

Elisabeth Fiedler CHRISTOPH WEBER silent disbelief

The issue of reality, how we perceive and represent it has been a dilemma since the beginning of storytelling and the first myths. Closely interwoven in all this is the phenomenon of utopia and visions of the future.

From cave painting to the Technological Revolution, from the first drawings or scratches made in stone to the emergence of new media, art and philosophy as constants that influence and are at the same time influenced by society have always involved an ever changing examination of this issue.

But it took the onset of photography, which for the longest time was considered the most true-to-life medium, to set in motion a new discourse that addressed and contemplated reality and which was also relevant to painting, drawing, or sculpture.

Film, video, and the use of digital media, which ultimately set the global standards for the capturing and spreading of reality, brought with them strong skepticism about possibilities related to the recording, manipulation, and verifiability of realities.

In the wake of Descartes' philosophy of conscious awareness, the various approaches by Kant, the German Idealists, or the Positivists, it is above all Baudrillard whose influence has survived in philosophy to the present: in his meditations on the disappearance of reality he focuses on the concept of simulation, whereby these simulations no longer refer to any specific thing but only interact with other simulations. In this, he attributes the factors contributing to the erosion of the system to the media, specifically the mass media.

His simulation model uses the order of artificial, drawn worlds, which he classifies as simulacra of the first, second, and third orders. In the first order, the map and territory are still congruent, this simulacrum imitates nature, so to speak, whereas the second order diverges from the image as a man-made device, it produces and reproduces and in this way helps to disintegrate the real. Finally, the third order of simulacrum produces a self-referential system that simultaneously leads to the hyperrealization of the real: "Henceforth, it is reversed: (...) it is the map that precedes the territory, indeed the map engenders the territory (...) It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself." (Jean Baudrillard, *Agony of the Real*, Berlin 1978)

Christoph Weber is concerned with realities and how they are perceived, with exploring concepts, systems of order, and patterns of fixed ideas, and he is also interested in different materials, e.g. wax, concrete, iron, carbon fiber, or cardboard and the significance they carry.

Departing from the medium of photography, he passes through drawing, video, tape recording, architecture, and interventions in public space, developing a new concept of sculpture that reflects the consistency between what is promised and what is delivered in respect to both form and content.

Using a conceptual method of working, he produces room-filling, sensory stimulating results that oscillate between the three-dimensional spatial drawing, stage set, object, and intervention.

The progressive destruction of conditioned concepts as well as of architectural graphics or manipulative film sequences are as much a part of his repertoire as his studies of the given interwoven system of the meanings and functions of a modernist and utopian technology of deception, for example one's trust in the visual perception of fake surface structures or trivial dialogues. Taking these, he exaggerates their monumental impression by transforming them into acoustic sculptures.

In this way he compresses the relation between space, time, image, and sound, shaking up and expanding the

viewer's awareness of orientation as well as his sense of reality by making reference to and extending the *Matrix*-Baudrillard quote "Welcome to the desert of the real."

Using the film *Matrix* (1999) to bring this concept in context with 9/11, Slavoj Žižek also makes reference to virtual reality, within which a reflection of realities in whatever sense hardly seems possible anymore. In allusion to science fiction films Žižek concludes: "This inconceivable thing that happened was already present in the imagination, so that in a sense the USA was confronted with what it was fantasizing about, and that was the big surprise." (Slavoj Žižek: "Welcome to the Desert of the Real," *Die Zeit*, no. 39, 2001)

By making reference to this viewpoint, Christoph Weber confirms his critical approach to the mass media in his work. In his examination of the concepts of the real, hyperreal, and representation he also contemplates the long history of science fiction, a term coined by the publisher Hugo Gernsback in the 1920s. The birth of science fiction goes back to antiquity and overlaps with realities and the ways they might have developed when Plato devised his model of an ideal state around 360 B.C. From there, it continued to develop as it passed through mythological legends and religious prophesies, Thomas More's vision of an ideal island named Utopia – the name is a compound formed by the Greek ou = not and topos = place – or Francis Bacon's novel *The New Atlantis*, published in 1627, which anticipated a number of future technological developments. The invention of the telescope led to writings such as *Somnium* by Johannes Kepler (1634) or Cyrano de Bergerac's *Histoire comique des états et empires de la lune* (1659). With Enlightenment and the new view of the world that recognized man as a creative force came the first recorded publication of a futuristic novel in 1771, *L'an 2440*, by Louis-Sébastien Mercier, and in 1818 Mary Shelley describes the making of the first cyborg in *Frankenstein*; Jules Verne would ultimately become the most well-known writer of the utopian novel in the nineteenth century.

Credit for the first science fiction movie goes to Georges Méliès for *Le voyage dans la lune* (1902); *Metropolis* by Fritz Lang is produced in 1927. In 1922, the Soviet pioneer film director Dziga Vertov saw cinema as a dispositif for "realizing what cannot be realized in life," social manifestos like Le Corbusier's master plan for building the Indian city of Chandigarh in 1948 and political utopias like Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument for the Third International*, 1919, exist side by side with the visions of the future that in the wake of technological developments and space exploration began appearing more frequently in film, architecture, and social restructuring models in the 1960s and 1970s.

After films like *The Truman Show* (1998) or *Matrix* (1999) reality was once again called into question by TV reality shows and the actual parallel world offered by *Second Life* on the World Wide Web. When asked whether real people have perhaps arrived at that age criticized by Jean Baudrillard, a time where nothing is real anymore, everything merely simulated, Peter Weibel answers: "We are further than that. In his simulation fantasies Baudrillard always made reference to pictures and objects, whereas now we are dealing with actions, and that is what the media, particularly media artists, have always wanted but never quite managed to achieve: the simulation of biological and social life." (Peter Weibel: "Das neue Leben vor dem Tod" [The New Life Before Death], in: *Der Spiegel* 8/2007, p. 156)

Departing from a close study of film, architecture, art – particularly developments since the 1960s such as conceptualism, minimalism, contextual art – and art and media theory, Christoph Weber, whose thesis addressed the materiality of dematerialized art, searches in his work for the connection between conceptual analysis and sensory perception in order to challenge realities in the form of conceptual-performative sculptures. Out of a mixture of individual media, an investigation of existing visual materials, and in the constructive contemplation of real patterns of illusion he generates highly complex works.

The exhibition at the Neue Galerie consists of three parts: the point of departure of the first project *The first*

*minutes of October, 2007*, is the 1927 film *October* (a.k.a. Ten Days that Shook the World) by the constructivist director Sergei Eisenstein, a film commissioned by Stalin about the October Revolution of 1917. Weber re-edits the first scene, which shows the statue of Tsar Alexander III being toppled. The statue was erected in Moscow in 1912, where it stood until it was removed in 1921. The film, however, suggests that this scene took place in St. Petersburg, although it was filmed at the actual location in 1927. For the film, the statue had to be reconstructed out of paper-mâché. This particular scene became famous for its powerful camerawork and distinctive editing. Weber analyzes each frame in detail, focuses on the perspectives taken, and methodically transfers the constants to a CAD drawing (Computer Aided Design), carefully making sure he maintains the right distances to the central shooting motif. This is then transferred to iron plates, which are mounted on the wall as a heavy, three-dimensional star-shaped sculpture. Without touching on the content of the film scene, Weber transforms a sequence that progresses through time into the hard material of iron, from which incidentally Tatlin's tower was to be constructed; at the same time it stands for assertiveness, but also for force. Parallel to the intended reception aesthetics, the artist peels away the system to reveal the star inherent within. Emerging from the existing matrix, it makes reference to the communist-constructivist star and thus to the utopia of socialism. Weber erases and empties filmic reality on the one hand and at the same time formulates the symbolic infusion of energy derived from the aesthetics of the image conveyed in the film. Questioning the conditions contextually infuses the documented event at the historically real location with energy and gives it new meaning, questioning as well as confusing the decoding process. The work, as a sculpture that sounds the limits of the wall, not only explores historical conditionalities but inscribes itself in the museum context.

The second work *Untitled, 2007*, is intended as a reflection of the typical sets of science fiction films. If, for example, the stage design for the film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was simple and sparse, the security-promising sets in the 1970s and 1980s - from *Star Trek* to *Star Wars* to *The Fifth Element* - become increasingly more elaborate. Christoph Weber is interested in the function of these sets, which is to establish protection promises in the context of the fears transported in the film. An analysis of the materials actually used, e.g. cardboard or cheap synthetic surfaces, reveals their obvious uselessness. Trust and the willingness to believe in the protection promises, however, does not stop here but is extended to the designing of everyday utility items. The principle used in these films for spaceship interiors, for example, was enhanced with reinforced materials and became popular in suitcase construction.

In this piece, Weber designs a typical 1970s science fiction film set, a transition from one level of reality to another, to one that promises great stability. On the front side, the artist exposes the deceptive functionality of the materials used in early set design with its predominant application of cardboard, while on the back, he fulfills the promise made by the front by using real carbon fiber laminate.

Thus this sculpture resembling a collection of props becomes another realm for contemplating realities, hyperreality, and self-referentiality, whereby one must add that inherent in the shiny aesthetic of the glossy black material there is the appeal of something haptic, something one can actually touch, and this fuels the temptation to believe in its realness.

In his third work *Telefunken und Tesla, 2007*, two tape players from the 1950s, a West and an East German model, of which the latter was actually made in Czechoslovakia, are arranged as props that communicate with each other. Here, Weber is playing with memories, the realities in people's heads, and the private and public way of dealing with the available new media. The sound, the language, the given verbal content in the ostensible form of a conversation is thrown back at itself: Weber takes dialogues from familiar films such as *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *Blade Runner*, *Alien*, East German films like *Eolomea*, *Der schweigende Stern*, *Im Staub der Sterne*, and films from the post-Cold War era such as *iRobot*, *Mission to Mars*, *The Thirteenth Floor*, dialogues that seem monumental and profound, but which in fact are absolutely trivial. Lines like "I hope you're right" or "I'm scared" play in endless loops, the message turns out to be nothing but the medium itself, and the willing listener is left

helpless as he or she tries to make sense of a non-existent plot.

In this way Christoph Weber explores the zones of collective memory and tests the methods by which they were constructed, and at the same time he attempts to sound the realm between reality and medial representation. Materials and the significance they carry seem just as important as the act of questioning the given circumstances or the world that surrounds us; this is what is subtly and ironically expressed by the title of the exhibition silent disbelief.

Info text on the exhibition Christoph Weber silent disbelief, Neue Galerie Graz, Studio, June 1 – July 8, 2007

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