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On: 40yearsvideoart.de

After years out in the cold, the individual, subjective body is back at the interface between text and meaning. The resurgent popularity of phenomenology, especially in recent academic film writing, confirms what almost any lay person could tell you - good art has always had the capacity to bypass the brain and go straight for the gut. Why should this apparent truism have ever fallen out of favour? Perhaps because there is little space for the universal within post-foundational frameworks like phenomenology. There is no constant. The recurrent problem lies with the fact that people react differently given the same stimulus. Except perhaps, when it comes to the drone.

Dylan Carlson of noise band Earth knows. Seldon Hunt's 2006 video documentary *Within the Drone* lays out Carlson's twenty year quest for the perfect feedback texture, transgressing barriers of pitch and volume in a search for the sound of pure affect. Christopher Nolan, director of the latest Batman film *The Dark Knight* knows. His sterile set-pieces are rehabilitated by clever sound design, saturated with barely audible low-frequency hum which serves to inexorably ramp up the tension. And after a week spent at the Adam Art Gallery working through the retrospective tape collection 40yearsvideoart.de, it's clear that the potency of the drone was an open secret amongst the fledgling German video scene.

On a structural level, this is no surprise. A video camera is, after all, not too dissimilar from an electric guitar. Plug it in, turn it on, point it at a monitor and it will oscillate. Crank up the volume and it will feedback, an avenue explored by video pioneer Wolf Vostel's *Sun in Your Head* (1963), a flickering barrage of broken images set to piercing feedback at a frequency sure to have you scrambling to remove your headphones. Volume safely readjusted, embrace the mono-tonal assault and marvel at the Adam Art Gallery's quirky tendency to vibrate sympathetically, shuddering in time with the machinations of the University air conditioning apparatus.

Harsh noise also dominates Otto Piene and Aldo Tambellini's Fluxus inspired *Black Gate Cologne* (1968/69), a shot-for-TV 'happening' which revels in the newly developed ability to mix and superimpose video feeds on the fly. Tweeded beatniks

wrestle interactive sculptures, afloat against pixelated abstractions and solarised flicker. Visual degradation and crude keying artifacts tie disparate elements together, lending the tape a portentous air. The pulsing drone of the soundtrack ebbs and flows, finally building to a pitched crescendo as footage of Robert Kennedy's assassination at The Ambassador Hotel unexpectedly flickers across the screen.

Life-Death (1969) by Katharina Sieverding perfectly prefigures the gothic romance of the *Neue Deutsche Welle*. Swapping her large format still camera for video, Sieverding becomes the subject of her own stretched out studio portraits, slow motion studies remarkable for their vivid colour and dreamy frame rate. Honey drips from a spoon onto Sieverding's thighs in fluid slow motion, accompanied by a remarkably liquid drone soundtrack from electronic noise titans Kraftwerk. For Kraftwerk, the drone is a pure realm of synthetic modulation. Symmetrical sine waves coaxed from modular synths, technology which flooded the music scene at just about the same time as the video camera began changing the topography of European art.

No longer the preserve of dedicated techno-junkie, by 1982 the video camera and the synth had conspired to take over the airwaves. MTV reached Germany in 1982, however the inclusion in the collection of a pair of mocking video clips from Malaria (*Geld*, 1983) and Die tödliche Doris (*Über-Mutti-Live-Konzert-Paris*, 1983) suggest a latent Germanic contempt for the Faustian MTV promise of easy money and global fame. On the other hand, Nam June Paik's optimistic *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* (1984) leverages satellite technology to create a globe spanning interactive performance space, completing the promise of *Black Gate Cologne*. John Cage can finally jam with Allen Ginsberg via orbiting repeaters, but stripped of all the noise and jagged edges, the result seems hollow and contrived. This transmission demands a blast of interstellar static to liven things up.

Pfingsten (1989) by Norbert Meissner channels that much needed stream of noise and energy. New technology, this time in the form of pixel pushing computer power, frees Meissner to churn sounds and images faster than we can comprehend them. Faces are ripped apart into colourful storms, while sounds are sampled, delayed and reinjected into the static lace stream of bits and bytes. It's been said that white noise is the sound of the universe decaying, yet a detuned television is the gateway to sleep

for some. This video could literally induce epilepsy, a reminder that the eye can still challenge the ear for domination of the viscera.

More time, however, and Meissner's digital assault gives way to digital ubiquity. Both Nina Könnemann's *Unrise* (2002) and Jan Verbeek's *On an Wednesday Night in Tokyo* (2004) capture ghosts, compelling fragments of the drone which emerge from the ambient soundscape of the contemporary train station. This is, however, the art of simple observation. Surveillance of the mundane can lead us to insight - we are ourselves drones! But these videos furnish none of the explosive, immediate hit offered by those fine early examples of video art. Parabolic megapixel increases smooth all visual artifact. Desktop software combs and filters, erasing the slightest aural glitch. Something is missing. My body is unmoved.