

Images of Space / Image Spaces

by Anja Osswald

The category of space is inextricably linked to the directedness of our gaze. The gaze constructs and reconstructs space as well as distance. Therefore, every experience of space also implies a physical sensation. The axioms of the vertical and the horizontal, rooted in the horizon and humankind's ability to walk upright, are basic factors of quantifying space, of measuring depth and width.

In Ariane Pauls' video pieces, spatial parameters play an essential role in the choice of setting. Her sequences of architectural spaces and landscapes demonstrate her deep interest in the construction of perspective: while the horizon's line of the Atlantic ocean in **6058 x 2438 x 2591** (2007) implies the depth of the depicted landscape, footage recorded in archives for **42 000 lfm** and **280 000 lfm** (both 2007) show corridors between parallel book shelves, opening up a perspective view. The measurements of these shelves, which are also the titles of both pieces, refer to spatial expansion. The parallel alignment of the shelving seems to stretch deep into the image, creating an imaginary vanishing point. The illusion of depth in these images is quite suggestive. The observer's gaze is pulled into the depicted space, but repeatedly bounces back to the surface. This is mainly due to Ariane Pauls' treatment of the film material. By using strategies of doubling and serial arrangements of sequences, the artist converts image space into surface. In the video installation **Untitled** (2006), a similar effect is generated by darkening the scenario. A camera scans a dark, bare space – a parking garage, a construction site? – in a 360 degree pan shot while the light of a slide projector sporadically illuminates fragments of the space. The observer is unable to fully grasp the spatial parameters of the situation. His/her gaze is literally diverted by the pan shot. A horizontal movement *along* the surface of the image replaces the vertical movement *into* the image. While the images spread out, the space contracts into the surface of the image, accentuating a divergence between the perception of the surface and that of the space image. In this sense, Ariane Pauls' stagings refer to Gaston Bachelard's "Poetics of Space"¹. However, Ariane Pauls does not focus on the psychologically laden dialectics of inside and outside, of imaginary and objectively existing spaces, that Bachelard describes in his literary images of space. As a visual artist, she rather

¹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1957), New York 1964

focuses on the image production of three-dimensional spaces. How can the image of a space be distinguished from the impression a space leaves?

Surfaces

The emphasis of surfaces found in Ariane Pauls' work can be understood as a self-reflective investigation of the conditions of images, which also explains her affinity to the aesthetic concepts of Minimal Art. A moment of irritation, however, is also a distinctive feature of her video pieces and installations. The permanent alternation between surface and depth produces a visual oscillation that causes the observer to feel a certain sense of disorientation. Caught between the images' surfaces and the three-dimensional space of the image, one is no longer able to find a fixed vantage point. In this sense, the video piece **6058 x 2438 x 2591** can be characterized as a phenomenological experiment. The footage was shot during the artist's trip from Rotterdam to Lisbon on a container ship. It shows the view from the command bridge over the front of the ship to the ocean. The size of the video projection aligns the observer's viewpoint with that of the camera. It is as if one is standing on deck, gazing over the container stacks out to the ocean's horizon. The horizon seems to waver, creating a slight sense of dizziness, a symptom of physical dislocation, resulting from the confrontation of movement and stillness – a feeling that everyone who has been at sea is familiar with.

While **6058 x 2438 x 2591** develops its slightly irritating effect through the swaying line of the horizon, thus carrying an anthropological axiom ad absurdum, the multiplication of central perspectives leads to the disarrangement of spatial situations in other video projections by Ariane Pauls. **42 000 lfm**, for instance, is a tripartite video installation depicting rows of mobile bookshelves in the Landesarchiv Berlin, the regional archive in Berlin, on three monitors. Each monitor opens a view into an aisle between the shelves, creating a central perspective, which is repeatedly disrupted. By moving the mobile shelving units that are common in archives, the artist produces a rhythmic opening and closing of the scene. Like a stage curtain, the colored front sides of the mobile shelves rhythmically shift in and out of the scene, alternately revealing and veiling the observer's gaze into the depth of the space. The three-channel installation develops a steady sequence of opening and closing, which corresponds to a vertical and horizontal movement of the image. These movements

are additionally accentuated by the shift between the colored front sides of the shelves and the grey and white rows of books and archive material.

280 000 lfm, a four channel video installation, also creates a kaleidoscope-like effect. Shot in the German National Archive, the footage is presented on four screens, using a symmetric mirror arrangement. Similar to m.c. Escher's illusionist images or Piranesi's "Carceri" prints, Ariane Pauls' stagings question the construction principles of virtual, artist-created image spaces, which we cannot comprehend with our common-day sense of perception.

The movement of the images is created by the camera's steady tracing of the shelves front sides and the parallel installation of the video monitors. The impression of continuous movement expands infinitely on a horizontal plane. Perhaps it is this panoramic perspective that - apart from its formal aesthetic dimension - makes the never-ending sequence of the same shelves legible as a metaphor of the expansive and cryptic space of knowledge. It is reminiscent of Jorge Luis Borges' short story "The Library of Babel" (1941). In the story, Borges paints the image of a surreal, labyrinth-like library "composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries, with vast air shafts between, surrounded by very low railings. From any of the hexagons one can see, interminably, the upper and lower floors. The distribution of the galleries is invariable. Twenty shelves, five long shelves per side, cover all the sides except two;"² Similar to Borges' literary description, Ariane Pauls' video installation evokes a space of knowledge that meanders into infinity. The observer can decide whether to perceive the image as the imaginative activity of his/her own perception, or to give in to the image's rhythmic flow.

Space as social territory

The social dimension of space usually plays a marginal role in Ariane Pauls' stagings. The core of her visual concepts is rather the phenomenological experience of space. Some pieces do address the socio-political function of space, but mostly in a masked, encrypted way. The title of the video **\$430 a square foot of air** (2006), for instance, refers to a peculiar practice common for New York real estate companies, who buy the unused airspace above buildings. So-called "air rights" allow developers to build taller buildings by buying the unused space above low-scale buildings and

² http://jubal.westnet.com/hyperdiscordia/library_of_babel.html (Sept. 9, 2007)

virtually transferring it to their property. A cube made of lattice fence symbolizes the square foot of air in Ariane Pauls' video, simultaneously marking the airspace and its commercial value. There is a certain irony to the fact that Ariane Pauls lets the lattice fence cube circulate above buildings in Berlin, a city that is known to have very restrictive building regulations.

The pieces **curuña** (2006) and **6058 x 2438 x 2591** can also be read in a socio-political context, as a reference to the circulation of commodities in a globalized world. In this sense, the almost identical containers, which house every kind product, no matter what it is or where it is from, can be read as the homogenization and leveling of difference. In fact, Ariane Pauls' image sequences contain a semantic trace that allows an interpretation of this sort. However, this content-based reading should not take over formal aspects of her pieces. Apart from the basic realization that content is always formed and dependant of its staging – just as every form is also content – the specific quality of Ariane Pauls' work lies in the perception of her images of space as laminar arrangements of color and form. This becomes evident in the minimalist photo series **6058 x 2438** (2006), developed alongside the videos, in which all narrative qualities are given up in favor of emphasizing color and surface.

Making room / Opening space

The constitutive characteristic of Ariane Pauls' work lies in her insisting on the specific logic of aesthetic space as opposed to the real space we inhabit in our daily life, space that is shaped by our being and that we, in turn are shaped by. The emphasis of the openness of aesthetic space beyond factual or sociological location leads me to Martin Heidegger's essay "Art and Space" (1969)³. Heidegger illustrates the intricate aesthetic interplay of art and space, which can also be applied to Ariane Pauls' artistic conception of space. Starting from a phenomenological understanding of space, Heidegger suggests that art not only "makes room" within significant processes of reference, but also opens them. The construction of meaningful correlations in the process of aesthetic experience is connected to an opposing process, in which points of reference are continuously dissolved. Therefore, artistically created space – as opposed to the space of common things - does not disappear in "inconspicuous familiarity", but rather becomes prominent in its potential for presentation. It is this fusion of semantic connotations and aesthetic reification in

³ Martin Heidegger Art and Space (1969), in: Man and World 6 (1973): 3-8

Ariane Pauls' work that expresses a structural moment of art: its lack of locality, which makes the naming of its aesthetic value possible.