

POSTMASTERS

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Untitled

Keith Sanborn

Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.

—Walter Benjamin, *The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility*

Excursus

Wolfgang Staehle's installation, 2001, ran at Postmaster's Gallery in New York City from September 4 to October 11; by means of the events of September 11, it seemed to pass from interesting to extraordinary.

Staehle placed under the surveillance of the unflinching eye of two digital cameras, the contours of lower Manhattan. At the same time he trained another camera on the Berlin TV tower, and another on the old Benedictine fortified monastery of Comburg opposite the town of Schwäbisch Hall in the German state of Baden-Württemberg. From each of the three locations, images streamed in via the internet every few seconds to be projected onto the wall of Postmasters Gallery in Chelsea. The two images of lower Manhattan were projected side by side, creating a composite panoramic view. The Berlin TV tower was seen on an adjoining wall of the same room as the view of lower Manhattan in a vertical, portrait orientation as the camera and the image it produced were rotated clockwise 90 degrees to accommodate the verticality of the structure. The image of Comburg was projected in an adjoining room in conventional "landscape" orientation. Staehle calls the entire installation "2001." The transmission of the view of lower Manhattan, originally called "To the People of the City of New York" is now called "Untitled." The transmission of the image of the Berlin TV tower is called "Fernsehturm" [i.e. TV tower]. And the transmission of the image of Comburg, simply "Comburg."

Soundlessly, the images streamed in all month, with a few interruptions, due to breakdowns in their transmission through the net, power outages and the like. After the first several days, the images began to be saved and stamped with sequential time and date codes, so that a slow scan movie of the best part of the month could theoretically be recreated by page-flipping the jpeg's of each moment captured.

When two hijacked commercial jetliners were flown directly into the World Trade Towers, bringing about the destruction of this familiar element of our psychogeography, the transmission and recording system Staehle had created, became a mute witness to one of the most singular events in American history and, perhaps, in the history of the world.

Before I pass on to further analysis of this installation, I must retrace my steps briefly and pass beyond the point where I began, in order to note one deliberate omission in my description.

In the small anteroom at Postmaster's, between the outside door and the main gallery, there is a small LCD screen, permanently installed by the gallery and often ignored by gallery clientele. Staehle used this screen as the conduit for a sequence of texts including the title of the installation, thanks to his collaborators, and the following epigraph and attribution, in German and in English translation:

Wenn die hinterste Ecke des Erdballs technisch erobert und wirtschaftlich ausbeutbar geworden ist, wenn jedes beliebige Vorkommnis an jedem beliebigen Ort zu jeder beliebigen Zeit beliebig schnell zugänglich geworden ist... wenn Zeit nur noch Schnelligkeit, Augenblicklichkeit und Gleichzeitigkeit ist und die Zeit als Geschichte aus allem Dasein aller Völker geschwunden ist, wenn der Boxer als der große Mann eines Volkes gilt, wenn die

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Millionenzahl von Massenversammlungen ein Triumph sind - dann, ja dann greift immer noch wie ein Gespenst über all diesen Spuk hinweg die Frage: wozu? - wohin? - und was dann?

— Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, 1935

At a time when the farthestmost corner of the globe has been conquered by technology and opened to economic exploitation; when any incident whatever, regardless of where or when it occurs, can be communicated to the rest of the world at any desired speed... when time has ceased to be anything other than velocity, instantaneity, and simultaneity, and time as history has vanished from the lives of all peoples; when a boxer is regarded as a nation's great man; when mass meetings attended by millions are looked on as a triumph - then, yes then, through all this turmoil, a question still haunts us like a specter: What for? - Whither? - And what then?

— Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 1935

By analogy then, if we read this preface carefully, when we enter the gallery space, we are about to enter into the realm of Metaphysics. We should also be returning to a moment before the furious destruction of German Fascism reached its pitch and to a moment one year before the appearance of Benjamin's celebrated essay: "Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischer Reproduzierbarkeit" ["The Artwork in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility"]. But one never really returns to a previous moment in history. During the month of the exhibition's run, we were to have witnessed by means of the critical technological apparatus Staehle set before us, the sharply outlined appearance of indexical mutations in the relationship between culture and technology. And the questions we will pose to ourselves might easily take the same form: What for? Whither? And what then? though their meaning was to have changed utterly. For by the end of the exhibition, a new world war will have begun, its beginnings traced in fleeting grids on the reflective surfaces of the gallery walls.

How big is it?

One of the most basic, subtle and yet important aspect of this work is the issue of scale. And by that, I mean not only the physical size of this constellation of sharply projected video images. In this case it is a matter of what we might call technological scale. In a work called *Empire* which first appeared in 1993, Staehle initiated the series of investigations into technological scale of which 2001 is the latest installment. That work can give us perspective on the latter work, which is the subject of this series of observations and reflections.

Empire offers its viewers an continuous view of the Empire State Building. The work is in part a product of architectural chance: the 26th Street offices of The Thing, an internet project and ISP Staehle founded ten years ago, happen to have an oblique view of this New York icon. But there is also a conscious and direct address of Warhol's eight-hour epic and unflinching film portrait of what was then New York's most famous landmark, a handy metonymy for the city of New York.

Conventional artists' wisdom has it that in challenging accepted canons, in forcing a rereading of art history, an oblique hit is best, otherwise one's work may be seen as merely derivative. Sherrie Levine's photographic appropriations are usually seen as a kind of post-modern endgame, offering a reading of authorship so directly against the grain, it seems to offer no sequel. But in Staehle's *Empire*, in its mode of direct address, we have neither pastiche, nor homage, nor a deliberate turn into a cultural cul-de sac. In the direct confrontation of the two works, we are confronting the recognition of a subtle mutation in the relationship between technology and culture.

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Warhol's film, though it is rarely projected, and even more seldom seen in its entirety, has become iconic in several aspects. Andy's own one-liner on the film is usually reported as: "The Empire State Building is a star." And what is extrapolated from this, is that Warhol saw himself as having created a moving picture *portrait* of something utterly static—perhaps the offscreen perpetual erection implied but never seen in *Blowjob*. That he had personally used the camera's divine power to give eternal popular and arthistorical life to an inanimate object, that is, to bestow an aura in Benjamin's sense. And indeed Warhol understood the ritual transformations of commodity fetishism as no other artist of the century, with the possible exception of Guy Debord.

But how does Warhol work his magic? It is not only by the simple affixing of his celebrity signature to a technologically reproduced image of a pre-existing architectural icon, but by challenging it, or rather, his audience to a staring contest. Warhol shot around six silent hours of 16mm film, continuous—except for the intervals required for quick changes of the oversized magazines of film he used for the project. He would then project the film at 18 frames a second to increase the intensity of its flicker and to draw out the overall duration of the footage to more than eight hours.

The experience of this work goes considerably beyond the twin poles of boredom and astonishment; after only a few minutes, each minor variation in the grain of the film and in the passage of light over the structure become greatly amplified, unless the viewer shuts down entirely. The sun goes down and spotlights are turned on the exterior of the building, but before long even those go out. After sitting in darkness for an eternity in the tens of minutes with the murky outline of the building which was previously burnt into our consciousness, the impact of the fleeting image of the filmmaker as he leaves the room where the camera is located after changing magazines, reflected in the window glass, comes as an hallucinatory sensory overload. Thereafter we return to an expanse of darkness comparable only to Debord's *Hurléments en faveur de Sade*.

Since so few ever sit through Warhol's infamous work to receive its darker secrets, it resides in popular film history as a singular act of perversity. It is sometimes even argued that one doesn't need to see it, in order to understand its film historical significance, at least as a received idea. But whether understood phenomenologically or ideologically, it is certainly a singular achievement in the experience of duration in the cinema. Staehle's *Empire* works differently, but actually manages, using both the architectural icon and the film historical one, to exceed Warhol in an evocation of scale, reflecting a new historical paradigm in the reception and digital transmission of information.

Staehle's *Empire* differs in several important ways from Warhol's.

First, Staehle's Empire State Building is seen vertically, occupying the frame in true portrait mode. Second, it is continuously transmitted, with a handy little date stamp along the edge, to whatever space in which the work is "exhibited." Third, as a consequence of this continual transmission, no more than two frames of it need ever be recorded in order for it to "exist." A video camera feeds a video capture board at 30 frames a second. Every few seconds the board captures an image and encodes it in jpeg format. This image, in turn, is routed through a server across the room, then across the net to a client computer in the gallery. The computer in the gallery receives the data packets, assembles them into a file on disk, decodes the file to an image and sends it to a display board which in turn sends it out to a display. At the display, this matrix of values is refreshed every few hundredths of a second and replaced by a succeeding image in progressive scan every few seconds. If Warhol evokes a subtle slow motion within the technological and ideological framework of "real-time," then Staehle uses the sample and hold time shifting strategy of nettime. It is at once "real time" and slow-motion, a series of freeze frames in which each gives way gently to the next, giving us a metaphor for data transmission in its very method of display. Fourth, Staehle's *Empire* will likely disappear, except as documentation, in 2005, when the lease is up on the offices of The Thing, a fitting and ironic index to the lifespan of the organization. And finally, Warhol's work is projected at a constant speed of 18 frames a second; Staehle's *Empire* is not, for net congestion varies

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the speed of transmission and display. If one image takes longer to arrive at its destination, the image already on screen will remain displayed for a longer time, before it gives way to its tardy successor. This in turn will mean, a larger interval between the time the image is next sampled from the videostream and transmitted over the net.

Each of these *Empires* exists in a distinct cultural and technological realm. Each, whether by design or by coincidence, in its title, refers beyond itself not only to the empire of signs, but to the historical, economic and military projection of power.

The same technological processes and procedures at work in Staehle's *Empire* form the basis of his 2001. In fact, the *Fernsehturm* component of 2001 with its vertical format is a kind of morph of Empire. Both architectural structures are packed with radio and TV transmitters, though the one in Berlin is specialized for that use. And both have remained icons of their cities since their initial construction. The Fernsehturm, which was built as an East Block Icon and electronic panopticon for spying on both East and West Berlin, has become, since the fall of the wall, the most commonly reproduced image of the city. In a queasy parallel, the Empire State Building has regained some of its practical function as a TV transmission center and some of its iconic status in New York since the destruction of the World Trade Towers. Though the World Trade Towers in their absence, even more than as wreckage, have become a kind of spectral iconic presence through their destruction. Staehle's *Untitled*, his two-screen panoramic view of lower Manhattan, which forms one component of 2001, has become a record of that vanishing.

We might compare Staehle's strategy with the Situationist strategy of *détournement*: the use of pre-existing materials in a higher construction of a milieu. Only here, Staehle has detoured not only an image, an icon, and an art-historical construct, but the delivery system of the internet. His critique is less direct than the succinct and aggressive formulations of the Situationists; his critical contribution is to place the entire system of the recording, transmission and reception of electronic images under an implicit and open scrutiny, by providing an alternative within the interstices of the system. We may scrutinize the spectacular presentation of the events of 9/11 in which we have been immersed, by comparing them with the reflective alternative Staehle has provided. This alternative shows us something of the events, but without the moronic ideological commentaries and without the numbingly complex collages of explosions and terror. It is the presentation of a separate and personal view of the events which constitutes the political dimension of the work. But this is not a simple matter of being in the right place at the right time, as say, in the case of Abraham Zapruder being in Dealy Plaza in Dallas on the 22nd of November in 1963 with his 8mm movie camera in his hand. Though there is an extraordinary historical and aesthetic dimension to Zapruder's approach and his subject, it is distinct from that which Staehle has presented. Staehle's transmission system happened to record the events automatically, because he knew to cast his net wide; he knew enough to recognize his position as a fully enfranchised citizen of the republic of surveillance.

At the outset of this essay, I noted that Staehle's work *seemed* to pass from interesting to extraordinary because of the events of 9/11. And as a record of the disappearance of the World Trade Towers, they are more than just an important historical document. What I meant by that somewhat cryptic notation was that Staehle's work was already extraordinary; the events of 9/11 only made it possible for a great many more people to realize it. It is, as I have stated, a question of scale, but it's importance derives as well from a deft and economical use of existing technology and finally of an intellectual ambition unusual in art—let alone art involving the internet—the way it is currently made.

How slow is it?

One of the concerns of the 20th century from the Futurists to Virillio to Bill Gates has been speed. Bandwidth, bandwidth, bandwidth. Many of us have owned more modems than automobiles in our lifetimes. But as Hollis Frampton has noted, it is at the point of the withering away of the state of the art, at the point of technological

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obsolescence that art becomes possible. As a purely technological feat, Staehle's installation is noteworthy but not really cutting edge. After all, with fast enough data lines, or by using a smaller image size, or even a simple but costly satellite link, he could have used real-time streaming video had he wished. But from what might be seen as a logistical point of view, but is really a social aspect, its project becomes more interesting.

The connection to Comburg, for example, derives not only from the symbolism of the historical stage of data storage and transmission represented by such an early medieval fortified monastery, but from Staehle's biography. He grew up nearby and a recent show he agreed to do at the local *Kunstverein* in Schwäbisch Hall, became a standing offer of future assistance from the local telephone and internet company. Similar stories might be told about his connections to Berlin, to Williamsburg where the views of lower Manhattan originated, and to Postmaster's gallery a few blocks from his office in Chelsea. But the point is that the network of connections that made the show feasible on an incredibly limited budget were as much social as technological. There is a particular synergy between the technological and social connections mediated by the internet.

In a purely technological sense, much of the equipment involved could only be classed as outmoded. At a time when an average PC runs at over a gigahertz, the two salvaged machines driving the capture and transmission of standard resolution video images of Lower Manhattan, were chugging along at a stately 133 MHz each. A speed disadvantage of an order of magnitude. But a cost savings which made the show possible, by allowing Staehle to spend just a bit more money on the two medium quality consumer digital video cameras for this feed. Such a feat would barely get a nod from a hardcore geek or a broadcast engineer, because its cultural significance remains invisible to the brute force approach: "Dude, it's only 15bit color and it's not even a frame every 5 seconds." But from the point of view of one who works in the media arts there can only be an appreciation of what an incredible amount of time it could take to tweak such an arrangement into *elegant* functionality. It's not broadcast quality, strictly speaking, but it looks better than good. Staehle manages to reach that zone where virtue and necessity are happily joined under the sign of electronic bricolage; he is a master of it: of bringing together the possible and the desirable. Putting into service the wisdom of his experience, he arrives at elegant and simultaneous solutions to complex problems in technological, artistic, and historical domains, throwing light on the subtle patterns of their interactions.

Precisely because of the technological parameters within which Staehle chooses to work are we able to experience and reflect upon the state of world culture and its relationship to technology. If the images displayed in the gallery for 2001 were merely real time, there would be no space for reflection. This installation offers us a something other than an evening's "video art," a typical "video installation" or a typical evening's television viewing, though it might reasonably be called "video art" or "a video installation" and is certainly a form of what we might call "personal television." The latter term, I fear, might too easily be confused with the collections of products of formal or social canons which might be aired on PBS or Canal Plus, or Channel 4 in Britain. No, Staehle's work encompasses both his own production and distribution system within the work itself. It is that which allows it to stand on its own and it is precisely that stance outside of all accepted categories, yet prismatically reflecting them back their own images which makes this work extraordinary.

An afterward

Before we leave Heidegger's *Metaphysics*, we should restore some context to this essay and to Staehle's evocation of it: There were not one but two ellipses made in the paragraph cited as the epigraph to 2001. The first is noted by the familiar What has been removed, is extraordinary:

when you can simultaneously "experience" an assassination attempt against a king in France and a symphony concert in Tokyo.

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The re-inclusion of this part of the citation brings even greater relevance to Heidegger's reflections, as we have surely "experienced" something in Staehle's piece on the order of an assassination attempt against a king. The second and unnoted ellipsis of the beginning of the paragraph is more problematic:

"This Europe, in its unholy blindness always on the point of cutting its own throat, lies today in the great pincers between Russia on the one side and America on the other. Russia and America, seen metaphysically, are both the same: the same hopeless frenzy of unchained technology and of the rootless organization of the average man."

At this point in his life, Heidegger saw the Nazi party as the answer to this rootlessness in the land of a philosophical people; he never saw fit in later editions of the work to criticize or rethink this position.

If we return to the final paragraph of Benjamin's essay, we will find the epigraph to this essay sandwiched between two more topical political observations:

"*Fiat ars—pereat mundus,*" says Fascism, and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of "*l'art pour l'art.*" Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.

If communism is no longer a viable option and Heidegger's quest for a path for his philosophical people has discredited itself, we would do well to reflect a bit upon the differences between the distribution system of the spectacular images of catastrophe we have recently seen in the media, and the alternatives Wolfgang Staehle has offered us in *2001*. As we enter a new era of global conflict, we would do well, to reflect, in the space provided, on the meanings of our use of digital technology.

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