

Lost / Found in Translation

Julie Monaco's conceptual artwork allows a view beyond its smooth user-interfaces into the abyss of being, and gives visual form to that prospect.

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Softly the water of the ocean ripples. Small waves, crowned with white foam. The left side of the picture is threateningly darkened. A monochrome black cloud weighs like an incubus on the stygian flooding. Yet when the gaze wanders to the right, the scene lightens. The sinister overcast loosens itself into transparent formations. The heavens shoot a beam of grace at a point over the illuminated horizon as if there were a holy Teresa von Avila in the Nowhere, and who moved by godly illumination is just then at the mercy of a crucial erotic spiritual experience. The visual composition which corresponds in all respects to the European occidental discourse of the exalted is foremost about the experience of Nature: This is the impression of splendor, a whiff of the numinous that the picture breathes, and the ambivalent feeling of a „delightful horror“, as Edmund Burke characterizes the sublime.

The newer postmodern theories decline Kant's conception that, in the recognition of its inadequacy in the face of the infinite ocean of its ‚humanity,‘ the human being's supersensible powers can be successfully defended in consciousness. Especially Lyotard rejects the projection of the reasoned concepts of the Subject on the Object. This is not about the hypostasis of an enlightened pure reason. Rather, it is about listening to the „naked presence“ and compensating the debt against what is, via art, a process that can never be conclusive or concluded.

The privation of meaning, the no longer thinkable, the submission to glossolalic babble of the contingent should be brought into some form. A form that, however, no longer adheres to rules of taste nor has to obey a pleasing opinion as with Kant, but is in fact the opposite. One that through the breaking of rules, aims at the not-presentable. „Let us do battle against the whole, let us bear witness to the unrepresentable, let us activate differences, let us save the honor of that which we call by name.”¹

At first Julie Monaco's visual constructions seem rather obligated to be a reflection of the Kantian or Schillerian definition of the sublime as a release from the sensed world through the activation of a „supersensible wealth within us“. But a more precise examination makes clear that in reality war has been declared on the whole. In the over-affirmation of the dramatic, in an almost provocation dismissal of the eerily-beautiful view, in the hyper-stylized geometrical perfectly straight — as if drawn with a straight edge — horizon-line the suspicion arises that this is a masque of form, an optical maneuver of camouflage, a deception, and a voluntaristic cover-up of sundry remains of that which withdraws from portrayal. The aesthetic of the overwhelming here reminds us of the provenience of the Hollywood fantasy movie where too-muchness brings the system of affect massage out of

balance. That small band which connects the emotional experience of awareness itself — however its authenticity is presented — with its corresponding bodily limits, is cut. The painterly über-perfection of an allegedly photographic document of ‚reality‘ feeds a fundamental skepticism: Is this, which is visually unfolding, really a dystopian narrative of the unspeakable? It is a Trompe l'Œuil which overfeeds an apparent meaning of something where there is really nothing at all to see?

One also finds such dramas of nature that oscillate between hyperreality and irreality in Julie Monaco's other work of the same period. These are marked with the acronym „cs“ (Construction Sky). Snow covered, wildly jagged mountain massifs under polar skies. Rock formations in solitude of night, but on which nonetheless light — light that comes seemingly out of Nothingness — defines the craggy contours. Cloud dances in weak sunlight that brings out abstract expressionist figures in graduated grey tones. Is this too beautiful to be true?

When in the thrall of an illusion-machine, whomever believes in a reality beyond the image will be disappointed. The works of the series „cs“ are artificial. They are digital pictures that are developed using fractal algorithms which are in turn made visible through rendering processes — a principle that is used in the game industry and in Hollywood films. However, as opposed to a deployment for entertainment purposes which operates in mute agreement with the public, and which disappoints in the sense of ‚as if‘, and where the question of authenticity in completely affective stimulation may not be raised, art belongs to another paradigm. Either as painting or photography this art is bound up with a trans-artistic being with which it behaves in a complex interaction. Art produced in the analogue mode develops various degrees of abstraction in presentation, whether it is people, landscapes or the inner topographies of the soul. Even in advanced stages of abstraction or dematerialization such as tachism and informal or minimalist art, there remain connections to the physical or ontologically defined ‚outer‘ which are still mediated in geometry or materiality.

The complicity between a sense experienced presentation of reality and the intentioned imaging aesthetic of the production methodology is dissolved in digital image production. A representation of the world is created through the calculations of the computer and the infinite variations of binary code. A program about the „not perceptible rubble of empiricism“ (Theodor W. Adorno) is ending; the deprivation of World wraps itself in a covering of visual exuberance. Roland Barthes defined analogue photography as a new form of

hallucination in his famous essay „Camera Lucida“: „On the one hand ‚this is not here‘, on the other, ‚that very much was‘: a crazy image that has rubbed off the Real.“²

The ecstasy of producing pictures with a camera unfolds itself for Barthes when, in that madness of compassion for something that once was, one accepts entering into a relationship. In digital image production, however, there never was anything there. Behind the digitally composited meta-illusion, seamlessly welded to the visible image, there is no fate anymore that would have summoned compassion or sympathy.

The artwork of Julie Monaco is located at an uncanny Nowhere thus: She lines up in a visual genealogy that reaches from Constable, Turner and Caspar David Friedrich to Géricault, and in later days, Giorgio de Chirico and Kurt Kocherscheidt, but she is still closer to the unrepresentable. Instead of reality, the real in the sense of Lacan steps up; an inconceivable and uncontrollable that stands beyond all discursive constructions, near the spheres of death and sexuality. What shocks and vexes in Julie Monaco's art is that she evokes a connection with artistic works and of life's „reality“, which is supported in painting with the gesture and brushstroke, but which in this medium is accomplished in computer operations that are devoid of any haptic quality. Excepting the act of the mouse click, there is no manual component in the production of this art at all. The machine works and works — an art ‚écriture automatique‘ — and it brings forth fantastic and phantasmic image inventions that, in their lack of connection and referents bridge an existential void, a trauma of awareness. In the end, Julie Monaco's „cs“-Series is a pictographic-aesthetic experiment about a fundamental ontological absence. Indeed, it is beyond the categories of affirmation and negation. It is a Heideggerian model of thought that is confirmed by oath here: A confrontation mediated by fear, a „held out into the nothing“³ that lifts people completely above Being and thus transcends it.

One may discuss Julie Monaco's work in connection with contemporary discourses of disappearance and immateriality. One could evaluate it as an idiosyncratic appropriation of so-called computer art. One would thus, however, overlook the decisive impression of a de-mystification that arises once the recipient realizes that the mystery has run aground. A commitment to the nothing by choice is a „fundamental facilitation of a confession of beings,“⁴ or a nihilistic view into the abyss in the sense of Rosanow's „The public rises. It is time to put on our coat and to go home. The visitors are turning around: no coats and no home.“⁵

Julie Monaco's art thus exists to show us a magnificent tailored coat that gives off emotional warmth and at the same breath makes clear to us that there is nevertheless no home to go to. The series „cs“, which reaches a culmination in its „delightful horror“ of the sublime annihilation, marks an epicenter in terms of content within the 15 year career of the artist, while at the same time it marks a turning point. All aesthetic arrangement testing and artistic laboratory experiments have come to Zero Hour when this artistic project exploded in a figurative frenzy. „cs“ becomes a plateau of the variegated play of the logical procedures of development that had made it possible to reach the formal and aesthetic goals.

Nonetheless the early work of Julie Monaco appears at first to come out of a completely different space of thought and imagination: Formally rigorous, hermetic, and self referential to the point of being a mental shut-in. The texts from works of the series „transkriptions-objekte“ read like a technical description of a physics experiment, and the development of the work follows like the meticulous monotony of a lab test series:

„26 grey tones will be assigned to the latin alphabet. The musical scale c/d/e/f/g/a/h/c (in 16% steps) will be extracted from this grey-step alphabet. Four bars of the Eric Dolphy improvisation (alto saxophone) will be transcribed in wood as grey-step objects. The width of the wooden blocks define the duration of the notes:

1/8	1/16	1/32	1/64
6cm	3cm	2cm	1cm“

The synthetic translations into grey tones from sounds and the respective tone notations are tabulated using these arbitrary rules systems that are fixed a priori by the artist.

In the series „1999“ Julie Monaco submits to undergo the virtually monastic exercise of ‚measuring‘ a whole year aesthetically. And then she planned the transformation of insulation panels by the representational data won over days and months.

These uniformly shaped sculptural modules are nevertheless differentiated in size and can be installed in a variety of configurations. The tilting of the object is a variation on erection writes Julie Monaco in an accompanying text. „Just as feasible are the variations of stacking, of lying down and of hanging. It is about a permanent repetition within variations combining apparently identical elements. The elements are pieced together according to an adjustable orientable grid, like in the system of counting which also repeats itself.“⁶

What thus manifests itself as a visible sculptural ensemble reminds us of specific works of Minimal Art. Especially Donald Judd comes to mind, although Julie Monaco's pre-loaded thought process arises out of a completely different theoretical and conceptual vibratory space. Also an archetypal early Minimalist composition by Terry Riley suggests itself in a comparison to

„In C“: The artwork by Terry Riley, as it is here, is determined by a modular system. There are 53 short musical phrases that freely repeat and jump octaves in interlocking overlap. These create a monochrome sound texture in the foreground. Upon careful listening, however, there is a hardly discernible progression of change through minimal variations and digressions that over the period of the performance effects a complete transformation of the audible sound's form. What in Terry Riley's work is linear and unfolds on an axis of time and which is presented in an acoustic form extends in Julie Monaco's work in space. The abstraction of a temporal space is petrified into an ensemble of sequentially organized objects that are apparently beyond time. They became haptic matter that had won density, in reality removed to another plane of time — that of the ever renewing present. It is about a fine tuning or micro-calibration of the awareness. It is in a listening to minimal changes in the totality of the acoustic, and in the perception of dimensional variations, often first in

serial organizations — perhaps through gentle ascending — that these may be recognized in the visual domain. Through their immersive character of large scale artworks the viewer is redirected to the subtly registered differences within the similar. Maybe it is in the sense of Jacques Derrida's Différance-concept whereby the Hegelian notion of abolishment of identity as limit, interruption, destruction is opposed.

The series „1999“ is accompanied with graphics on grid paper that holds the data in almost calligraphic abstract form. They are like scores for art within an a priori defined time-frame; maps for the navigation of the ocean of time; cryptograms that are part scientific test projects and monomaniacal discharge of trapped-in-addiction driven repetition of desire. The totality of Julie Monaco's early work is bound up in this dialectic between rational approach and flickering insanity. And the unscrupulous following of subjective rules is a part of this glass bead game. For example, in the artist's statement for the series „07/Teile“:

„the digital figure is comprised of only 07 units, which are all the same. The 07 objects become three dimensional form modeled in cardboard. The 07 models were fabricated of a single piece of material in 24 hours in order to achieve an apparent sameness between all of the individual units.“

Further on we read:

„a project was completed in 168 hours using the same system“ This is not only about the production of artwork using a precise procedure. Rather this is also about the experiential varieties that a monotonous manufacturing process creates in the conscious awareness engaging various temporal budget parameters. Julie Monaco is questioning the space-time (dis)continuum in various ways. She orientates her search on basic ontological categories and locates her artistic oscillograms between the poles of being and time, and between similarity and difference. This is art following the principles Taylorism for the assembly line in the production of phantasmic systems without any social utility.

„The uniform out flowing art work functions like a constant,“ writes the art historian Roam Berka. „It provides the security of the individualized system in which Julie Monaco is active, and on the other hand it limits her freedom of choice and her functionality.“⁷

If one wishes to bring the work of this Viennese artist into a theoretical line of sight with other recent aesthetic projects, then the best example is Hanne Darboven. Her systems of simple number sequences, which are arranged in columns and boxes with seemingly random calendar dates, are evolved into complex variations. Her copies of poems according to constructed indices can be recognized as similarly obsessed with creating a world of her own making („homo faber“). They are works that through aesthetic the Différance-concept are simultaneously taken ad absurdum.

The above described Zero Hour of the „cs“-Series pushes Julie Monaco's work into a completely different paradigm of artistic meaning because it adds to the game of the proliferation of signifiers the whole catalogue of affects and emotional agitation, with its „all too human“ qualities. What looks like a completely new artistic angle at first — seemingly an aesthetic discontinuity — reveals itself under precise investigation as an aesthetic discourse that has been continued with other means. This is because as in the earlier works up to 2000, as well as in the slightly later „Construction Sky“ group of

works, this work continues to be about the translation from the immaterial into tangible/signifying/comprehensible objects. Only the means of realizing the transformative processes are different. The earlier „Concept“ works included the integration of the artist's body into the production process which was about pronouncing the body/mind synapse. Similarly digital machines function as autological executors of programs that Julie Monaco has set up.

Since its implementation in the early 21st century, the platform called „Construction Sky“ is the cockpit from which Julie Monaco controls her further expeditions into the unmapped visual parallel universe. A dialog of digitally created pictures is set up with photographic and painterly elements in the series „construction elements“ and „sv“. This means that the promise of authenticity of the analogue surfaces are confronted with the renderings in a kind of endurance test whereby the expressive possibilities of the image are viewed in relation to the presumption of reality. Thus, even if the question is not carried through, at least the relationship is presented from a new perspective. Further declinations of the digital image generation are tested under the title „Synthetic Engravings“. The method called „Non-photorealistic Rendering“ (NPR), results in two dimensional line/stroke diagrams which recover a suggestion of three dimensions only in combination with conventional photo-realistic digital productions. The artist writes the following in reference to the preset aesthetic decisions used in the works titled „o.t._#500“, „o.t._#700“ and „o.t._#900“: „A completely rendered and finished picture is disassembled into its image components. The digital image layers that composed the picture are dissected, itemized.“ In this deconstructive disassembly, in as far as Julie Monaco allows a peek into the workshop of the of the illusion machine, makes visible the inexpressible behind the supposedly expressed. The mathematical-algebraic structure has only dressed itself as a narrative, like the body-less intelligence in a Hollywood film that throws on an anthropomorphic shell in order to be able to interact within the human social habitat.

The series of line drawings with the title „line buildings“ is an attempt to oppose the rendered image with a „not ordered, similar to chaotic“ condition. Newer and the newest works, such as „Superdrawings“ or „Inva“, continue this conceptual de-collaging and rebuilding work with constantly morphing design parameters, some of these are completed with the integration of hand drawings. Recently Julie Monaco has also begun bringing color to the to the existing game of Darkoverian tones. The previously inserted paradigms of aesthetic processing are discontinued step by step. They are either developed further or devolved, so that the individual elements are repeatedly mixed into new relationships.

What in the more contemporary works of Julie Monaco pointedly strikes the eye – in the real meaning of the word – is the combination of a seemingly hand written Ecriture and the rendered image familiar from „cs“. The raw and the cooked are suggestively overlapped.

When viewing work of the series „sv“ one may like to remember the over-painting of Arnulf Rainer. Or one can refer to violent artistic interventions pointing to commitment to the idiosyncratic and subjective, or to impulsive chaotic acts of creation which fit into the genealogy of the unconsciously

directed ‚automatic‘ art production of the 20th century. Nonetheless Julie Monaco has doubled her floor with a false bottom. Her position of committed vacillation is cemented with radical ambiguity through the slime and streaks marked on the virtual body of the objects with brush or with India ink. These are a quasi-Pollockian gestural release which are in her case (usually) scanned digital images. Through that technical step she is thus distanced from the immediate vicinity of the physical sweat, the tears and the emotional expenditure. It is about an in-between in the new work; navigating between presence and absence, between access and license, between the visceral and the cerebral. These figurative schemes, which are a result of a supposed „all too human“ effort of de(con)struction that flits over the smooth surface of the sublime, carry with them in the fully apparent recognizability of their production, the trace of a foreign precisely inscrutable aspect. They effect a feeling in their palimpsestic layering of both analogue and digital, in heavy application and empty erasure, of abstractly chaotic lines and harmonically disorganized mimesis that swings between the poles of „in the far distance, so near“ and „in close proximity, so far“. „Julie Monaco succeeds in each case of allowing the effects to escalate each other,“ writes Markus Mittringer, „the brushstroke is recognized in the zone of the pixels, stays untouchable without being an alien element.“⁸

Lost/Found in Translation: What is lost when an abstract mapping, a taxonomic system, a method of recording time, a few lines of code, are redeemed in the concretion of object/assemblage/computer generated pictures? What is gained in the making visible of the incommensurable, the exercising of the brushstroke in the territory of the pixel? Horror of ambivalence. Delirium of the undecidable. Ecstasy of the uncanny.

Julie Monaco’s art is therefore fascinating because, in her imagery’s full power of suggestion, she shows us the instruments of the production of her illusion scenarios, and in the sense of the Spanish Inquisition, nonetheless succeeds in preserving the mystery. Or better said: She contrives a new mystery that, behind the revelation of the de-collaging techniques, the fractal image generation, and the combinatorics of analogue and digital techniques, gives us a hint of something absolute that may be perceived. A world of autologically created subliminal metaphors behind which an incomprehensible grotesque executes its convoluted maneuvers. Julie Monaco literally holds us into the Nothing with her artworks. She lets us feel how it feels when the supposedly solid reality of a traditional pictographically certified image threatens to fall apart into crumbs and pixel bits. We hope that we are not living in a time where „the pictures are more alive than people“.⁹

- 1) An excerpt from: Ferrier, Jean-Louis, Director and Yann e Pichon, Walter D. Glanze [English Translation]. *Art of Our Century, The Chronicle of Western Art, 1900 to the Present*. New York: Prentice-Hall Editions. 1988. <http://www.noteaccess.com/APPROACHES/Lyotard.htm>
- 2) Roland Barthes: *Camera Lucida*, Frankfurt a. M. 1985, S. 126. Trans. MK.
- 3) Martin Heidegger: *Was ist Metaphysik?* Frankfurt a.M. 1986, S. 35. „an English reading of the first edition of Martin Heidegger’s inaugural lecture at Freiburg University,“ „Was ist Metaphysik?“ by Thomas Sheehan, Stanford University 2001. www.stanford.edu/dept/relstud/faculty/sheehan/pdf/01-hd-wm.pdf
- 4) M. Heidegger: *Vom Wesen des Grundes*. Frankfurt a.M. 1983, S. 55. Trans. MK
- 5) Raoul Vaneigem: *Basisbanalitäten*, Hamburg 1976/77, S. 174. Trans. MK.
- 6) Julie Monaco, *Projekte 1997–2000*.
- 7) Roman Berka: *Zeitliche Objekte als „Grenzgänger“*, in: Julie Monaco, *Projekte 1997-2000*.
- 8) Markus Mittringer: *Nordlicht auf Befehl*, in *FRAME 18/19 2006*, S. 72.
- 9) Barthes 1985, S. 129.