



*Conceptual Paradise, 2006. Stefan Römer photographing Liam Gillick. Film still. Courtesy the artist.*

## CONCEPTUAL PARADISE:

THERE IS A PLACE FOR SOPHISTICATION

STEFAN RÖMER IN CONVERSATION WITH WESLEY HILL

In April 2006 the German film-maker Stefan Römer visited Australia at the invitation of David Pestorius to participate in the Heimo Zobernig exhibition project that Pestorius organised for Artspace, Sydney. Römer's participation in the Zobernig project involved the screening and discussion of his new feature-length documentary *Conceptual Paradise: There is a Place for Sophistication*. Similar events involving Römer were also hosted by the Institute of Modern Art and the University of Melbourne. *Conceptual Paradise* explores the complex history and evolving legacy of the Conceptual Art movement through discussions with many prominent living artists, including Zobernig, as well as critics and promoters of the evolving discourses around conceptual practice. Using the film-essay style of documentary making, *Conceptual Paradise* revealed the major concerns and paradoxes of the Conceptual Art movement as well as highlighting important issues about the nature of the documentary genre itself. As an historical document alone the film is significant to contemporary art culture as it documents the thoughts and physical presence of over fifty artists, many of whom, such as Ed Ruscha, Lawrence Weiner, Dan Graham, Joseph Kosuth, Daniel Buren, Vito Acconci and John Baldessari, have had an immense influence on contemporary art and the development of post 1960's art theory. As an artwork, Römer's editing and scene constructions had an air of play and self awareness that made for more compelling viewing than that of a linear and chronological account of the subject. Through the wonders of email, Stefan Römer kindly agreed to answer my questions as he travelled to Sydney and Melbourne to promote and screen the film.

**Wes Hill:** Firstly, what appealed to me about the documentary was that it portrayed multiple points of view without being overly guided in any one direction. Conceptual Art does make for a somewhat invisible subject matter which, when coupled with the multi-directional nature of the film, offered an experiential engagement rather than following a literal and linear argument. During the screening I became aware of the overall 'event' of the film as a portrayal of this strange and elusive phenomena called 'Conceptual Art' with all the participating speakers trying their best to define what the term actually means to them. Was the desire to portray Conceptual Art as a malleable and multitudinous phenomenon the impetus of your conception of the film or did it come from somewhere else?

**Stefan Römer:** It is difficult to take precisely one moment of motivation out of a work that took more than three and a half years of concentrated effort. What I want to point out is that my whole understanding of my own work as an artist is so much involved in the epistemological and political practice

of the conceptual legacy that it is hard to separate single positions or single works. I have been writing on conceptual practices since the end of the '80s, and then it was already clear to me that making images and writing would be the basis for my work, be it painting, photography or film/video.

Let me try to say it this way: from this background it was not so much my interest to 'portray' Conceptual Art, but to make visible the discussion which is significant for this field of practices called Conceptual art. As there are so many people appearing in the public arena with zero 'statements' (now there seems to be a stronger urge for 'personalities' than ever), why not stage talking heads who give heavily loaded and determined statements. There is no conceptual art beyond these struggles around linguistic, social, epistemological, gender, sexual, and in that way cultural politics in general. The discourse is the always fluid and ephemeral performative act of practice that never followed a closed set of paradigms, even if some of the participants tried to fix it. Conceptual art, hopefully, permanently produces differences. But as we saw with many examples in the history of art this can have political impulses on the public sphere of a society.

So my interest is much more a cultural political one. I am convinced that the discussions on the different issues in the film are playing a specific role in cultural developments now and over coming years, and it seems to be very important to renew the knowledge about these issues and strategies, whereas the dominant part of the contemporary western art world is taking sunbaths in the self-adulation of naïve paintings. Of course this is the contemporary market. And of course that kind of painting can bring you much more prestige and cultural capital than sophisticated reflections on popular phenomena and representational strategies.

**WH:** I was watching the TV series 'Twin Peaks' the day before the screening of *Conceptual Paradise* and on the DVD there is an audio commentary that discusses how David Lynch used noir motifs and well worn TV character stereotypes as a recognisable structure around which he based his ideas and plots. Your documentary has an iconic documentary-style feel to it but it also reflects upon the medium (in your discussions with Hartmut Bitomsky) and is more dialectical than the average documentary. Was the documentary aesthetic something you consciously tried to highlight or exploit as a structure, and if not what was the motivation behind the style of the film?

**SR:** As you point out with Lynch's 'Twin Peaks' (by the way I was a great fan of 'Twin Peaks' in the early '90s screening in Germany) as a kind of reflexion on TV series in a series itself, artistic works can at the same time entertain with a story, address an issue and be aware of their own modes of production. In my opinion the greatest cultural works always imply a kind of reflection on their media; if you add a reflexivity on their epistemological background and their institutional presentation modes then you can get as near as possible to conceptual practices. This combination may not be appropriate for all works but these are some of the points which you will find in the literature on that field.



*Conceptual Paradise*, 2006. John Baldassari. Film still. Courtesy the artist.

In this way I took the genre of documentary film as one issue for my essay because two things are important for contemporary documentation: firstly, with the widely spread format of docu-fiction or docu-soaps in TV we are facing an oversimplification of documentary work. In the documentary genre, producers and theoreticians are under pressure from this and they try to popularise their argumentation for the sake of bigger audiences. The second issue is that all media representation is always lead by a fiction even when it is reporting the most imaginable hardcore brutality of true events, it depends on the question: for which audience do you want it to work.

As I write in the film a reflection on a text of the philosopher Jacques Derrida: 'Every event does always already bear within it its own documentation. Otherwise we could not think the event'. In respect of that it always depends what the aim of its use is. If you just want to speculate and test the public with conspiracy theories like Oliver Stone with his *JFK* (1991), or if you are producing a kind of intellectual reflexivity like Chris Marker with his *Sans soleil* (1983) or a kind of historical reflexivity like Hartmut Bitomsky with his *Reichsautobahn* (1986), which consists of 90% of found footage, all that makes a big difference.

To make this point and say, 'as an artist I love images and I love to interweave them with intellectual reflection'—that is my basis. I decided for the form of the essay, because it allows me a more open point of view—you have to define the framework by yourself, nothing is given. Everything that appears has to be defined, from the title to the distribution. This is my understanding of the conceptual which I use, to treat it as a political statement.

If I remember it right, David Lynch didn't do all parts of the series by himself but his definition of the characters and the uncanny narration with the permanently increasing suspense defined the work for the other directors involved. Agent Cooper was supposedly his alter ego even if he himself appeared in his own film. The presence of the director as an author is a specific figure in films, which I also speak about with Hartmut Bitomsky in *Conceptual Paradise's* excursions on the theory of documentary. I wanted to define this figure which acts as an author to be involved visually and intellectually in the discussions with the interview partners, so there was the decision for two different camera perspectives: for the artists I tried to find optimal perspectives in situ; with the theoreticians I decided for an over-my-shoulder perspective where you can see my head.

**WH:** In discussing the film with my colleagues and friends we talked at length about how some of these artists in *Conceptual Paradise* came across on film. In some instances it was the first time we had seen these artists talking on camera so it was interesting to us how that changed our perception of their work. In this regard, the issue of portraiture and persona featured strongly in the film. We were surprised at how strange Mel Bochner appeared to be, Dan Graham looked physically unwell and we thought that Joseph Kosuth came across as overly pedantic. These are superficial judgements, but were there any artists that you were surprised by in terms of defying your expectations of personality? Also, can you reflect on this aspect of portraiture in your film?

**SR:** To start from the last: the female voiceover says in the end, 'Within the mediatized white cell of humanist betterment, the questions posed in the film on the event, the figure of the witness and the staging of the two gain significance as a politics of the face and the gestural'. The diagram in the film points out that in the Deleuzian Post-Panopticon documentation always is a feedback between showing and being shown.



... it seems to be very important to renew the knowledge about these [conceptual art] issues and strategies, whereas the dominant part of the contemporary western art world is taking sunbaths in the self-adulation of naive paintings.



all images above: *Conceptual Paradise*, 2006. clockwise from top left: Shilpa Gupta; Lawrence Weiner; Dan Graham; Sabeth Buchmann. Film stills. Courtesy the artist.

It was a full conscious decision to show the faces of the artists but how I show them is again a critical statement on the presentation forms of artists in TV. There the standard is a voiceover on a horizontal shot of an exhibition and some zooms on single works. My aim was not a listing of so called important artists. I was working hard trying to give them enough time to speak and trying to involve them in a discussion through historical and theoretical reflection.

As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari pointed out prominently out in their book *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), the face has a kind of dominant visual function in our western culture, in contrast, for example, with aboriginal pattern paintings. The representation of the face seems to biologically guarantee a kind of originality. This projection of an originality, which has returned dominantly to the arts in the last years, is always part of a contextual argument of the invention of something new, an authentic individual and a kind of signature of the master's hand.

The critique of this traditional basis of the art institution was one of the points of Conceptual Art. The crux is that if you want to seriously criticize something in the field of art, you cannot do that from the outside, you have to get some influence inside the field. Then you own the authority to really change something, but this process of acceptance also eventually changes the institutional definition of your authorship. To put it radically, are the only real contemporary conceptualists the ones who refuse to be portrayed as a personal representation in the film: Michael Asher, who is not visually present, or On Kawara, Stanley Brouwn and Hanne Darboven, who don't give interviews?

A lot of my artistic interest culminated in the last years around the changes from the disciplinary society (M. Foucault) to the society of control as Deleuze has put it. What does this, for example, mean for taking an artistic photograph? For a popular picture only counts on its simple catchiness of the iconic. How could a sophisticated artistic gesture be transported into a filmic process that takes account of all the implied intellectual work? How do we interact with the fragile constructions of artistic gestures in cultural life?

WH: There is a great scene at the end in which Dorothy Vogel, the well-known Conceptual Art collector, talks about how she was interested in the idea behind the conceptual artwork but that the art had to look good to her as well, she needed to connect with both the aesthetic and the concept. I thought it was a lovely way to end the film as it modestly alluded to the uneasy relationship between the discourses on dematerialisation

that surrounded Conceptual Art and the reality of the art market. What are your thoughts on this?

SR: As in all interviews, I asked at the end if there was something that they wanted to say beyond my questions, like the famous last words. Herbert Vogel explained truly that 'it isn't a better statement if it is longer'. But Dorothy wanted to add something. She formulated that for her the visual is as important as the idea, which is conceived to be primary in Conceptual art. In this moment I felt a strong emotion and I knew that exactly this must be the last word of the film.

WH: As a multi-disciplinarian in the visual arts, is there an underlying theme or continuity of interest between your writing, art making and filmmaking or do you tend to resist such labelling of your work? Can you also talk a bit about your art practice and whether you perceive theory and practice as coming from the same brain space?

SR: This division mainly has importance if you work in academic institutes or if your personal interest is focussed. The institution of art is tending to deregulate institutional divisions. Of course there are different functions but 'There is no image without a text and all texts produce images'. My word is the term 'interest', for that reason the only thing that counts is the amount of interest (from Latin 'inter esse': to be in between) that you invest as a beholder, a fan or a producer of artistic practices. My brain in that respect is more or less this white room of perception, the observatorium, which the philosopher Michel Foucault describes as the central place of intellectual work. The term I use in the film, 'the white space of humanist betterment', can be understood as an idealised imagination of both the panoptic public sphere and the white cube of artistic presentation.

This time the space is filled up with talking heads on Conceptual Art. ■

*Stefan Römer is an artist and writer who is currently Professor of New Media at the University of Munich. Stefan Römer's visit to Brisbane was assisted by the Queensland University of Technology Visual Art, and Queensland College of Art, Griffith University.*

*All information about the film, including an essay by Stefan Römer and a list of the interviewees, can be found on the website: [www.conceptual-paradise.com](http://www.conceptual-paradise.com). DVD copies can be obtained through 235 media, Cologne, see: [www.235media.com](http://www.235media.com)*