Reset the Apparatus!
Retrograde Technicity in Artistic Photographic and Cinematic Practices

Since the early 1990s, the usage of "old" media and technologies has figured prominently in contemporary art. What is particularly striking in this turn to the so-called outmoded is that artists not only rely on "obsolete" media, but also use these media in non-normative ways. Retrograde technicity encompasses camera-less techniques such as photograms, luminograms, chemigrams or bacteriograms in varying arrangements as well as works based on the *camera obscura* or other pre-photographic tools, and works that attest to a modification of the apparatus. The term "retrograde technicity" is situated within the broader field of "obsolescence", but clearly engages with the historicity of technological forms. In a more general perspective, retrograde technicity is characterized by the replacement of technical devices of a "higher" order by technical devices of a "lower" order, and it can take a variety of forms. The notion of "technology" itself applies to both the use of hardware and to basic bodily techniques.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the phenomenon of retrograde technicity today is prominent not only in art, but also in popular culture. Hence, it is a broad social phenomenon that is having a considerable impact on the ways we interact with audio-visual media.

Key aspects of the project in terms of *artistic research*

Our project considers the artist as both practitioner and researcher and includes collaborative and participatory approaches. It positions itself on the "evocative" pole of creative research, meaning that the resulting artefacts produce affect and resonance through evocation (Hamilton/Jaaniste 2014). "Evocative creative research" (often aligned with art practice), unlike "effective creative research" (mainly associated with design practice), is practice-led rather than problem-based. We believe that art involves an interplay between the "matter" of various bodies – the material bodies of artists and theorists, the matter of the medium, the technologies of production (Bolt 2013). None of these bodies is passive, but should be regarded as active co-producers of the research.

Research context

The return to "obsolete" techniques, media and their underlying dispositives is not a rejection of the contemporary or a nostalgic turn to the past, but instead fulfills a critical function and therefore requires to be fundamentally reevaluated. As this recourse to "older" media and technologies already existed in pre-digital times, the "reaction" argument is not a suitable explanation of the peculiarities of retrograde practices. The inclusion of historical examples should help us to think of retrograde technicity *productively* instead of reactively.

By replacing an elaborate series of optical, chemical and mechanical processes with "simpler" means, whether they are handmade or achieved by a modification of existing hardware, retrograde cinematic and photographic practices no longer adhere to the medium as an actual apparatus (its technological implementation as we know it), but rather as a *concept* or an *idea*. Such an engagement with the conceptual dimension of the art work is exemplified, for instance, by the cameraless, projectorless, filmless films of the American Structural Film (Walley 2003), as well as by cinematic works realized through older, non-cinematic media, such as drawing, writing, or performance – "cinema by other means" (Levi 2010 and 2012). A conceptual perspective on retrograde technicity not only resists teleological and essentialist interpretations of cinema's and photography's technology, but also allows for

a fuller understanding of its critical potential. The only way to maintain the utopian potential originally contained in any new medium before it becomes standardized, commoditized, and subjected to utilitarian purposes, is to repeatedly evoke and enact the discrepancy between the idea and its technological implementation (Levi 2010). Though the obvious reference is conceptual art, we are not interested in photography's and cinema's de-materialization, but rather in their *re*-materialization, aptly termed a "conceptual-materialist praxis". Therefore, instead of using the terms photography and film, we will use the terms *photographic* and *cinematic*.

The artistic works that are relevant for us are not realized via the conventional means of photography or film, but rather thwart their normative use by deliberately undercutting the technical standards of these media. At least three strategies can be distinguished:

(1) The deliberate *underuse* of the "software", including its *misuse* and/or modification (concerning all processes related to the film stock, the photographic material or their replacements).

(2) The deliberate *underuse* of the "hardware" (camera, projector or their replacements).

(3) Making photography and film *by other* – (older), non-photographic and/or non-cinematic – *means*.

The critical potential of retrograde technicity

There are several points where the critical value of retrograde technicity as a site of resistance becomes apparent:

– Artistic practices based on retrograde technicity demonstrate that photography and film are not reducible to their physical properties and thus can challenge the concepts of a medium and its specificity.

– Retrograde technicity offers a way of (re-)interrogating the very idea of the dispositive of production and its spatial arrangement. Inherent to the notion of the dispositive is the idea of a certain "appropriate" distance between the photographer/filmmaker, the "profilmic" event, and the apparatus. Retrograde practices explore the limits of this rule. Whether the artist's/user's body is "too close" to the medium or the material, or "too distant" because it is linked to it in conceptual terms, they reject the spatial arrangement provided by the dispositive (Jutz 2011).

– By making media translation their basis, retrograde practices in art and popular culture remind us that there is no single direction and logic in which this transfer can proceed, and thus they represent a critical tool with regard to the logic of consumer society and its imperative to "update".

– Since all technical media today are digitizable, the computer takes on the role of a universal or convergence device. However, talking about a universal medium is far from unproblematic.

– Photography and film are mediums that are not confined to the making of fine art, but are produced industrially. Consequently, these art forms became dependent on industrial decisions. Retrograde art practices show how media convergence, with its tendency to merge all media into one, leads to a reduction of choices and hence to an impoverishment of artistic practices.

Research questions

The two central questions of this project are: How can artistic photographic and cinematic practices, based on retrograde technicity, create new knowledge? How can the productive nature of artistic research be mapped? The aim of these questions is to invite the participants not only to reflect how their art also constitutes research, but also to articulate what new knowledge and innovation emerges through this research. Hence, the focus has to be shifted

from the mere production of artworks to the generative and productive nature of research. This move *beyond production to productivity* calls for an appropriate methodology to demonstrate the effects of these actions. In order to map the productive nature of artistic research, its interplays and effects, we will use a blog as part of our website. The participating artists are asked to contextualize their own research and to identify the innovations and new knowledge that has emerged through it, but also to give feedback to the other researchers' entries. On the one hand, the blog represents an important tool to collect, reflect, document and publish the ongoing research process; on the other, it will be vital for the communication and interaction between the co-researchers (artists and academics), generating collaborative projects and in-person meetings that may not be predetermined at the outset. Besides the blog, a database, two workshops, an international conference, a final presentation of the research process and its resulting artefacts, and a compilation of printed materials demonstrating the work in progress will be provided.

Aims

As already mentioned, our project regards itself as evocative practice research; its research process is practice-led rather than problem-based, which means that the researchers' practice remains fundamental to it. Since the major aim is to produce new knowledge in the fields of artistic research and retrograde technicity, the resulting artefacts will be framed within a research statement, demonstrating the methodologies used to realize them and the new knowledge produced. However, as far as evocative practice research is concerned, we must concede that knowledge is not only rational and empirical but can be philosophical, poetic and experiential too (Hamilton/Jaaniste 2014). Hence this kind of knowledge can be experienced through artefacts which produce affect through evocation and resonance. Further contributions to knowledge are related to the topic of retrograde technicity. This might be insights into the photographic and the cinematic, the contingent nature of their apparatuses, new retrograde methodologies of production or new types of exhibition/performance practices. By expanding the research beyond the artistic and academic contexts into the field of popular culture, the project will strengthen its innovative aspects.

Participants

• Team

– Edgar Lissel (project leader), born in Northeim, Germany; lives in Vienna (http://www.edgarlissel.de/).
Edgar Lissel is a visual artist who has been working in the field of the photographic with a conceptualist-materialist focus. His interdisciplinary artistic projects include collaborations with microbiologists, archeologists and biomolecular engineers. By exploring new methods of production such as cameraless, filmless photography, his artistic work is exemplary for both art-based research and retrograde technicity.
– Nina Jukić, born in Zagreb, Croatia; lives in Vienna.
Nina Jukić holds an MA in musicology and an MA in art history and English. In her doctoral thesis, *Obsolete Technology and Media in Contemporary Popular Culture*, she deals with examples of retrograde technicity in music, photography and film.
– Gabriele Jutz, born in Salzburg, Austria; lives in Vienna.
Gabriele Jutz is Professor of Media Studies at the Department of Media Theory, University of Applied Arts Vienna. Her book *Cinéma Brut. Eine alternative Genealogie der Filmavantgarde* (Springer, 2010) focuses on cameraless

techniques in experimental cinema.

• International partner

– Hubertus von Amelunxen, born in Bad Hindelang, Germany; lives in Berlin and Switzerland
(http://www.egs.edu/faculty/hubertus-von-amelunxen/biography/).
Hubertus von Amelunxen is an internationally renowned philosopher and theoretician of photography and fine arts and curator. He is the President of the European Graduate School (EGS) where he also teaches Media Philosophy and Cultural Studies. Since 2003, he has been a member of the Akademie der Künste in Berlin.

• National partner

– Austrian Film Museum (https://www.filmmuseum.at/en).
The Museum has a film collection of approximately 31.000 works, a major library, a rich collection of film stills and historical film technology, nitrate film frames from the 1910s and other works that support the project's aims. The Museum has been a partner in a wide variety of artistic and research projects. As a collaborative partner, the Austrian Film Museum can organize screenings at its venue, support research activities through its collections, and provide access to materials that can serve as a source for new artworks.

• Participating artists

– Gustav Deutsch, born in Vienna, Austria; lives in Vienna (http://gustavdeutsch.net/).
Gustav Deutsch is one of the leading international avant-garde filmmakers working with found footage. His works are shown in cinemas, as well as galleries. His recent film and exhibition project *Shirley – Visions of Reality*, which three-dimensionally reconstructs and narrates thirteen paintings by Edward Hopper, was premiered at the Berlinale in 2013.

– David Gatten, born in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA (http://davidgattenfilm.co).
Over the last 19 years, David Gatten has explored the borders of film as a medium. His 16mm films often employ cameraless techniques, combined with close-up cinematography and optical printing processes. His body of work illuminates a wide array of historical, conceptual and material concerns.

– Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder, live and work in New York, USA
(http://www.robischongallery.com/html/exhibinfo.asp?exnum=3165).
Collaborators since 2000, Gibson and Recoder unite the traditions of experimental film and expanded cinema. Their large body of work explores the interstice between hands-on projection performance and the incorporation of moving images into the museum and art gallery. Their film-based sculpture and installation works embrace film as an experience of light, and celluloid as a material itself.

– Rosângela Rennó, born in Belo Horizonte, Brazil; lives and works in Rio de Janeiro (http://www.rosangelarenno.com.br/).

Rosângela Rennó has a background in Architecture and Fine Arts, with an emphasis on analog photography. She started working with found photography in the late 1980s. Her projects (installations and photobooks, among others) have a high level of socio-political focus. They deal with obsolete photographic materials (such as glass negatives), historical apparatuses (such as magic lanterns) and appropriated photographs found in archives.

– Hanna Schimek, lives and works in Vienna, Austria (http://www.hannaschimek.at/).

Hanna Schimek is a multimedia artist and curator. Her work includes painting, photography, installation, artists' books, and artistic research in visual media and film. In her work she focuses on the artistic-scientific analysis of film by means of drawing and sketches. She was the key scenic artist and painter of the *tableaux vivants* based on Edward Hopper for the motion picture *Shirley – Visions of Reality* (Gustav Deutsch, 2012).

– Gebhard Sengmüller, lives and works in Vienna, Austria (http://www.gebseng.com).

Gebhard Sengmüller works in the field of media technology. Since 1992, he has been developing projects and installations focusing on a "fictive media archeology," which attempts to make up for "forgotten" inventions (i.e. *Vinyl Video*, *Parallel Image*, *Slide Movie*). His works are especially interesting for this project from the point of view of bridging art, technological innovation and popular culture.

• External experts

– Ruth Horak is an art historian (MA), lecturer and curator specializing in historical and contemporary forms of experimental photography.

– Jan Kaila, Doctor of Fine Arts, artist, Head of Doctoral Program and Professor in Artistic Research at the Academy of Fine Arts in Helsinki (2003–2014). Since 2014 he is Advisor of Artistic Research at the Swedish Research Council.

– Kim Knowles, PhD in film studies, Lecturer in film studies at Aberystwyth University (Great Britain). Her current research centers on contemporary experimental film aesthetics, particularly in relation to photochemical practice in the digital age.

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Walley, Jonathan. 2003. "The Material of Film and the Idea of Cinema: Contrasting Practices in Sixties and Seventies Avant-Garde Film." *October* 103: 15-30.

Selected art works by participating artists

– Gustav Deutsch. *Film ist.* (1998-2009)

http://gustavdeutsch.net/index.php/de/filme-a-videos.html

– Sandra Gibson and Luis Recoder. *Light Spill* (2012)

http://www.robischongallery.com/html/Detail.asp?WorkInvNum=5764&artistname= GIBSON + RECODER*&whatpage=artist

– David Gatten. *What the Water Said* (1997–2007)

http://davidgattenfilm.com/davidgattenfilmdotcom.pdf

– Edgar Lissel. *Lightmemory – Mnemosyne I+II* (2003-2007)

http://www.edgarlissel.de/data/start_tabelle_pro_fr.html

– Rosângela Rennó. *Série Lanterna Mágica* (2012)

http://www.rosangelarenno.com.br/obras/view/55/1

– Gebhard Sengmüller. *Slide Movie* (2006)

http://www.gebseng.com/04_slidemovie/

– Hanna Schimek. Illusionary paintings for *Shirley – Visions of Reality* (Gustav Deutsch 2012).

http://www.hannaschimek.at/paintings/shirley-visions-of-reality/