

Lost in the Loop

At first glance it seems as though Nadim Vardag's art devotes itself to the cinema: it adopts the principle of the moving image, and it engages the technological and material presentation apparatus of the cinema hall, this spatial set of projector, darkroom, and canvas. It invokes it in sculptures simply called Screens," empty surfaces in the classical screen formats of 4:3, 16:9, or Cinemascope mounted on simple scaffolds, as well as in short loops extracted from movies. And yet it would be inadequate – a product of the desire for a simple explanation, one based on content rather than addressing the structure – to claim that the "subject" of this art is "the cinema."

For the cinema is here more than anything an image in its own right, a placeholder. The cinema and more particularly its technological apparatus first and foremost provide the most persuasive – the most elegant and efficient – code for a principle of projection more broadly conceived – with all its iridescent ambivalence between the simple technical process of throwing a picture on a wall using a directed ray of light and the power of the imagination. In other words, to say that the cinema is the subject of this art is itself already a projection. Even if this nesting brings us to a first typical strategy of Vardag's art: to repetition, to the loop, and to their result, a reflective reduction to itself that seems to end with what is "essential."

Filmic images accordingly appear here forever only as decontextualized loops running to no more than a few seconds, appropriated from motion pictures such as Henri-Georges Clouzot's "Salaire de la Peur" (1953), Alfred Hitchcock's "Lifeboat" (1944), or Jacques Tourneur's "Cat People" (1942). Most of the scenes they show would seem to be marginal: thus the three similar yet not identical sequences from "Cat People" in which there is nothing to see but reflections of the water on the ceiling and walls of a swimming pool – brief shots into the off of filmic narrative that can generate even more suspense because they propel the beholder's imagination; but also short-circuits between two planes in which the pictures show exactly what they strictly speaking are: projections on a wall.

This self-reflective loop in which at bottom nothing is shown other than the fact that something is being shown can also be found in Vardag's installations. Thus when, at Kunstverein Medienturm Graz, he displays the display situation of the cinema hall itself: in a first room we look into sideways, a projector rests on a small tower of delicate occasional tables designed by Charles and Ray Eames. The projector casts its image through a small hole onto the far wall of an adjacent second room we again look into from one side. Relying on very simple means, the artist here cites the principle of projection on which the cinema is based – its subdivision into a screening room and a projection booth – reducing it to its basic technological and spatial parameters and drily exhibiting

it as such.

The same cool calculation, functionalist elegance, and minimalist “rigor” with which this art works on a revelatory reduction to the purely technological dispositif behind the pictures can be found even in the light piece of cloth in the projection-screen format of 4:3 that is loosely, even casually stretched onto a slight aluminum frame. And yet – or precisely because of this minimalist reduction taken to an extreme point, because of a repetition that works on emptying out – a specific kind of dry humor emerges: highly elegant and slick just a moment ago, these works suddenly seem to exude a certain sadness, a strange and not entirely uncomical helplessness, a sense of being lost in the loop.

So Vardag obsessively and relentlessly drags the structures framing the projection apparatus into the limelight; into a limelight in which these implements appear as precisely what they are: as apparatuses serving a projection. Yet ultimately even this “illumination” itself is revealed to be an empty or at least an evacuated gesture. What happens then is fully consistent with the circular structure of Vardag’s work: the machinery of illusion is set in motion at the very point where the art just a moment ago worked on undoing its illusions. The emptiness that is born of repetition wants to be filled. And each unconcealment in turn results in a new concealment.

Dominikus Müller

(This document was automatically generated by Contemporary Art Library.)