CURIOSITY AS AN ARTIST'S BRIEF

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In this paper I will discuss some techniques that I use as an artist to instill curiosity. The criteria for my 'discourse' are set out by Stephen Bann in his book "Ways around Modernism" wherein he formulates an "ambitious brief for the present-day artist in respect to curiosity".
I will elaborate on this brief with references to my own work, and show how a media-archeological mindset can be a source of inspiration for an artist.

Fig 1. recording session with Psallentes @ AMUZ, Antwerp, Belgium. © Rudi Knoops
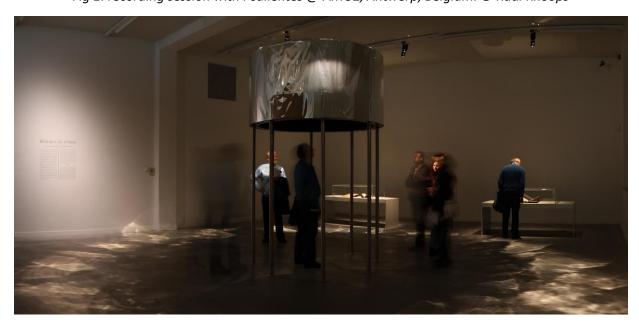

Fig 2. DIORAMATIZED #02, installation view @ M - Museum Leuven, Belgium. © Rudi Knoops

Fig 3. DIORAMATIZED #02, Psallentes? performing Hildegard von Bingen. © Rudi Knoops

The criteria for my 'discourse' are set out by Stephen Bann in his book "Ways around Modernism" wherein he formulates "a specific and ambitious brief for the present-day artist in respect to curiosity." [1]

I will here discuss some techniques that I use as an artist to instill curiosity, and elaborate on the three elements of Bann's brief:

1. that the practice in question should combine the process of experiment with the irreducible appeal of the singular object;
2. that the artist should seek to adopt, and of course to revise, historical precedents reminiscent of earlier conjunctures between art and science;
3. that our attention should be drawn to particular, appropriate types of locale for the work. [1]

The Brief - part 1

In a confrontation of present-day art practices with this brief, Bann refers to curiosity as a historical ricorso: the recurrent practice of retracing some of the older pathways with their ambiguous connection with art, science and technology.

For audiovisual media, this return to curiosity is advocated by different scholars in the field of media-archeology:

This anarchaeology of media is a collection of curiosities. [...] By curiosities, I mean finds from the rich history of seeing, hearing, and combining using technical means: things in which something sparks or glitters – their bioluminiscence – and also points beyond the meaning or function of their immediate context of origin. It is in this sense that I refer to attractions, sensations, events, or phenomena that create a stir and draw our attention. [2]

Harking back to this 'deep time of the media' and uncovering undeveloped possibilities can be an important source of inspiration for contemporary art forms. A media-archeological mindset becomes a fertile context for serendipitous insights, a trigger for "fortuitous finds instead of searching in vain." [2]

The link between curiosity and research methodologies used is obvious: as the fortuitous finds that shock you into the awareness of new possibilities are unquestionably also the most interesting finds, curiosity – in its general meaning of an inquisitive interest – is always part of any research approach. My own practice, characterized by a research through design approach, could thus easily be rephrased as research through curiosity, or research guided by curiosity. And "it is the by-products of experiment that will often prove to be the most important dividend, at least for the artist." [3]

The Brief – part 2

Adopting media-archeology as a methodology has already partly answered the second part of the brief. But I still have to elaborate here on the media-archeology based techniques I employ in my work as a media artist, namely re-injecting analogue elements into the highly digital apparatus that video has become. The technique of anamorphosis is one such form of mediation that I use in my work.

It is however not a pure analogue form of mediation, as I first use algorithms to 'anamorph' digital video materials, and secondly I implement, on the viewer's side, mirrors that function as hardware mediators between the projected visuals and the viewer.

In fact it is a hybrid combination of exploiting the possibilities of the existing digital apparatus, and adding an analogue/hardware form of mediation using mirrors that questions the traditional audience-screen relationship.

ANAMORPHOSIS

Definition of Anamorphosis:

1. A distorted projection or drawing of anything, so made that when viewed from a particular point, or by reflection from a suitable mirror, it appears regular and properly proportioned ; a deformation. [4]

Anamorphosis is an optical curiosity that has a long history of being positioned on the intersection of the fields of science – architecture, optics – the magical and art. As an optical subterfuge anamorphosis is especially interesting because of its interfering with the laws of perspective: while asking the observer to view the distorted shapes from a determined point – thus enforcing a certain perspective upon the observer – anamorphosis at the same time shows the illusion of that perspective.

Exploiting this core characteristic of anamorphosis – the inherent possibility to impose perspectival limitations – touches the core of my PhD research wherein I explore how interventions on a number of parameters of the video apparatus can generate a sense of wonder and curiosity with the observer, in search of a contemporary iteration of the concept 'cinema of attractions.' [5] 'Cinema of attractions', not in its meaning of historical time indication in early cinema theory, but in its meaning of being an ever present undercurrent surging to the surface whenever the fascination for and the explicitation of the medium takes the lead.

Anamorphosis perfectly fits this picture of what a cinema of attractions can be, firstly by exposing the laws of perpective and thus focussing on the medium itself, but in second instance also by its many references to the realms of the phantasmagoria, the uncanny, the magical and the taboo.

Daniel Collins' description of the observation of a single anamorphosis is of interest in this context

To observe anamorphic images, one must be an "eccentric observer", that is, an observer who is not only a bit "eccentric" in the usual sense of the term (i.e. "strange") but an observer who is willing to sacrifice a "centric" vantage point for the possibility of catching a glimpse of the "uncanny" from a position off-axis. [...] An eccentric observer is exactly the observer of the anamorphosis, an observer who literally "stands apart" and is self-aware of the process of seeing. [6]

In contrast to the traditional Albertian one-point perspective representation, that solicits an immobile stance from the spectator, an anamorphosis demands a dynamic act from the observer, an exploration of the 3D space wherein the anamorphosis is projected or displayed, in search of a favorable vantage point from where the warped 2D image coalesces into a coherent form.

One main type of anamorphosis is the group of catoptrical anamorphoses where special mirrors – cylinders, cones, pyramids, prisms – are used to reconstruct the distorted image. [7] In cylindrical anamorphoses a mirror in the form of a cylinder has to be used in order to view a reconstruction of the distorted image from a specific vantage point.

It is exactly the possibilities of cylindrical anamorphosis that I explored for the visual part of the media-installation DIORAMATIZED #02.

DIORAMATIZED #02

DIORAMATIZED #02 is an experimental design exploration in the framework my PhD research. I coined the word DIORAMATIZED because it refers on the one hand to the 19th century phenomenon of dioramas of which it transposes a few parameters into a contemporary interactive media formula: the modulation of light, the use of sound effects, the application of perspective, [8] the use of multiple moving images, or sometimes moving observers. On the other hand the word DIORAMATIZED carries some of the meaning of the word 'dramatized' as the multiple auditive and visual elements are presented in a very theatrical setting.

DECONSTRUCTION AND OPPOSING FORCES

The musical content of DIORAMATIZED #02 is the performance of Gregorian chants from four antiphonaries. For each of the antiphonaria the singers are filmed individually from top to toe against a black background. The video footage is being warped and displayed as separate visual elements. In the centre of each warped image is a cylindrical mirror. Only by looking at the mirror from a specific vantage point you will see the original recording dewarped correctly, the viewing angle being the key to 'decoding' the distorted image.

For the audio part of the installation, also each voice was recorded isolated. Each of the five visual layers has a corresponding sound layer, and the listening 'angle' coincides exactly with the angle of perception for the visual anamorphosis. But there is a difference built in that introduces friction between sound and vision.

From a distance, it is the sound emanating from the cylindrical construction that lures the observer to approach the installation. Upon discovery that next to sound, there are also images on display inside the contraption, the exploration of the manipulated layers of sound and vision can start.

The best position for perception of the sound layers is exactly in the centre of the installation, where the different sound layers merge into a 'surround' sound. The visual part of the installation works slightly different. Focusing on just one of the anamorphoses, it is perfectly possible to find a correct vantage point. Through the use of multiple anamorphoses however, and the specific circular setup, there is no ideal position to get a combined visual overview, and the search for good visual perspectives drives you away from the centre of the installation.

There is, in addition, the discrepancy between the size of the warped projections and the size of the dewarped reflections in the cylindrical mirrors. The warped projections function as points of attraction because of their sheer size and luminosity. When exploring the installation however, the dewarped cylindrical reflections may take over as main points of interest. As observer – an active viewer/listener – you make your own choice between these opposing forces of sound and vision.

The Brief – Part 3

The media-installation DIORAMATIZED #02 is an integral part of the exhibition 'Divine Sounds – Seven Centuries of Gregorian Chant Manuscripts in Flanders' at M – Museum Leuven from september 8 till november 27, 2011.

The centre of the exhibition is not only these manuscripts, but the audible music itself. Visitors can hear the music they are looking at, and listen to diffences in style, form and performance practice in the installation DIORAMATIZED #02 by multimedia artist Rudi Knoops. Three top ensembles – Cappella Pratensis, Psallentes and Psallentes♀ – breathe new life into four antiphonaries from the eleventh, twelfth, seventeenth [...] and eighteenth centuries. The integration of an installation with historical heritage raises that heritage to a new level: that of contemporary art. It refreshes our collective memory and brings it up to date; the ancient traditional chants not only get a fresh coat of paint, but become an essential element of a new artwork. [9]

As visual concept for integrating the installation into the white exhibition space, I covered the top part of the installation in a mirroring sheet, and the reflecting light of spots draws a full circle around the installation, in balance with the light level allowed for the precious manuscripts on display. At the same time keeping the centre of the installation as dark as possible to guarantee the best visual quality of the images projected inside the contraption.

Second element of this lighting concept is an inverse application of anamorphosis, now utilizing pure light. On the inside of DIORAMATIZED #02 I use warped video projections and from specific vantage points you can see the video images reconstructed in the mirrored reflections. On the outside of DIORAMATIZED #02 however, I use lights that are reflected by the mirroring hull, throwing warped reflections on the floor that merge into one shimmering nimbus of light.

Third and final function of having this aura of light around the installation, is a reference to light being filtered through the stained-glass windows in a Gothic cathedral – which still is the ideal location for performing Gregorian chant.

Thus recreating part of the atmosphere of an "appropriate type [...] of locale for the work" comes close to an answer to the 3rd part of the brief of Stephen Bann.

Challenging the traditional audience-screen configuration

Through the use of anamorphosis, and especially through the multiple use of anamorphosis, I challenge the traditional audience-screen configuration. Instead of a viewer immobilized in an Albertian tradition of static one-point perspective representation, the observer becomes an active participant, who's full sensorium of vision, hearing, feeling, walking ... is called upon.

In this dynamic act of exploring the multiple images and sounds on offer in the audiovisual installation, the peripathetic observer becomes an active participant in the articulation of the projected – or (re-)presented – objects, and constructs his own perspective on the music performed.

This concept of the construction of vision through the dynamic act of the observer, comes close to an embodied phenomenological concept of perception. Mark Hansen positions the 'affective body' right in the centre of the perceptive act. In his neo-Bergsonian phenomenological concept of perception as an act of subtraction 'affectivity' is the sum of the "bodily modalities of tactility, proprioception, memory and duration." [10]

In DIORAMATIZED #02 it is the friction between sound and image that stimulates curiosity. Curiosity as the driving force, the trigger for bodily activity, the formative power in a dynamic and personal sensory experience.

As observer you engage with the installation, aware that what you see and hear is the result of a specific media configuration, but at the same time you are at risk to lose yourself in a fascination for the mirrored world created in this Wunderkammer of sorts.

In contrast to Collins' description of the 'eccentric observer' of one single anamorphosis, the viewer/listener explores the innards of DIORAMATIZED #02 – with its display of multiple anamorphoses – from within the installation. Instead of being an 'eccentric observer' in the literal sense, the viewer/listener immerses himself in a multi-perspective experience that challenges his curiosity and invites to explore these multiple perspectives.

References and Notes:

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10. *Mark B. N. Hansen, New Philosophy for New Media (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 101.*