

TRACY WILLIAMS LTD.
NEW YORK, NY

sint-lukasgalerij : Critical Review

At documenta X, this young French artist attracted attention with condensed drawings in which her interpretation hampered the identification of the subjects. In a few lines, she summarized a whole commentary on her environment. For these works, she had drawn inspiration from street scenes, media announcements, and seaside holidays. In these familiar scenes, she uncovered layers of meaning. What she depicted coincided with bits of concrete reality, but observed from unusual positions. The spaced hanging of the drawings suggested mutual shifts of meaning. Our visual culture and our customary interpretation patterns flood us with so many stereotypes that we tend to overlook a lot of information, even when it is right before our eyes. We have problems interpreting a solitary drawing because the context is missing, and we usually do not realise that, in everyday life, we take in fragments all the time. The codes with which we do this are always the same, which means that we exclude all other potential meanings. In the end there is a lot to be seen, but how do we look at it and are we still open to changes in meaning?

ANNE-MARIE SCHNEIDER

Anne-Marie Schneider presented her first film on the occasion of the group exhibition *L'autre Sommeil* (16.11.99 - 23.01.00) at the Musee d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. When the hurried art consumer is not immediately captivated by attractive images, preferably combined with a single, superficial concept, he soon loses interest. Who will then sit through seventeen minutes of a film that wipes the floor with all the conventions of visual perception? Since Schneider's piece of work does not develop a narrative, it needs to be watched over and over again to be understood. It can safely be said that this is a work of rare intelligence.

Schneider's contribution is much more than a commentary on the drawings. She uses a film language that goes against both our aesthetic and anti-aesthetic expectations. Still shots alternate with abrupt movements. Sporadically, the picture disappears, or the screen turns

black, or deliberate editing errors creep into the sequences. Discolourations and scratches are legion. A sepia haze hangs over all the images. White and yellow light flashes and illogical cuts deconstruct the classical construction of meaning. It seems as if different expectation patterns and jamming stations are crossing each other here and are struggling for supremacy. Previous or future hag from teddy bears to lugworms.

The longer we look, the better we can identify the film shots with the living environment that can be seen in the drawings. The drilling man refers to building sites, the teddy bear to the funfair, and the seeping water to a leaking roof. The film provides all the clues we need, but the unidentifiable street scenes have no biographical meaning whatsoever and have been conceived to be as universal as possible.

Sometimes, Schneider suggests the beginning of a plot, playing with romantic and narrative expectation patterns. The funfair shots, the train trip, or the sea swelling to the sounds of an opera aria are good examples. But then she undermines her footage with opposite scenarios. It seems as if the traditional element is there only to prevent us from growing accustomed to chaos. Standstill and movement come when we least expect them. The soundtrack also often goes against the viewer's expectations or escapes to another level of reality. Opera arias alternate with a hammering drill, shrieking sirens, saccharine funfair tunes, a monotonous trickle of water, or simply with silence. By the auditory evocation of air-raid alarms, skimming aeroplanes, shoot-outs and animal growls, the toy soldiers and teddy bears acquire a terrifyingly real meaning. Schneider's anti-aesthetic camera movements shoot off in all directions, launching into a movement only to go back again. It is not only the film itself that moves. The people on the screen keep on walking about aimlessly, in their homes or on the streets. The aim lies in the action and the levels of meanings themselves. In addition to the editing and the camera, the basis of the image itself is also constantly shifting. The drawings are badly framed. A muscleman holding his arms up turns out to be exercising with dumbbells. The intervention of Schneider's instructing voice questions the solidified duration of the drawing. That which, at first sight, looks like a finished image, appears to be only a snapshot in time of successes and failures. She encouraged him (*Hisse*) to while the colour changes from black on an inky blue and the drawing wobbles a bit, as if she is holding the piece of paper and as if the athlete is trembling from the exertion. Irony is a form of conferring meaning that is added as an ingredient after the traditional meanings have been exhausted, but also an element that dislodges these meanings.

A street worker seems to shake loose from the drawing-paper, which trembles along with a drill. From time to time, the drill has an abstracting effect. With its overpowering noise, the tool suddenly dominates the worker, who is completely subordinate to it. The tool systematically moves closer to the white screen, away from the drawing-paper and from the contours of the worker. Does this not illustrate how human and technological evolution escape from earlier stages and generate new meanings? Still, the drawing never vanishes completely. Some past and future meanings always linger on. On another sheet of paper, a 'sleeve/arm' entity laboriously draws in the reaching hands, and the paper with them. Here, the intermediary level starts acting autonomously and removes the traditional signified (the hands) as well as the sign medium (the drawing-paper). Meaning is taken back from the representation, without going back to the previous reality that gave rise to the drawing. Paradoxically enough, the condensed drawings are often more concrete than the film images of reality, in which a hazy detachment dominates. The concrete is there, but it does not exist without interpretation. This is very manifest in the street scenes. The parts of a bridge are real, but on the screen, they turn into black blotches. There is never a moment when we are not reminded that we are dealing with signs of reality. The jagged editing technique, the ear-piercing sounds, the artificial discolorations, the shifts of levels from drawings to reality and then on to the messy editing, and the compelling picture and sound interventions addressed to the public, remind us all that we are, in the first place, watching a film, the product of a working process and its interpretations.

The strength of Schneider's work is that it is precisely this raising of the public's technical-material awareness and its subversion of semantic conventions that opens the door to an endless network of meanings. Being subjected to numerous levels and interruptions sharpens our experience of time. On the train trip to the seaside, for instance, colour shots fade into black-and-white until they reach total abstraction. Traveling time and editing time are interwoven. Thanks to the tangible presence of the artist and the fact that the viewer is kept awake with the aid of a jumble of image and sound processes, he is invited to contribute, actively and in the now moment, to the construction of new meanings. In the viewer's experience, every minute of the film is equal, even when he watches it again.

"N()M Non" is a montage of fragments without a fixed chronology or fixed symbols. The abstraction and the constant shifts indicate that the object of perception is also always partly absent, due to the presence of other layers of meaning and moments in time. Because of their extension in time, the succession of pictures supplies information that alters the interpretation. The unstable framing makes us aware that the extension of the spatial environment enriches the construction of meaning. But even the image fragment in itself already contains a stratification of meanings instead of perspectives. Each image is only a

fragment that is never autonomous, but always connected to many others. Our factual life merely consists of fragments of a thousand-and-one things, interwoven with bits of interpretation which we construct without being able to elaborate them, because life keeps on presenting us with new contexts to be interpreted. All these fragments and interpretations together determine our perception of the now moment. Freedom consists of escaping from the formation of fixed meanings and looking for new ones. In Coup de Foudre, the artist provokes the public, as it were, to find meaning. To the insistent rhythms of a tam-tam, we see lugworms crawl out of the sand and start mating in strange positions. The damp beach suggests a skin, and is the scene of a kind of erotic feast. The effect of a particular climate makes this into more than just another noncommittal nude.

-Filip Luyckx

(The original text in Dutch has been translated by Catherine Thys.)

De Nederlandse tekst verscheen eerder in Sint-Lukusgalerij, maart 2000.