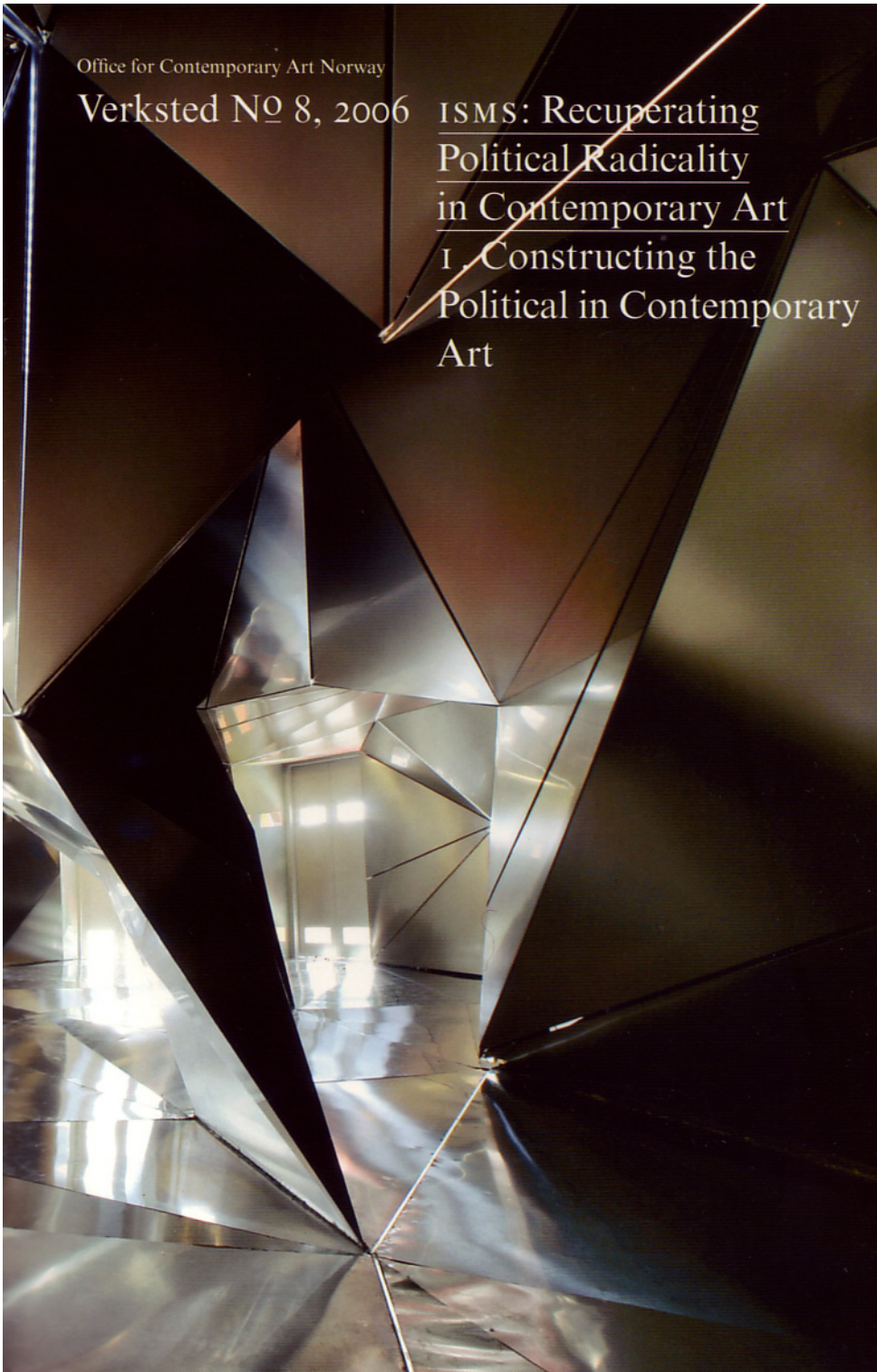Office for Contemporary Art Norway

Verksted № 8, 2006   ISMS: Recuperating
Political Radicality
in Contemporary Art
I, Constructing the
Political in Contemporary
Art

Lamps, Televisuality and Biopolitics: Introductory comments to another history of video art
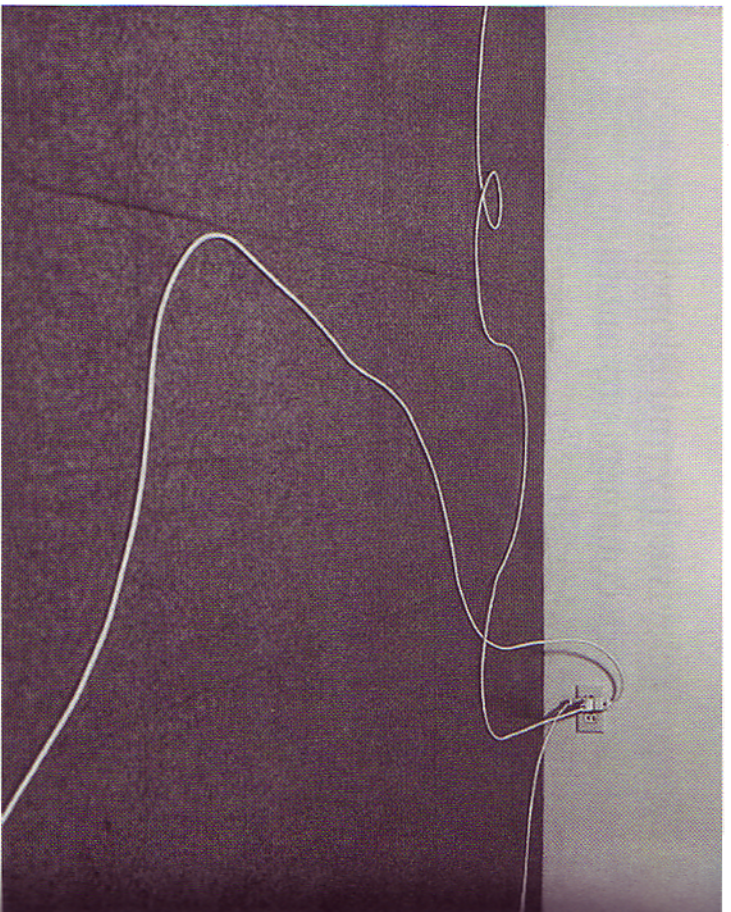
Ina Blom

Fig. 1.
Philippe Parreno /
Jorge Pardo
Untitled, 2002 (detail)
3 elements, pvc, bulbs,
electrical outlet
85 x 50 x 27 / 85 x 63 x 51 /
72 x 52 x 20 cm
Courtesy Air de Paris,
Paris

I have given this lecture a second headline that is not in the program – *Introductory comments to another history of video art.* Under this headline I will return to a topic that has informed some of my previous work: notably the question of how – or through what specific strategies or measures – the avant-garde reinvents its own radicalism or criticality. It is well documented, I believe, that a key issue in avant-garde production is the critique of the present and, along with this, the emergence of a desire to work with time itself, to so to speak liberate time, to trigger a time of events that will rupture not only the time of tradition, but also the disciplined, subjugated time of production. The reinvention or recuperation of radicalism has then to a great extent also been an issue of reinventing the time of events in order to avoid an inscription of work into a formatted and homogenizing avant-garde tradition, as well as a particular formatting of "works" and "artistic media". Such reinvention notably involves a certain element of destruction– a differentiation in the time proper to the avant-garde itself and its concept of work.

What is at stake is, among other things, the avant-garde's own forms of temporalization, its own "event forms" or "process forms". And it is from this point of view that I want to take a look at how a different notion of "video art" emerges from within a contemporary art practice in which video itself is not in any way a key artistic medium or format. In fact, issues concerning the role of televisual images emerge only as a sort of secondary consideration within a framework that seems to place all emphasis on social spaces and situations rather than the presentation of media and image formats. What seems "primary" in the works I will discuss are, more precisely, issues related to design and architecture, and the type of "sociality" that is inevitably evoked due to the use-oriented, "non-artistic" perspectives one often tends to associate with these practices (at least from the "art" point of view). In work after work, a great deal of emphasis seems to be placed on the particularities of the inhabited environment:

the cool or colorful, minimal or crowded surfaces of indoor and outdoor spaces, furniture and fashion. What grabbed my attention, however, was the omnipresence of one particular design object, an object that seemed to return in work after work with a peculiar kind of obstinacy: The lamp. For the last decade or so, contemporary art has practically been littered with lamps. And by this I really mean lamps in the most everyday sense of the word — the chandeliers, neon ceiling fixtures and lamp posts that light up homes and offices, public buildings and streets — as opposed to the abstract orchestrations of light effects in (for instance) the work of James Turrell.

As I mentioned, the lamps are generally seen as contributors to a quasi-functionalist framework in which art seems to rub up against the more use-oriented qualities of design and architecture. This framework of explanation is perhaps nowhere as clearly formulated as in the discussions of the work of Jorge Pardo (a notable lamp-maker), which is usually said to inhabit "the grey area between art and architecture, art and design and art and life." But this grey area seems to have a quite precise definition and function: it emerges as the place where the limits of the different artistic disciplines are negotiated. Pardo's work is said to be "about the speculation of an object and its definition as art," about using "the language of design to explore and question the conventional limits of sculpture."1 Pardo is then "an artist who has a command of design and industrial material rather than a designer seeking alternative marketing strategies" — an important clarification that returns again and again in the critical discussions since the works he creates clearly have both utilitarian and formal aspects. As it turns out, the grey area actually seems more like a black and white checkerboard field where multiple strategic players from the fields of art and architecture/design can play for a bit of what each needs, whether that need is artistic questioning and reflexivity or design-oriented solutions and formal renewal.

There is little doubt that the underlying tenet of this discussion is a legalistic discourse fundamentally concerned with the freedoms or constraints dispensed by various aesthetic practices and their rules. It is a discourse that is heir to almost a century of avant-garde art balancing between formalist media-specificity and non-formalist interdisciplinarity — an eternal dialectic of limits and boundaries that is grounded in the changing strategic viewpoints of a politics of liberation. My argument, in what follows, is that the dense distribution of lamps across the field of contemporary art could also be associated with a different kind of discourse, vested in a set of very different preoccupations.

To see the contours of this other set of preoccupations it would be necessary to start with the obvious: with the light that these lamps emit, and the basic attraction exerted by the presence or aura of such quotidian light sources. For lamps are above all efficient creators of atmospheres or ambiences — a fundamental feature of any kind of inhabitation or social gathering. Then it also becomes easier to see the association that is continually established, in the works in question, between the lamps and various other ambient light sources that permeate contemporary spaces: The light emitted by the interfaces of streaming real-time media such as televisions, computer screens, clock radios and mobile phones as well as the constantly flickering neon signs and LCD advertising boards that make the night city appear like a live interface.

What the lamps make visible — what they offer up for both sensation and reflection — is the peculiar conditions of perception within contemporary inhabited environments that are also electrically wired and electronically connected, infused by mediatic and informational processes and procedures. The lamps direct us, in short, to a field of artistic articulation in which art, technologies, media, economic production and lifestyles are treated as one continuum, a field in which the visual in particular comes to denote "televisual" and where the televisual itself emerges as a productive framework that extends far beyond its typical journalistic and/or aesthetic formats and forms of programming.

This particular perspective found its most pertinent early articulation in the artistic experiments with television that came to be named video art. The lamp works both renew and widen the impact of this articulation and in the process outline a different story of avant-garde media art. The century-long identification between art and new media can no longer simply be read as a quest for new artistic formats that are in step with an evolving communications culture or as Situationist-type interventions in hegemonic media. The lamp works seem to literally bring media art "home" – home to the spaces of living, of personal sensations, memories, atmospheres and affects. And through this operation they also offer a different perspective on what was at stake in the avant-garde's famous quest to erase the boundaries between life and art (a quest that also informed the early television art). Now this quest emerges as a corollary to a biopolitical scenario in which all facets of life, and not least those associated with aesthetic experiences and sensations, are rendered politically pertinent and economically productive. The lamp works simply seem to access our fundamental connectedness to the media machines that have a privileged place in this form of production.

Work after work shows the same structure. On the one hand, there are lamps that hang or stand in exhibition spaces and installations, mysteriously silent, glowing, looking good. They seem to trigger no other impulses than a basic desire to just hang around, to bask in the atmosphere of the lamps: i.e. to sink into the general "lounge feeling" that swept through 1990's art. On the other hand, a closer look at the artistic situations in which lamps take centre stage show, over and over again, the same association between lamps, real-time media and the omnipresence of electronic networks. A lamp by Cerith Wyn Evans will more often than not hang or stand adjacent to a computer screen showing a program that transforms informational material into Morse code signals: these signals in turn control the distribution of lamplight. The constantly changing colored light that flows out

of an apartment window in a work by Philippe Parreno is the end result of a peculiar and convoluted media production. The pure video color emanations that function to light up the apartment are triggered by a Morse code rendition of a text that again tells the story of a film. Pierre Huyghe's grid-like ceiling lamp works like an Atari computer game and Angela Bulloch's light grids read like pixel screens. Olafur Eliasson's projector lamps often mime the visual effects of video projection, while a project currently under development presents spherical lamps whose light simply consists of signaletic material from whatever TV-channel the lamp is tuned into.

Then there are lamps whose glowing presence is even more "essentially" televisual in the sense that it literally transmits other times and places. The pretty glass lamps that Tobias Rehberger installed in the medieval tunnels in the Italian city of San Gimignano did not simply facilitate perception of the place itself. Thanks to a computer program with an Internet connection, they gave off a quantity of light that would at each moment correspond to the actual quantity of sunlight in the South American city of Montevideo. (The choice of the city of Montevideo for this project was in fact a direct function of its "televisual" name).

But the atmospheric continuity between lamps and streaming media – the sensation of the home environment as interface – is perhaps nowhere as articulated as in the spaces of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and her sense of how the great cinematic spaces are in fact integrated in the home itself. This intimate relation with the medial environment is further emphasized in a series of non-narrative video films that seem to encircle and project the very presence of a spectator by functioning as some sort of meandering luminous surrounding. These are films that work as lamps, films that not only document exotic and atmospheric spaces around the world but also offer themselves up as atmosphere-producers in their own right. (Some of the films are designed for possible use in clubs and rock concerts, alongside other light effects.) This mode of presentation reaches an extreme in Gonzalez-

Foerster's *Ipanema Theories* – a film that moves from lamp to lamp throughout all 90 minutes of its duration, as if willfully confusing the documentation of spaces and places around the world with the lamp-like quality of filmatic projection.

A discussion of the lamp works would then seem to need a critical concept of the atmospheric, as well as an idea of how such a concept could relate to mediatic spaces and circuits. Traditionally, the concept of the atmospheric had no real place in aesthetics or art criticism, but lately it has come into focus thanks to the work of Gernot Böhme, who uses the idea of atmospheres as a point of departure for a new environmentalist philosophy that pays attention to the more elusive aspects of our experience of the environment. Atmospheres are here understood as in-between phenomena that stand between subjects and objects: while they refer back to subjective perception, they are also object-like emotions that are so to speak cast into a shared space.

A potential connection to a thinking that takes the mediatic environment into account emerges as Böhme presents Walter Benjamin as a theorist of atmospheres. For the concept of the aura – the experience of the unique, if distant presence of the original work of art – contains (claims Böhme) a theory of the atmospheric impact of aesthetic experience, at least if one is to take Benjamin's actual examples of the auratic experience seriously. The key reference here is of course Benjamin's description of a person resting outdoors on a summer day and who is so to speak "breathing" the aura of the natural phenomena around him. To Böhme, Benjamin's description of inhabiting aesthetic experiences may be an apt explanation of the effects of great works of art, but it is certainly not exclusive to them. For we inhabit other "things" aesthetically as well – a fact that becomes clearer to us once we leave behind the classical thing-ontology and instead pay attention to "the ecstasy of things" – that is how things appear for our sensory register.2

This observation would be all the more relevant if Benjamin's essay were simply a theory of aesthetic experience. But the fact is that Böhme's analysis somehow brackets Benjamin's preoccupation with the changed status of the work of art, and then also brackets its specific historical and political perspective. In Benjamin's text, "art" and "auras" emerge as concepts that help bring out the implications of a change in the mode of economic production and the historically new relation between production and perception that goes with it. This type of focus opens a more precise analysis of how we inhabit modern media environments than Böhme's more general or ahistorical concept of atmospheres.

A notion of specifically mediatic atmospheres might rather be developed with reference to Samuel Weber's reading of Benjamin's reproduction essay. For in his view, what Benjamin's essay allows us to understand is not so much the general disappearance of the aura, but rather the specific conditions for the *return* of the aura in the modern mediascape. The auratic or "atmospheric" experience of "distant presence" could actually be seen as a defining trait of this environment: it corresponds in many ways with the particular modes of presentation provided by modern mass media and in particular with the live electronic presence of television. For television provides a medial set-up in which perception itself is *experienced in its differentiation*. The live transmissions of television do not simply overcome distances in time and space, they render distance invisible by *transposing it directly into the vision it transmits*.3 This process goes beyond the splitting up of the unity of a body's time and place, which is also characteristic of film and photography. In television this bodily splitting is combined with a *presentness* associated with sense perception that involves the actuality of the body in a very different way.

Weber's text is part of a small body of writings that theorize the televisual less in terms of its communicational output or forms of programming than in terms of the bodily and perceptual relations it instigates. Through a somewhat parallel move, the

lamp works produce a focus through which media such as television are related to modes of living and producing rather than modes of viewing. This means that habitual artistic play with discrete media formats and genre conventions are displaced by an operation in which the media – as legal entities, so to speak – "disappear" only to reappear within a larger grid of relations. This operation corresponds in many ways to the perspective that informed Serge Daney's provocative statement that "TV does not exist – or, at least, not in the form we usually think it exists" – meaning that in order to understand television we must cease to see television as one definable "thing" and instead reconstruct its way of functioning through a series of different categories and frameworks. It is, in fact, a reconstruction of this type that is performed by the lamp works. Playing with atmospherics, they foreground an affective, incorporated media relationship. The visuality of the lamp works then triggers thinking on the power formations in which this affective relationship is also a productive force.

For a start, they draw attention away from the major framework informing our understanding of televisual images – in which they are seen as the output of either the propaganda machine of the classical mass medium or an aesthetic framework in which mass media technologies are deployed for different purposes (for instance the production of so-called video art). However, a "video-philosophy" devoted to the question of the wider grid of mediatic relations was developed in embryonic and fragmented form in the early writings, instructions and technological experiments of television art pioneer Nam June Paik – works that preceds and in many ways also differentiate themselves from the later artistic genre named "video art". The perspectives outlined in Paik's early work and writing were quite rapidly forgotten – partly because of the way in which video technology opened up for representational or narrative formats of a more informal and situational nature than the ones usually associated with film and partly because of a modernist/historicist

drive to extrapolate ever new artistic genres or formats from any engagement with discourses or materials not yet inscribed in artistic tradition. But recently Paik's fragmented video-philosophy has reemerged in a more worked-out and detailed form in the writings of Italian philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato. In his view, video technology closely mimes the processes of perception, thinking and memory, and it is precisely this proximity with mental processes that makes it the key social machinery for a form of production that is often described under labels such as "cognitive capitalism" and theorized according to an "attention theory" of value.

Generally this form of production no longer draws value only from activity in the workplace but from all aspects of our lives – through our "free time" down to the level of the affects and sensibilities that characterize our cognitive activity. To the extent that cognitive operations give or produce any notion of temporality, it is therefore a form of production in which time itself has become subject to the capitalist creation of value. Since television and video figure prominently among a group of technologies that seem to work directly on and with temporality itself, there may be a fundamental complicity between such technologies and an economic production that extracts value from the various ways in which we "spend" our time.

Like Weber, Lazzarato takes an interest in the way in which video technologies seem to distinguish themselves by reproducing perceptual operations. While film connects discrete images-spaces in a temporal sequence, there is, as Paik has pointed out, no such thing as an "image-space" in television. Television "images" consist of continually moving flows of light that have no spatial extension, but are temporal through and through: video technology gives us access to something that belongs to the realm of pure perception: it basically creates various forms of durations or cuts within the streams of light that exist independently of this particular technology or medium. While film may reproduce the

reality of time and movement, television technologies manipulate the material of time itself in a "live" unfolding of past moments, which moves parallel to the temporalities of memory and perception. Here, an analogy exists with Henri Bergson's non-psychological description of the way in which the mind itself deals with temporality as a complex processing of past memory and future projection within a continually unfolding present. The technologies of time can only imitate the complexities of memory in a very limited way, but what they can do is to reproduce its temporalities. The affective power of these technologies comes precisely from this ability to replicate the very force and activity of contracting and distributing time – a force that approaches that of mental work itself. It is this ability that gives video technology a particular significance as a social machine – a machine that extracts the new, valuable, non-organic form of energy called mental power or affective power.

However, to discover this particular mechanism of social production we need to avert our attention away from the habitual understanding of the television viewer as a user or consumer of television messages. We, the viewers, are rather used by television as human machines: our mental apparatus is an intrinsic part of television, part of its input and output, feedback and circuitry. From this perspective, TV-viewers are primarily the synapses or relays through which information is passed on so that energy can be accumulated and value created.[4]

It was precisely such an economic perspective that was foregrounded in Paik's early work with television. His engagement with television technology was part of a quest for a radical temporalization in the arts, which initially had nothing to do with the field of visual art or the desire for new artistic formats. While artists such as K.O. Götz or Lucio Fontana approached TV as a purely visual medium that might engender a new type of electronic painting, Paik's approach was different. In the early 1960s he was a composer on the German new music scene who wanted to replace

the dominant focus on musical content with a new emphasis on the musical event. This became the point of departure for a wholly new ontology of music: *"This when (time of day, and day of year, a very interesting measure (....) shall be intensely developed and exploited)..."*[5]. As a result, the tempi that structure musical content would no longer be seen as separate from the actual time of lived experience.

Such radical temporalization could not take place with the (then current) audiotape technology of electronic music: like film, audiotape could essentially only contain and represent time. This is why television technology, with its endlessly mutable real-time flow of signals emerged as the answer to Paik's quest. However, what I want to draw attention to is the fact that time here is not approached in the abstract or in general, as is often the case in the type of aesthetic argument that promotes the supremacy of process over whatever is considered the more static or deterministic art forms. In Paik's work and writings, time is above all treated as a singularly important *economic* factor, a rare and valuable commodity that is explicitly compared to an energy source like oil. In contrast to the process-oriented philosophy of John Cage, which posits an analogy between the processes of art and the processes of nature, Paik's interest in temporality emerges through the specific framework of social and productive machineries: television production mines time (work time, private time, mental time) the way industrial production mines oil.[6]

Paik's insight into the connection between television-time and social production engenders a type of work that places all emphasis on what we have called the atmospheric or auratic aspect of television. In his own writings he underscores the ex-static dimensions of the televisual.[7] This may explain why Paik's television work brackets a more specific or differentiated preoccupation with television contents or programming. He primarily seems to create a sort of direct linkage between experiments with television's real-time flow of signals and the presence of the TV-set as an object within a social environment,

an object that seems increasingly hardwired to human minds and bodies

Paik quite literally joins these two aspects of television in a hands-on way. In one type of work he reaches deep into the internal mechanisms of TV-sets, changing their circuits so that no two sets show the same images, despite the fact that they receive the same channel. These manipulations demonstrate that it is only by actively forgetting television's infinitely mutable temporal flow that it can appear as a simple dispenser of messages for consumption. Another type of work approaches this same perspective from the receiver's end, where the idea of touching the screen becomes a figure for the television viewer's corporeal involvement in the live flow of signals – an overlapping between biological life and the technologically "live" that is continually thematized in Paik's work. A series of works made in collaboration with filmmaker Jud Yalkut present the touch-based, or corporeal, involvement in television within a framework of infinite regress where the distinction between the bodily presence of the television viewer and the flexible temporal manipulations of the real-time flow is erased. Paik had Yalkut make films *of* TV-sets that show Paik's video work: The key motif of these films is that of someone touching the surface of a television screen in the filmed environment, while images of the touching hand appear in ever more ghostly guises on the television screen itself. From this departure springs work where TV-sets are made into furniture, musical instruments, clothing, glasses and watches – works that evoke a body subjected to a televisual life.

Such attention to the wider mediatic and economic field that constituted Paik's concept of the "televisual" was largely put to one side by new art that singled out video as an exciting artistic medium that could generate its own representational forms (and – with this – a nascent discourse of video specificity). It is therefore significant that when these concerns reemerge in the art of the 1990's, they reemerge not within the framework of video art, but

in terms of a new artistic interest in inhabited places and social spaces, lamp-lit spaces of leisure that are also understood as places of production.

There is not enough time here to go into long analyses of specific works – but by way of concluding I just want to draw attention to the way in which prominent lamp works instigate thinking on such production by repeating Paik's strategy of displacing or bracketing the focus on media content, so that the media object disappears into a wider grid of relations. The work in question is a film by Philippe Parreno that documents a space – and this space is in fact nothing but a scenario – as a generative point of departure for the production of the film itself. As it happens, this scenario space is also a lamp. The film, which carries the sci-fi like title *The Boy From Mars*, has no narrative in the ordinary sense. It only consist of the slow unfolding of this space – a strange tent-like construction of elastomer sheets that lights up at night like a giant biomorphic Noguchi lamp – that was only erected for the purpose of generating a film. The inside of the lamp building is a dynamo that produces and stores electric light by means of the raw muscle power of water buffalo pulling a two-ton steel counterweight. What we have here is, in other words, a work where space, film, and projection (filmatic projection, mental projection – there are long traditions for associating the lamp with both) are completely folded into one another.

Now, science fiction is no doubt one of the key examples of the power of mental projection. And in the usual perspective on the role and use of media, such thinking of possible futures is usually identified with a narrative (a novel or story) that is seen as *previous to* – and thus also fundamentally independent of – the media machines in which it is presented. Everything then proceeds as if the fantasy of the future just happened to pass through the apparatus of film or television. The feature film or the television series is presented as the end product of a narrative desire whose origins lay elsewhere: putatively in the autonomous imaginative capacities of human consciousness. In this work, however, the few

direct sci-fi elements in the film (a few moving lights in the sky) only appear as if in extension of the unfolding of the space/lamp/film itself. Not only are mental operations here fully integrated with the media machines that contract and distribute time, social space itself is shot through with the projective productions of the scenario mentality (a key factor, as we know, in the capitalization of space, seen in everything from the tourist industry to new housing developments). This is a theme that can be followed in a number of works by Parreno in which lamps and lamplight figure prominently.

Works such as Parreno's create forms that make visible – and thinkable – a contemporary capitalization of time and affects. Their eventual radicalism lies neither in a construction of utopian futures, nor in a critique of institutions, but in an attempt to liberate time based on a historically and politically specific subjugation of time. In engaging with this subjection of time in its qualitative dimension, they may come to unleash uncontrollable temporalities, brief moments of unproductive time. In what sense or to what degree such strategies contain political potential is of course open to discussion.

Notes

1.
Ann Goldstein, quoted in Emma Mahony, "The House on the Hill", in CIRCA 97, Autumn 2001, pp. 23-25.

2.
Gernot Böhme, *Atmosphäre: essays zur neuen Ästhetik.* Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt, 1995.

3.
Samuel Weber, *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media,* Stanford University Press, 1996, pp. 76 – 129.

4.
Maurizio Lazzarato, *Videophilosophie. Zeitwahrnähmung im Postfordismus,* b-books Verlag, Berlin, 2002.

5.
The "new ontology of music" was presented in Paik's leaflet manifesto *Postmusic, The Monthly Review of the University for Avantgarde Hindusim,* Fluxus edition, 1963.

6.
Nam June Paik, "Medienplanung für das nachindustrielles Zeitalter (1974). Bis Zum 21. Jahrhundert sind es nur noch 26 Jahre.", and "Input-Zeit und Output-Zeit", in Wulf Herzogenrath (ed.) *Nam June Paik Werke 1946-1976 Musik Fluxus Video,* Köln: Kölnischer Kunstverein, 1977, p. 163 and 12-13.

7.
Nam June Paik, "Nachspiel zur Ausstellung Exposition of Music – Electronic Television, Wuppertal 1963", in Herzogenrath, ibid., pp. 87-92. In this text Paik explicitly discusses the ecstatic qualities of a musical production based on the production logic of televisual signals.