"My ultimate vision of beauty would be a film consisting of one single exposure"

A dialogue with Manfred Neuwirth
by Stefan Grissemann

Memory is a central theme of your work. The essential thing about cinema and video art is to create memory, to capture something for a time afterwards. What part does the concept memory play in your work?

In "Pictures of a fleeting world" I start with the memory of my grandfather, a man who lived for more than a hundred years. In the time just before he died I often asked myself what kind of images remain after such a long life, where does this last drop of energy come from when the body is hardly alive any more?
It's also a very personal project because it's about my own memory. The starting point is based on a thought from Canetti, in which it he maintains that images are necessary in life, for orientation, images one can bring to mind when necessary, giving one a kind of life-scaffolding. Canetti calls this "nets" – that is pictures in and on which something is captured.
I have experienced this very clearly on myself: There was a phase in my life completely without television during my childhood, at the time when the fascination for the cinema was therefore much greater. Whether it was the very first Karl May or not is irrelevant: The greater than life-sized cinema picture always overwhelmed me, gave me incredible energy.

It is well known that the cinema has a generally euphoric effect.

I always had this feeling. With Canetti however this feeling has nothing to do with the cinema, he is talking about a Bruegel painting in the Art History Museum, which has become something of a life-picture., an image of orientation, for him. I believe that these life-images I am searching for come mostly from my childhood – they are images I have tried to find in the "magic hour", and also tried to get out of myself, layer by layer. And it's not just images with me, but also the sound to the images, this is often smelted together in my memory. But there are also other images which have become important in my work, those which have emerged and presented themselves to me through the media. My generation is the last one to distinguish between "one's own" and the "medial" memory. Already the next generation lives much more in this conveyed world. In "Pictures of a fleeting world" I'm trying to hint at the equality of the images coming out of me and the found, medially conveyed. As a camera-man I am also a picture collector, whereby the abundance of material I collect on my journeys provides a kind of assistant memory.

How does one get access to the childhood images you're talking about? These are partly buried deep in the subconscious.

In order to get to these images one has to be in a special unintentional state of mind; one can't force the images to arise, but one can be wary of recognising them when they come back. When I sit by the sea and simply watch three children playing in

front of the waves for example, then this could may well happen. If I consciously try to search for them then everything becomes blocked.

Freud also describes this phenomenon: When one is desperately trying to think of a name which should be rolling off the tongue so to speak, that it only seems to come to mind when one has given up searching. Only then will the associative connection to the wrong name disappear, that was blocking one's view beforehand.

My interest lies in conveying this condition in a film. Only by blocking off the intellectual approach, was this possible. When working in a documentary way, one is often distracted by theory and the possibilities of medial self-reflection. Only by avoiding this quite radically was I able to find these recollected, atmospheric images. The really wonderful moments with such projects are then when one finds one of these images and also happens to have the film camera focussed on it. Even when I'm travelling in Japan or Tibet: these pictures can suddenly have a lot to do with the traces of my memory. The density is important at that moment. My ultimate vision of beauty would be a film consisting of only one single exposure, where a particular emotional state is reflected.

You have quoted the Japanese film maker Takeshi Kitano in the concept of your latest project, saying that one could make a really moving film out of 10 images. Would you call this, also your belief, minimalism or essentialism?

I would like to quote another film maker: Paradshanov was always shocked by the fact that one only associates the cinema with dynamic. He turns this cliché around completely, asserting that the static element is actually the power of the cinema, because the pictorial representation has to be all the more powerful, more immediate.

To the actual project: The figure of your grandfather represents the starting point, and also a kind of framework for the "story"

My thoughts started like this: What happens inside the memory of a hundred year old person? My grandfather's stories were actually very brief, like mine, this was one of our ways of communicating. I want to look closer at what connected us, but also at what divided us: I have had this well-protected, pretty peaceful life really, almost half a century long, he on the contrary had one of poverty, one with many years spent in war.

Many central themes of your work are tied up in this figure: the war, travelling, memory. As someone who took you on long journeys with him, he also made it possible for you to absorb unfamiliar, "strange" pictures.

He is the focal point, the project began in remembering about him.

He is almost as old as the cinema when you filmed him shortly before his death; you are therefore also able, by talking about his life and his memories, to take a look at the history of film. You make connections between his person and the found film material from the Kosovo-conflict. Is that again the smelting of personal and public history?

It is more a question of portraying the picture-less-ness he grew up with in the country. The cinema was an absolute exception for him. Visually and medially speaking, the old people of today had a much more sparing provision of pictures, which maybe led to the flowery nature of their language, consisting of more than just a bare picture/text frame. These people had to generate their pictures themselves, their life-images.

The new visual literacy seems almost out of necessity to have simplified the human language potential.

The number of images deeply affecting one's life emotionally, was probably the same a hundred years ago as it is today, only one is now confronted with so many more, that it is difficult to find one's own. Visualisation has existed for a long time as a meditation technique, the images have been used in every phase of mankind. Only it has become difficult to find pictures of orientation; my grandfather was able to describe events with words - in a way I am no longer able to - simply because these events in his memory hadn't been replaced by anything else.

The war pervades out of the television in the background whilst you are filming your grandfather at the old people's home. It's a programme about the Kosovo-conflict, however it seems that your work is about war altogether.

Yes, my grandfather told me about the war, the first world war, the battles of which he said were the worst experiences of his life. Implicitly at least, that is one theme – and then it's about medial war-images, about the Gulf war and the fights in the Balkan States and Afghanistan.

Your grandfather's memories, especially those of his last one and a half years, interested you particularly?

The question is, what happens when you are actually living off your memories right up to the last minute, something happening to me - already now : I've noticed that I gain strength from memories. What is it like then, shortly before death, when life has sort of turned around, no really new experiences, only memories, remembering? There must be something comforting, strength-giving in that, otherwise those who are soon going to die, wouldn't live as long. Remembering, visualising what one has already experienced must eventually become the main quality of life. I am attempting to find out how one gets back to one's own essential, positive pictures.

Do you see your work as a mixture of sensual and intellectual events?

My main problem is actually that I tend to separate these two levels. On the level of the text I quickly get theoretical, on the pictorial level I soon get into sensuality. My idea of utopia would be to use pictures without text to argue with, like a kind of script; a cinema that doesn't need this literary-defined, intellectual centre. The installation "Pictures of a fleeting world" is an attempt: To put 3 pictures together and juxtaposed, which all appeal to an intellectual level through the sensuality. I look at the installation as a kind of chamber of concentration.

The pictures standing in juxtaposition should be commentating and superimposing each other in one's mind, like a triptych-exposure?

Yes, although the sound should remain dynamic and flowing and then change its position.

The themes and motives in your new installation almost seem like a recapitulation of earlier works. Is it also a kind of "key-work", a tentative sum of your creative work?

Yes, absolutely. This comes about because I like working with material that I used in a completely different way maybe twenty years ago. In a way this project, as far as memory and recollection is concerned, fulfils the function of a detailed work-up of my archive, through which I can free myself for new beginnings and ideas. It's also a cleansing process. At the moment I feel that my storage space is full. It's time to work through it completely once more.

In this archive you're talking about, there is film you made yourself, but also found, borrowed and bought film. Did you build it up systematically?

It is systematic in the sense that I have immediate access to the things I want or could use. The more difficult part is finding a good artistic approach to using it. But I have some fascinating material: A friend of mine made a short-service film of the moon-landing, live from the TV screen, and captured this moment in mankind in strange broken pictures that have an almost ghostly effect.

One of the main lines in your work is quite obviously the double concept familiar/foreign. One often has the feeling that you are trying to present the familiar as foreign as possible, and on the other hand make the foreign familiar.

I would like to make that a basic principle of my life. Whether my work lives up to this or not has to decided by others, but this is my opinion. I avoid saying that I travel somewhere, I prefer saying, I wish to be there. My films are not "memories of journeys, but impressions of a world into which I have brought mine with me, and therefore one comes to a kind of mixture between familiar and foreign. For a time, Orson Welles always took a small window frame with him, giving him a kind of constant familiar structure or feeling of safety wherever he went. In my case it is the camera that helps me to get familiar with things.

Isn't the camera more an instrument for getting a distance to things? You're putting something between you and the world that you're filming.

Let's put it like this: I try to get closer to the world with the camera; of course it's also a kind of protective shield which maybe hinders direct personal contact. The filmmaker is better known as a voyeur than an exhibitionist.

In your productions, especially in the "ma"-trilogy, one notices the aspect of penetration. You seem to submerge under the surface of the moved world. You spoke of the "second glance" that you are looking for; is it this kind of penetrating vision that you mean?

I actually meant more the vision of the viewer, that he brings with him into the film. The first vision is mine, the second one his; I try to give the viewer this possibility in the way I edit it.

The emphasis of "empty spaces" is a central theme in your work.

I'm attempting to solve the mystery of what is between the pictures: When a camera is panning from A to B for example, it delivers something totally different to the human eye than when it jumps from A to B. The eye connected to the brain cuts out everything in between, which the camera doesn't do; it registers the space in between. These in-between spaces are of great significance in my work. The "ma"-sign/symbol, that gave the title for my trilogy   stands for exactly that: for space and time plus emptiness or in-between space. That is not a contradiction: If I'm aware of space and time, then I'm also aware of the space in between.

A certain natural mistrust of all the running pictures surrounding us is very necessary. Is that not also valid for your own pictures? Are they not also the product of your non-general point of view? How "true" then are your pictures? Even if they mirror your own feelings: Are you actually devoid of the "exotic-", the tourist-, the all-absorbing view?

Of course not. But my main aim is to try and work against that. If I'm suffering under the label of "Travel film", then it's because there's a grain of truth in it. But I do believe one can see a difference in the material; where I had the peace and quiet and a more open state of mind, necessary for finding good pictures. There are simply bad days on which one can't find what one is looking for. As to truth and untruth : Kiarostami says that in putting a row of untruths next to each other in a film, one gets to a higher truth.

The presentation of war as a sterile, "virtual" manoeuvre is one of the greatest lies in the picture industry, whereby digital settings of targets and bombings signalise a kind of reality that doesn't exist. It doesn't make any difference if one is viewing night-time air raids on Sarajevo or Afghanistan, or the collapsing of the Twin Towers: they are all cleansed pictures, in which war is converted into something worth showing, into easily digestible, even "beautiful" pictures. When someone like you then talks about the war, one feels it one's duty to try and bring back some of the pain that's missing in these pictures. How does one deal with the handicap of these pictures?

The question of how to deal with pictures of war initially puts me into a state of perplexity. The fact that these pictures are often a kind of lie is a well-known fact for every critical media observer. I only inform myself these days from people who belong to some kind of help organisation, as the only kind of information one can still somehow trust. These people only appear occasionally in the media, but in this way I can try and search for clarity. Some niches still exist. In the first few days after the 11th September this wasn't possible yet; the only perspective seemed to be that of endless repetition. The media functions only on emotionalism: the kind of emotionalism we experience in the media today probably never existed before. The disproportion of it is striking: One knows how many gruesome things happen that the media don't seem aware of.

The terror attack was only visually new, but in fact stands in a long tradition of terror that has been going on for centuries. Because the visual experience was so strong, the terror attack was ideal material to be exploited by the dispersing machines of the entertainment industry

It is also interesting how quickly the attack on the Pentagon disappeared out of the public eye. Hardly anyone can even remember the pictures of it. Only the image of the Twin Towers remains as an icon. These universal pictures, which in a way spread humanity, are strangely enough mostly techno pictures or pictures of catastrophes, whether the moon landing or the challenger catastrophe. Somehow this catastrophic technical-craze-effect seems to be necessary for the pictures to become universal.

On the other hand the Zapruder amateur film of the assassination of John. F. Kennedy also falls into this category.

OK, there are two possibilities – the things which have happened during live transmissions since the eighties, and those from earlier that became international in another way. The question is: Why aren't there any other pictures of real significance in the world? Why does it always have to be something with a gruesome touch or some crazy human achievement?

There are some key pictures which crop up regularly in your work, for example that of the children in the Chinese kindergarten who are throwing things at posters of the gang of four. You use this picture almost as if it was universal although you made it yourself. Does the significance of this picture change as time goes by?

This picture is a good example, because it altered so much historically, also for me. In 1976 I was supposed to travel to China, but then there was a very strong earthquake and the death of Mao so we had to wait until 1977.That was already the beginning of the last battle against the band of four, as runners of the cultural revolution. I was of course politically influenced by university, where China was always talked about as a kind of model and country of fascination. When I was actually there I was then confronted with things that were inconceivable. For example the way propaganda and political opponents were dealt with . Only as a left-winger in China did I then experience what can really happen in a communist society.

There's also always been the intellectuals that have been tortured and murdered in China.

I wasn't able to grasp the full dimension of that at the time –Mao a greater mass-murderer than Stalin. China was merely considered exotic beforehand. And I also had no idea that such terrible things were happening in Tibet at the time. Only twelve years later did I become fully acquainted with the Tibetan situation through doing the camera work for a film there. And aspects of this political suppression in Tibet flow into the project too. These political themes – and their pictures – have influenced my biography, have pursued me. Photos such as of the gang of four picture have become like a point of orientation that always bring me back to earth and make me think about the stations of my life.

As someone who works in a documentary way, searching for and finding pictures: Do you already know while filming what material you're going to need?

Of course, I've also done commissioned camera work, filming under much tougher conditions, where all the pictures one delivers have to fit exactly into a concept. One learns to see what is or could be important, and these experiences also flow into my own work. In my case however, I'm usually recording sound at the same time and often have to wait several minutes for something specific, although nothing much is happening visually. But a kind of routine develops after a while, in knowing that the waiting is often necessary. This also has to do with one's own relationship to film-making: If one looks through the camera and makes it known that one is expecting immediate action for the camera, then one will have problems. I try to at least give the impression that my presence and that of the camera is coincidental. In this way one gets pictures that wouldn't otherwise be possible.

You move between two frontiers as far as form is concerned: the experimental and the documentary often flow together in your work, where you use both video and film and undulate between classical film projection and graphic art, between optical and sound installations. Is this movement between the spheres and possibilities a sort of life principle?

I think so. My work, whether one calls it art or not, arises out of a way of life, a curiosity, an avoidance of routine, a search for different possibilities.

One has the impression that you could have perhaps made things easier for yourself – especially after the success of your documentary film "Memories of a lost country" 1987/88. Instead of following the steps of a documentary film maker, you chose a more complicated path .It seems that you have gone away from the "important", let's say journalistic themes, and moved more towards the lyrical, very personal themes. Is that also your intention?

Not necessarily. I have carried on successfully making documentary films, "From life, love, and death, and also worked with camera, editing and production on various projects. But I do of course see the different phases I'm going through – and because you mention "Memories": I'm working on a documentary film project again at the moment. However if I was forced immediately to specialise on, let's say editing or production, then I would probably stop making films altogether rather than fit in with the film branch. I'm not only interested in trying to survive in the film industry, but in pursuing what interests me.

In one interview you spoke of your love of big film productions such as to Cinema Scope, to Coppola and Lynch. This reference to the high powered, heavily industrial cinema seems to be the exact opposite of your work, which one could radically call independent: "unfiltered" one-man work. Would you ever consider giving up your independence, for say one project, in order to be able to make a big, highly mechanized film?

This opportunity is hardly likely to arise. But Coppola also stands for a radical personal madness – or Lynch or Paradshanov: Those are people who have preserved a strongly self-sufficient position in the cinema, also through the painterly aspect in their work. There is a form of personal work within the film industry, from Chabrol to Bigelows "Strange Days" and Shyamalans "The Sixth Sense".

You have always been searching for socio-political connections in your work, not just produced "beautiful" pictures and sounds. Do you see yourself as part of the interventional, socially engaged art world, which is very present in Austria at the moment?

I don't like delimiting or excluding myself in that way. I made my first really lavish, amateur feature film at the age of 16 in the seventies. I was actually already the obsessed type, who wanted to be an artist, did the directing, the editing, and played the main part in a critical film agitating against the power of advertising. The socio-political influence of my first video works, which led, for example, to the Medienwerkstatt project "People's groaning bone show", let the artistic aspects often fade into the background. At this time one played more the role of a medial social worker who had put various modes of expression into the hands of certain groups of people. In the end it got boring for everyone, because it was the wrong initiative: The idea was that people should take the camera in their hands and report on their affairs. That happened very rarely of course. Part of the fascination for a while came from the fact that most of the media didn't know what to do with the new socio-political trends, demonstrations were hardly documented at all for example. That soon changed. Themes only used previously by alternative media groups, cropped up more and more in the established media. Coming back to the question of socially involved art, these new trends do interest me. I think it's good for example, that art from the socio-political art field was chosen at the 3-Sat-Video prize-giving this year. But probably due to my biography, I have become far more critical about many works than I used to be.

In spite of this: I also consider a film like "Tibetische Erinnerungen" to be a political work, although there is something like an inner retreat perceptible, a retreat into your own emotional world. Or: You are bringing yourself back as a subject into the artwork.

Gaining the self-confidence necessary for showing others what I draw out of myself creatively, is also a process which becomes more natural as one gets older. That's why it's easier to convey a subjective position to the outside world. But as I already said: I am on to themes for a documentary film. But usually the theme finds, or surprises me, rather than me finding it . Of course I doubt my ideas every now and again: Isn't that the same old subjective story again? Shouldn't I work more on open questions, problems? Especially here in the given political situation of Austria?

Anyone who talks about the war of pictures, also talks about it: Which news reaches us, who's sending what? Which messages will one spread, which ones should be suppressed?

What really interests me is the machinery behind the pictures, making the wars into empty – or particularly attractive – pictures. And also the kind of sounds and comments combined with the pictures? I consider the expression " blind seeing machines" to be a very suitable description: One sends off looking machines, from a monitor to a self-and- other -destructive bomb-camera, with which man leaves the level of humanity behind him. The pictures all end in the bomb hitting something, after which there is only an empty white rushing sound. The intimate relationship between the picture- and the military-machines, ultimately leads – in the live-broadcast – to the annihilation: of one's own view and of the hit target. As Günther

Anders always said in connection with the atom bomb: through the atom bomb, man has confronted himself with problems way beyond his comprehension, which he can no longer deal with. These days people have visual access everywhere. You see terror attacks on television and at the same time a camera capsule can penetrate deep inside you. I have the feeling, that "the fear of something" can be increasingly registered in these pictures. Michael Moore shows this very provocatively in his film, "Bowling for Columbine". I associate the expression "Blindness of the seeing machines" very strongly with it: They film, they document, but they have lost the human dimension of putting the pictures into context. There is no longer an intellectual understanding behind their "seeing", no possibility to really see and sort out, or categorize the filmed material.

In a way, the work of these filming bombs is the most primitive form of documentation there is: the narrowing of the view to one target, which is to be destroyed. Reflection is no longer necessary, there is only a short beforehand – and then the end of the transmission.

If one then compares this with the film "Peeping Tom": The murderer's machine is essentially the same, only in the gruesome fascination of fear the pictures of those doomed to death convey, lies a kind of, even if perverse, still human – seeing, not blindness. The camera bomb in contrast, blends out every emotion, becoming an analytical instrument at the same time, showing us "the right way to make war" – with the task of destructing a target. What lies behind this goal, the good, the bad, whatever, always remains open. A moral component however – or maybe even only – the political decision-making ability – is systematically cut out completely.

Serge Daney writes: Every power has something visual. Is your work in this vein, also meant as a criticism of the domination (and visual-domination) of the Western World?.

Of course; going back to the pictures of the remote-controlled bombs. What remains in the presentation is the purpose, actually only the spider-lines themselves. What lies behind the annihilation and destruction, is almost immaterial.

The far-east concept of emptiness seems to go well with the story of the empty video-tape.

Absolutely. I'm not an esoteric person, but I can't deny the logic, that emptiness, the space in between, has the same meaning as the filled space.

The Shikiri-ritual, a form of preliminary psychological battle taking place between the 2 Sumo-wrestlers, is one of the chapters in "Pictures of a fleeting world".

That again has to do with the concept of the space in between: A fight, that in the end lasts 10 seconds, actually takes a good 10 minutes altogether, including all the preparation. In tuning in to each other and getting concentrated, the wrestlers often end up with the same pulse-frequency, their bodies swinging together, in a very similar state. This is necessary, otherwise their heavy collisions could cause bad injuries. What they show in the media today, taking ten minutes, used to take five or six hours. What used to be the main part of the fight, the tuning in, has now been radically cut for television.

Is there not some kind of equivalent ritualised sport in the Western World? In American football for example, everything happens in seconds, but the action itself is the follow-up of minute-long elaborate preparation work. And on television it is again interrupted by adverts and other interferences.

Yes, but the real fascination as against football as a team sport is the one- to- one- man- to-man showdown in Sumo. I like the clear ritual form, the mixture of tension and total calm.

In another part the "Pictures of a fleeting world" you pick up on earlier, politically based Medienwerkstatt films, which deal with anti-atom agitation and demo-films.

Those materials had a strong influence on me – both politically as well as medially speaking.

You describe the once in medium video clearly as having the same role as internet today: a modern, fast means of communication with a socially explosive potential.

Already with Brecht and Benjamin there was always talk of using the contemporary technology for political development. At the beginning of the seventies when we started working with video, it was definitely the medium for artistic and political reform. The medium of the moment always initially appears on the scene as an unoccupied field, automatically acting like a magnet for political groups and artists of course.

In the sequence "World experience" you are actually collecting world-pictures on the Gulf war, Tienanmen and Tschnernobyl. It's about the question of how events can disappear behind pictures. A "good" picture can simply dissolve the complexity of the matter, the existence of a picture can hinder one's perception of something.

I experienced this in a very strange way with the terror attack of the 11. September. The pictures of the Twin Towers collapsing now seems peculiarly historic. I had such diverse perceptions of it: In the first week the pictures had a totally different context to now where they are far more emotional and frightening for me. To start with the pictures weren't nearly as threatening as they seem now, perhaps due to the extreme suppression of reality. It's almost as if the pictures have now caught up with me, as if I can only now begin to grasp their real meaning. The constant repetition of the scenes initially made this impossible.

"Pictures of happiness" is the title, almost in antipathy, of the very next episode.

The particular kind of happiness I'm talking about in this case can only be experienced by a child in my opinion. Undisturbed by the intellect, with direct access to pleasure and joy in life.

One could almost say, the pictures of the previous chapter stand for "public" terror, and those afterwards for your own very private happiness. Are there no pictures that stand for "public" happiness? Pictures that aspire collectively as positive universal pictures?

Maybe I mistrust these too much. I really do believe that all later images of happiness are based on one's childhood impressions. There is also the tendency to search for situations in life that are similar to those that surrounded one as a child.

And thus we are back to memory: The concept crops up in no less than three of your works. Proust says: The past conceals itself somewhere beyond intellectual activity, unexpectedly, in a material object. That fits very well to many of your pictures, which often seem more connected to the sensual and physical than the intellectual.

The material aspect mentioned here I would define as follows: The whole idea of making a project about memory can only work when one allows for subjective findings. Those memory traces I preserve, need to have been through my camera. The other pictures are of equal value, but only when those I found myself, are facing them. I couldn't show this special subjective viewpoint with found footage alone. The moments of happiness occurring during the making of a film, can only evolve out of a situation that one has created oneself. Even though one can't actually order oneself to find a picture of happiness.

But one can create an inviting situation.

Yes, that's true. But I also have to invite myself to get into that special kind of mood.

Translation: Kim Hogben