooting aims directly at the filmic structure for which, according to a famous piece of work completed in 1974 by Michael Snow, there are Two Sides To Every Story. Here too Jermolaewa takes it one concrete poetical step further in that she takes the word 'shooting' literally, not by using two cameras anymore (as in Haskell Wexler's film Medium Cool, 1969), nor two projectors (like Michael Snow or Stan Douglas) pointed at one another, she confronts two video images with one another. One of these sequences actually shows a shot, the other shows the camera which is hit ('fatally'?). The augmentation of Vertov's Kino-Pravda as a duel, a situation where the camera's eye is itself at risk, is an interesting consequence of the monosyllabic, by no means unequivocal video sequences in which Anna Jermolaewa has experimented to date using the possibilities of a montage of Staccatoed ideas. However the dialectic is not abandoned in this installation. On the contrary, it also only functions because cinema and art have already run through this final constellation so often that the shoot itself belongs in a loop of its own significance, one that cannot be definitively stage-managed. The historical which only becomes visible as traces in all of these pieces, traces that are broken by a diversity of representational processes, returns once again in Shooting in the form of a duellist played by Anna Jermolaewa herself. She looks like an intellectual guerrilla from one of Godard's films, which means she has arrived at that heir of Vertov's who exhaustively resolves the epistemological implications of the latter's work. Here the outline for a new five year plan is emerging, one that Anna Jermolaewa will certainly fulfil with ease.

1 Gilles Deleuze, Das Bewegungs-Bild. Kino 1, Frankfurt/Main 1997, p. 62

2 Harald Szeemann, in: Welt am Sonntag, Nr. 14, 2000, p. 45

in: Anna Jermolaewa Big Sister / The Five Year Plan, Ausst.Kat., Herausg. v. Gerald Matt f.d. Ursula Blickle Stiftung, Wien, 2002.