

## Maria Vedder Susurrus

by Dieter Daniels

When it was built for the Paris World Expo in 1889, the Eiffel Tower was regarded by writers, artists and musicians in particular as an ugly monster disfiguring the city's silhouette. After protest by such celebrities as Guy de Maupassant, Charles Gounod und Alexandre Dumas was unable to prevent its construction its rapid demolition was then demanded, which had been planned anyway for the end of the expo. Twenty years later artists and poets begin to enthuse over the tower. Since 1910, Robert Delaunay began devoting a large portion of his painting to different perspectives of the tower, splintering its form into a dramatic field of force made of lines and rays. Blaise Cendrars and Guillaume Apollinaire dedicate emphatic poems to the tower. In particular the visual poetry from Apollinaire's *Lettre-Océan* from 1914 will become a milestone of lyric in "freed words", as also developed by Marinetti and the futurists.

How did this change of attitude among the avant-garde come about? The tower was built in 1889 as a monument without any other function than to celebrate the achievements of engineering. It thus directly competed with the freedom from function of art, demanding pure adoration not purpose. In 1910, it then becomes one of the most important radio stations in Europe, sending twice daily the time signal used in particular by ships to aid navigation. The capacity of radio to generate global synchronicity is demonstrated for the first time in pure form. This guaranteed the tower's survival while at the same time lending the high thrusting form a posterior function. This function finally became so prominent as to be closely wedded to the tower's aesthetics, reversing the dictum "form follows function" into "function follows form".

Maria Vedder's video installation *Susurrus* is an analogous demonstration of the ambivalence of technical monuments. According to the title, it is a "project about electronic smog and the sculptural beauty of high voltage pylons." The artist notes in an email written during her EMARE residency in Mexico: "I'm fascinated by the sculptural beauty of high voltage pylons, as objects in themselves as well of course as in their relation to landscape. I'm curious to see what they look like here in Mexico. In Germany they are often different, sometimes they look like a human body with head, ears, arms etc. reminding us of the giant with seven mile boots roaming over the landscape." This kind of poetic view stands in contrast to the awareness that the high voltage lines are spraying electronic smog over the landscape with largely unknown side effects for humans and nature. Vedder's installation works with this ambivalence by separating image and sound. The video image of the pylons awakens familiar associations, while the buzzing sound is a presentiment of the invisible menace. The artist's homemade antenna renders audible the electromagnetic field that lies beyond normal human hearing.

The installation draws on various material sources. Initial footage was made around Berlin in 2010, followed by field studies in Mexico in 2012. Research in China and other countries is in the pipeline. The project is however not a stocktaking of technical heritage (comparable to the photo series by Hilla and Bernd Becher) but instead reflects the changes in the global energy economy and long distance energy

transport, resulting partly from the abandonment of local fossil fuels. Finally, the viewer of *Susurrus* senses his own impotence in the face of these processes. What can I do, when a high voltage pylon is installed on my land, when a wind turbine obstructs my view or a cell tower is set up across from my house? These objects are in any case no more than a stand in for the invisible menace of electro-magnetism. Humans lack the sense organ for this radiation. Nature has not equipped them for the technical environment they have created. They are once again their own worst enemies.

Maria Vedder had already begun her work as the nuclear catastrophe in Fukushima renewed global awareness of the consequences of increasing energy use. Today, rising energy costs are a symptom of the crisis of capitalism. Even the German environment minister recently doubted whether the Federal Republic could attain its planned reduction of energy use by 10% before 2020. As a consumer I am also largely powerless. How can I know atomic energy from ecological energy? I must place my trust in the labelling of my respective supplier.

In contrast, around 1920 electricity was celebrated as the means to accomplish communism. Lenin's famous dictum "Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country" was the basis for the GOELRO-Plan (ГОЭЛРО - Государственный план Электрификации России; State Plan for the Electrification of Russia) and hence for the introduction of centrally planned economy into the Soviet Union and then in all the other Eastern bloc countries. The ambivalence or neutrality of technology shows itself once again. Electricity is neither capitalist nor communist, neither good nor evil.

The same applies to debates in art around electronic media. In the seventies, John Baldessari confronted his technophobic colleagues with the claim "TV (1) Is Like a Pencil and (2) Won't Bite Your Leg". In Maria Vedder's new video pieces the question of the specifics of media debated so hotly in the seventies and eighties has largely evaporated. The works focus on a few image-objects that speak essentially for themselves. In their minimalism the ambiguity of the images becomes tangible. The video *Allianzen* (alliances) shows whirlwinds on a sand pile before the surging tower of the Allianz concern, which played a major part in the turbulences of the financial crisis. In the five-channel installation *Aus dem Nichts, Out of Nothing*, the viewer witnesses the generation of a traffic jam. As the title states, the jam emerges out of thin air before disappearing again, all without recognisable cause in accordance with the principles of chaos theory. The charming simplicity in Maria Vedder's video pieces, which do without technical and thematic effects, maybe wants to tell us that the "neue Unübersichtlichkeit" ("new confusedness") of the world, long since diagnosed by Jürgen Habermas, demands – among others – from art a new "economy of attention" that no longer stands in competition to the digital information flood. Maria Vedder works on rendering us sensitive to the visible signs of the invisible, e.g. electricity, the financial crisis and chaos theory. For Marshall McLuhan, electricity was simply "a medium without a message" and therefore something invisible to itself, while generating visibility. In the same way, there is a latent connection between theme and technique in *Susurrus*. To put it another way, this video installation also needs electricity and it is precisely this fact that the installation makes explicit. *Susurrus* is thus media-specific, but in the depth structure of its techno-social context, not on the visual surface.

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