

Face-sur-face Philipp Timischl

At the Kaiserpanorama of Berlin, “a bell rang a few seconds before the image moved off, to make way first to a blank screen and then to the following image.” This is how German philosopher Walter Benjamin recalls the memory of having “travelled around in a room that was half-empty” where “everything was filled with the melancholic pain of departure.” These words describing the phantasmagorical and phantasmaparastatic experiences of the 19th century from Benjamin’s *Berlin Childhood* (1932–1933) resonate with the works created by Philipp Timischl in our 21st century.

In order to characterize the work of the young Austrian artist it is first necessary to define his modernity before attempting to interpret his work through the prism of contemporary artistic vocabulary. His work recalls the origins of mechanical images rather than electronic ones, as processes linked with the idea of painting as an apparatus. It is however tempting to focus on the trivial image of bright and noisy screens lined up in an electronics department store. The text introducing his exhibition at the Vienna 21er Haus (2013) employed this metaphor, at first sight interesting. The artist’s apparatus was discussed in relation to the screen, the locus of meaning¹ according to Jean-François Lyotard, but also in relation to television, interpreted as a totemic object.

Staged one after another, Timischl’s works, synchronized with similar if not identical images, could reinforce the spectator in his everyday experience as a consumer. The artist’s work thus shows the generic side of kitsch as seen in the universality and interchangeability of video. But this obvious reading of his practice is far from being completely satisfying.

What is at play in his work is not limited to the power of attraction of the HD screen. A better way to describe his work would be to use the term “tropisme,” borrowed from Nathalie Sarraute’s eponymous novel from 1939. “Tropisme,” a concept taken from scientific terminology, could be defined as those “indefinable movements that slip rapidly into the far reaches of consciousness,”² and gives birth to a theory of the reception, and then to a particular aesthetics. Timischl’s displays evoke the anachronistic image of crowds fixated on department store windows rather than the more contemporary one of screens in an electronics store. This begs the question as to the reason for exploring the analogue whereas the apparatus and the presence of screens refer back to the digital sphere. In fact, these televisions, so familiar to our domestic environment, are in fact merely pedestals.

Before looking at the different motifs of Timischl’s works one must examine its medium, inevitably linked to the question of surface. In his work,

¹ See the analysis by Jean-Louis Déotte, «Lyotard: la thermodynamique des appareils» in *L’Époque des appareils, Éditions Lignes & Manifestes, Paris 2004, p. 82.*

² See Nathalie Sarraute, *L’Ère du soupçon* [1956] in *Œuvres complètes, Gallimard, Paris 1996, p. 1553.*



Untitled (Two Parks), 2014
 UV-Direct print on epoxy resin on canvas, flat
 screen, and stickers, 140 x 96 x 4 cm, video
 duration: 30"
 Courtesy the artist, Vilma Gold, London, and
 Neue Alte Brücke, Frankfurt

televisions do not have the range of new media works. It is tempting to make ties between his work and the mass media technology economy but his work cannot be compared to other artists working in this field. As opposed to Cory Arcangel, who situates the screen in relation to the cult of a full screen world, Philipp Timischl regards television first and foremost as an accessory. The moving surface is not a demonstration, either as a digital object or as a "situation." Its function is linked to its planar surface. Punched in the back in order to accommodate an HDMI cable, the screen is the outer surface of the canvas that it stands on. The whole cannot be dissociated from the history of painting and it is thus that these two-dimensional towers are transposed in the exhibition space—a heresy from a modernist point of view. The concept of "facingness" formulated by Michael Fried about Manet's painting could apply to Timischl's work. What is at stake in this anachronism is to determine the conditions of this "face-to-face" between the canvas and its plinth as witness.

In his famous text "The woman in the closet"³ Daniel Arasse traces this idea all the way back to Titian. He proposes an incoherent *Venus* (1538) torn between two distinct realms: the right corner in which a perspective is outlined by the tiles on the floor likened to a fictional space; the bed, a planar surface which is the site of a confrontation with the real world. This structure exists in several of Timischl's compositions. The motif of a young man lying in front of his laptop is repeated, angled, floating between the stand and the canvas, always with the same "faceness." This male odalisque lies in the frame just like he would in his bed, in the same way as the Venetian historian

Marco Boschini would describe the preparatory layers of painting. In Philipp Timischl's work stratified registers occupy the canvas, the resin, and the image from which surges a man, who without looking at us stands radically face-to-face with us. The digital quality of the screen is even annihilated by collages placed on it. This work serves a matrix for the young Austrian's later works, raised like walls.

The artist belongs to the post-1989 European generation that shares a common identity defined by the fall of the Berlin wall despite its diversity. Without venturing into political analysis, this comparison enables us to think about Philipp Timischl's work not only in terms of surface but also in terms of *ouvrage*. Through the deployment and redeployment of different narrations, this very term, itself richly ambiguous, reveals structure and its guiding principle. His work proceeds by establishing panoramic sequences around the motif of urban growth. The walls that he erects, function as screens for looped images, thus resembling the journey described by Walter Benjamin; they evoke an inevitable feeling of melancholy. The title of the 21er Haus exhibition summarizes this feeling: *Philipp, I have the feeling I'm incredibly good looking, but have nothing to say*. A wall of screens is perfectly synchronized, one screen after another. Sequences of a group of friends in Corsica unfold on the screen with palpating images. They move to and fro within the screens, leaving their impression on the retina, as photographic images on canvases fix these evanescent images. The artist is present, in person, in the frame and playing his part. "Do you want to say something?" his friend asks. He turns away, afraid of being exposed. These scenic tableaux exist between fiction and documentary, private and public spheres.

³ Daniel Arasse, *On n'y voit rien*, descriptions [2000], Gallimard, Paris 2009.



Using the vocabulary of painting, Philipp Timischl is able to reconstitute the complex and purely cinematographic relationships that transpire within the frame, the set, space and time. Both within the field of his own edits and outside, he carries on the wall the reflection of a mirror-like melancholy.

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- *Born in 1989, Philipp Timischl lives in Wien.*
- *www.neuealtebruecke.com*

*Installation view, Neue Alte Brücke booth,
 Liste Art Fair, Bâle, 2014
 Courtesy the artist and Neue Alte Brücke*



*Exhibition view, 12346, not 5,
 Neue Alte Brücke, Frankfurt, 2013
 Courtesy the artist and Neue Alte Brücke*