

SPILOVER

Reflections on the Aesthetics of Adjunct Matter

Hannes Rickli in conversation with Peter Geimer

Hannes Rickli's work is situated where everyday aesthetics are brittle: his photography, videos, and installations open up new vistas of the social dynamics underlying media and their uses. He discovers these in such different places as multi-storey car parks or science laboratories in which rational and aesthetic arguments either intersect or clash.

Peter Geimer: We have decided to begin our conversation with one of the videograms from your "Arena, Überschuss" project. Could you perhaps expand on your notion of a "videogram"?

Hannes Rickli: I have borrowed the term from the Internet and use it figuratively. Videograms are small audiovisual sequences that can be transmitted as coded video emails and played back on any system. Their limited resolution, duration, and data volume afford them a casual and informal character. Moreover, they mostly refer to matters beyond themselves. The sequences collected in "Arena, Spillover" [*Arena, Überschuss*] are also informal and referential. The collection has grown out of material recorded on cameras integrated within scientific test set-ups and gathered over a longer period in research laboratories. If individual sequences are excerpted from what are often very lengthy video protocols of setting up research settings and conducting experimental actions, they appear like messages from an alien, hermetic world.

Peter Geimer: Not knowing that your videogram shows a behavioural physiology test set-up, one would probably think of something else. The clichéd notion of an experimental scientist is still that of a man wearing a white coat, examining a glass tube against the light, operating complex apparatuses, or closely studying a sample with an electron microscope. But what we see here is a young man wearing shorts emerging from a dark space and scrupulously handling a mysterious object; contrary to expectation, his torso is naked, not particularly muscular, but athletic. The caption explains that he is removing dust from an experimental room, and is scantily dressed to prevent unnecessary contamination by minute clothing particles. The object is missing in the second shot; instead, a white spot appears on the man's

right hand. Isolated from the experimental setting, the image now has another, additional quality. It recalls a dance performance. Since the enigmatic activity in the darkness eludes meaning, we might presume the scene to be art, situated somewhere between experimental and aesthetic design. Objects that the experimenter uses to remove the dust, like the roll of splicing tape, look like theatrical props. Vice versa, private objects and accessories suddenly appear to be integral parts of the experimental arrangement. In both images, the man's metal bangle catches our eye, that is, a personal ornament unrelated to laboratory work, dissociated, and yet still present. It is even especially lit. Isolating the image thus suddenly foregrounds incidental and cursory matter – off-stage as it were. So presumably your title refers precisely to such “spillover” – a different kind of quality.

Hannes Rickli: Yes, indeed. What emerges here is an attention to detail that is neither envisaged nor desirable. In economic terms, spillover or surplus denotes what remains in excess of what has been planned, what is produced in excess of need, and what outperforms a prior objective. Such spillover – or excess – is effectively an unknown factor or else it would have been determined in advance. Spillover can be determined as such only in hindsight. And it is precisely this temporal aspect that releases its aesthetic potential through shifting our perspective and casting light on the dynamics of the process in an utterly wilful and uncontrollable fashion. Its intermediary position always renders spillover or excess ambiguous. It looks back, delimits the boundaries of the envisaged, and attempts to identify the interstices in what lies ahead.

Peter Geimer: *How does this aspect of spillover become evident in your videograms?*

Hannes Rickli: Spillover lends itself to multiple interpretations in my work. Videograms produce surplus meaning at sign level, focusing our attention on the accessory or incidental, and thus diverting the human gaze. On the other hand, the products as sign vehicles are themselves spillover or waste. Within a recording system, they emerge in a functional connection with the experimental system. Recorders steer, monitor, and measure processes. But the purpose of recording is not the actual visual outcomes. Instead, the protocols are merely intermediate stages, single elements forming part of a long, transverse chain of abstraction and cleansing operations. They transform the events staged or orchestrated in the laboratory – such as observing the flight behaviour of a fly in a research centre's flight chamber – into tables, diagrams, formulae, charts, maps, and so forth. What crosses the

laboratory threshold at the end of this chain are established and stabilized information units, which can subsequently be linked with other institutions across the world. Whereas such information can be said to be global, my videogram images constitute a different kind of data. They remain in the dark, on the “dark side” of science, as the historian of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger would call the inner worlds of laboratories. While videograms are remnants or by-products, they occupy an essential place in their producers’ plans: scientists aspire to describe and conceptualize complex environments, not least to ultimately govern these.

Peter Geimer: So the by- or waste products of experiments could help enhance our understanding of scientific work?

Hannes Rickli: From an artist’s perspective, these videograms are spillover and yet somehow connected to the plan from which they materialise. Viewed through an aesthetic lens, they speak about the practices of manufacturing scientific facts. They afford insights into concrete situations, and lay bare space, lighting conditions, equipment, people, gestures, unstable bricolage. They inadvertently offer an inside view of the different atmospheric layers of everyday scientific life. Contrary to how science portrays itself to the outside world, that is, as what epitomizes a rational grasp of the world, some of this material reveals the sheer opposite: hesitation, groping in the dark, and failing to make adequate physical contact with the temporarily unknown. Such deficiency raises fundamental questions: does the scientific community wear blinders toward this irrational dimension toward the outside world? Is such behaviour accidental or purposeful? Does it amount to sheer ad-hoc tactics or it is rather subject to some masterplan? Would such images possibly unsettle the monopoly of a rational description of the world? After all, rationality is the hefty argument that the scientific community advances to assert its social and economic power. Rationality, moreover, underpins the prevailing culture of technology and expert knowledge.

Or rephrased in terms of the image of the scientist’s metal bangle, seemingly incongruous in the experimental context, I wonder whether such intimacy is merely incidental and minor or whether we are not perhaps onto something essential when our gaze suddenly focuses on the corporeal and atmospheric, namely a malfunctioning of the rational, inadvertently produced by the scientific system.

Art is expected to extend our grasp of the world through the corporeal and subjective. Perhaps I find my own videograms unsettling precisely because therein science and art seem to

mysteriously intersect. While they are produced according to rational criteria, they nevertheless disclose personal and even intimate matter.

Peter Geimer: *I wonder which allocation of roles between art and science underpin your reflections. Watching the videograms, I find it impossible to delimit the scientific and aesthetic dimensions. But this has to do with the fact these images are subject to change, of course, once they no longer circulate exclusively within the confines of the laboratory but enter the context of art. The division of labour between art and science that I mentioned before would thus be as follows: in producing knowledge, science constantly produces waste – failures, aberrations, makeshifts, unstable bricolage, and subjective interspersions. Such waste must be purposefully excluded from stable end products, like formulae, diagrams, and tables. It is simply redundant and superfluous. But along comes art and takes an interest in precisely these exclusions and rejects, that is, the material that scientists have cast aside and left by the wayside. How would you describe this division of labour? Various models are conceivable here: art as an external observer of scientific practice, as an explicit critic of blindspots, as a corrective or compensation, or simply as the process of weaving the threads initially spun in the laboratory further only to be subsequently discontinued and discarded.*

Hannes Rickli: Weaving truncated threads further would certainly be an attractive game. Artists play it, for instance, by picking up the thread of technical image production and feeding a machine, electron microscope, or large computer with their own input, which, however, is alien to context. While such appropriation extends formal vocabulary, I am more interested in so-called simple picture and image media, like photography or video, forming part of sophisticated high-tech apparatuses. Their shadowy existence enables these media, since they are not really taken into account by science, to produce images also readable by scientific laypersons through their displacement into the context of art. Their mimetic, that is, conventional language affords us a window through which we can engage in the physical dealings with the state of not knowing or not yet knowing. That is, we witness the manufacturing of the new and unforeseen in the early stages of a research process and quest for knowledge.

Through collecting the leavings from contemporary functional images, I am undertaking an aesthetic archaeology of sorts. The act of selection renders valuable the fragments, without, however, either gauging or roughly approximating their value. For now, I am unable to determine whether such a collection could serve to exercise criticism, make observations, or

furnish a corrective. What matters is that the images and pictures collected unfold their potential through transcending their functional intention, and that they amount to more than envisaged prior to their production. Art would thus merely constitute the attempt to bring into focus or frame found images. We would subsequently need to readjust our gaze on the collected items to activate the potential inherent in the surplus intention.

***Peter Geimer:** It is interesting that you refer explicitly to the role of the scientific layperson. Which is what we are in the face of most laboratory activities, as scientists are with regard to art and the humanities. Such ubiquitous laity, however, cannot lead to recognizing, accepting, or leaving unquestioned the authority of others without further ado. But it strikes me as mistaken, too, to mitigate the differences doubtless existing between science and art for ideological reasons. In a recent interview, the director of a German art museum expressed the view that science and art were currently very close again, as in the good days of the Renaissance. I would strongly disagree with this view and argue, on the contrary, that all preoccupation with another, highly specialized practice must first engage in a critical reflection on difference.*

I was implying as much when I raised the issue of the allocation of roles between science and art. When an artist sits down at an electron microscope or large computer, as your example suggests, he or she does so as an artist, of course. Whatever he or she does in that situation will be immediately perceived as art. Therefore he or she cannot expect such work to appeal to a scientist per se. Simply put, crossing boundaries ought to involve considering the vantage point from which one takes action and how one negotiates insides and outside perspectives. It is not enough to assert that no boundaries exist anymore or that artists also experiment or that art is science.

Hannes Rickli: How would you describe the interplay of these two systems?

***Peter Geimer:** Against the background of our present discussion, I would describe the stance you adopt with your archive of remnants as a kind of expectant distance. You are interested less in becoming active on the scientists' homeground and employing their technologies, but rather in identifying what lies slumbering on the fringe of such knowledge systems, what these evidently cannot utilize and therefore leave behind. It is thus rather an observant and descriptive attitude, whose purpose is not to hold up a mirror to those in working in laboratories.*

Hannes Rickli: Let me return once more to the dilemma arising when art and science are subsumed under the same denominator as if they were both social practices involved in symbolizing the world. The term “experiment” usually serves to bracket both. The term, however, is complex and carries very different connotations in these fields. Within each, moreover, it has a most heterogeneous array of meanings, thus suggesting that it is unsuitable for simplistic comparison. For the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, for instance, art *is* “experimentation.” In postmodernity, he argues, art constitutes an experiment as a kind of movement designed to perpetuate our sense of the non-representable through constantly renewed allusions. Neither can existing categories and rules guide the production of art, Lyotard claims, nor can the observer expect recognizable form to provide consolation. The incessant violation of rules aims not at achieving reconciliation with reality, but instead at representing the dream of the “inclusion of reality” [*Umfassung der Wirklichkeit*] as a phantasma. (Vice versa, randomness or the absence of rules could obviously be critiqued as a method of establishing rules).

The history and theory of science has only recently begun to explore the status of the experiment in the sciences, particularly of the experimental system as the reciprocal permeation of human, technical, and media components. So what exactly is an experiment? What exactly an experimental system? Which nature, and which reality, does an experimental system represent or produce?

With regard to your question about the videogram collection, your notion of “expectant distance” strikes me as pretty accurate, particularly due to the latency it alludes to. For what the scientific notion of an experiment and Lyotard’s have in common, and this might be their sole point of contact, is specific and inherent temporality. Lyotard speaks of the paradox of the future anterior and observes: “Artists and writers thus work without rules; their work involves establishing the rules of what *will have been made*. Work and text assume the character of an incident or event. For the author, rules always arise too late or, and this amounts to the same, that elaborating them always commences too soon.” [1]

Peter Geimer: *How does this temporal deferral function in your videos?*

Hannes Rickli: I consider the sequences as traces that only unfold possible effect or meaning in a subsequent viewing. However, they resemble hieroglyphs whose decoding requires either the discovery or furnishing of appropriate keys. Their shift into the context of art occurs

merely on the basis of the notion or inkling that aesthetic observation could supply a possible key.

On occasion, this prompts uncertainty about how and where such work should be classified. I am often asked whether I am an artist employing scientific methods or a scientist acting artistically. Neither is true, since I am an artist and no more. My work is thus not situated between art and science, but exclusively in art. I am interested in how “presence,” “event,” and “reality” are brought forth and enacted as aesthetic categories. In the working title for the collection project “Arena, Spillover” [*Arena, Überschuss*], the term “Arena” denotes the experimental system as a space especially prepared for enactments or stagings and their subsequent mediation. In doing so, I sometimes step onto terrain alien to art, where practices are defined primarily not in aesthetic terms, although aesthetic action is indeed taken there. The object of observation could perhaps be circumscribed in terms of what art would consider the aesthetic unconscious, that is, what has neither been envisaged or realized in professional aesthetic terms, but wherein I discover some potential. Such work focuses not on the object itself, but merely on its behaviour, for instance as a knot or fissure in an ever more tightly woven web of purposefully designed everyday surfaces.

I also discover such instances in other systems, such as the multi-storey car park, as a particular instance of the traffic system. The car park affords us an opportunity to see how design displaces the real: the automotive industry designs homely interiors as well as trivializes and humanizes form to suppress atmospheric and environmental pollution, noise emissions, oil policy, and so forth. But such displacement or suppression is suspended in the car park: its raw materiality alarms us, causes us to lose our bearings, and renders uncanny the immediate surroundings and their atmosphere. The multi-storey car park raises the question whether society or rather business and industry, in the guise of the authoritarian gesture of a mass organization, reveal an utterly different face, which now suddenly flashes up through the veneer of customized design.

My interest lies in the dynamics underlying (everyday) aesthetics and their media, and in locating sites and places where these workings can be identified beyond what meets the eye.

Peter Geimer: I find your assertion “I am an artist and no more” compelling. In his latest book, the art historian Wolfgang Ullrich describes the current and utterly opposite tendency: it is evidently no longer good enough for artists to master a particular genre; these days, they must cross all conceivable boundaries, be painters, sculptors, and filmmakers all at once, and expand such multi-tasking through writing, cooking, and running their own company. [2]

Moreover, Ullrich's question about what the benefits might be is perfectly justified. Presumably it carries with it the romantic notion of the artist as a figure concerned with the whole in times of utmost specialization, that is, a figure once more transcending differentiation.

In this respect, your description strikes me as far more compelling: to be an artist and no more, tracing involuntary aesthetics in "territories alien to art," which are not envisaged thus and virtually lie waste. So it is less a matter of swarming out into all conceivable areas and domains to hook up and chip in, but rather of attracting phenomena, such as carrying an unusual rock found on the beach home to look at from all angles.

Perhaps we could pursue this question with another example, such as your "Level # I – V" (2003). This raises the issue of intervention quite differently, since here you move into everyday life and engage with a semi-public space, the multi-storey car park at Basel/Mulhouse airport. Could you explain what this "intervention" was about?

Hannes Rickli: At the time, Crossair – which later became Swiss International Airlines – was constructing a large administrative building. Early on, in 2001, the civil engineers realized that the envisaged car park, comprising five expansive parking levels (each providing five hundred parking spaces covering 10'000m²), would overwhelm any conventional wayfinding sign system employing arrows, letters, and colour. In their eyes, the building's design made no provision for longer or congenial user stays – which is precisely what makes a multi-storey car park what it is. Nevertheless, company staff using the facility would be spending several minutes every day in the low-ceilinged concrete caverns replete with colonnades of supporting pillars, fire sections, vehicles, sprinkler and ventilation installations. The engineers anticipated that even in their state-of-the-art building, subject to compliance with all limit values, human individuals would lose their sense of direction and be afflicted by a sense of the uncanny.

Now, any artistic intervention could not aim to render this space habitable. Its spatial perimeters and the amount of concrete were simply too large. Nor was I interested in cosmetic embellishment. Instead, I sought to explore the collapse of the sense of sight as the primary organ of orientation immediately upon leaving a parked vehicle – or rather, the displacement of the "sense of reading" through hearing, smell, and touch. It seemed to me that only an uncontrollable, sudden shift of perceptual modes could help explain the loss of orientation – notwithstanding signposting and routine – in what was both a rationally planned and geometrically well-organized structure, in both cognitive and civil engineering terms.

While researching and drafting my art-and-architecture project, the multi-storey car park became an increasingly paradigmatic space, what Siegfried Kracauer called a “space image”: “Every typical space is brought forth by typical social circumstances, which find expression therein without consciousness intervening. Everything denied by consciousness, that is, everything otherwise deliberately ignored, is involved in its constitution. Space images are the dreams of society. Decoding the hieroglyph of the space image brings forth the basis of social reality.” [3] And it is precisely in civil engineering, where envisaged design does not “intervene,” but function is all-important, that the aesthetic finds particularly fierce expression. In my attempt to understand why this comes with a sense of the uncanny, I turned to late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century interpretations of urban life. Among others, Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Sigmund Freud all developed a perceptual sensibility for the newly emerging metropolis. Urbanism brought forth new phenomena, which had unsettling and “alienating” effects in the guise of various space sicknesses. In ever new attempts, these writers addressed such enormously significant social questions and how they affect the individual. They entered into hallucinatory states to become “dreamers” (Kracauer) or “individuals awakening” (Benjamin) in order to establish a sense of, and assemble into new images, social reality and its intersecting conflicts – proximity versus distance, the familiar versus unfamiliar [4], the crowd versus the individual, and pre-history versus post-history. [5] I consider most productive the early stages of events and processes, where we can perceive phenomena even though they are as yet indistinct or blurred, and where the questions and methods concerning their representation still need to be fathomed. Both the modes of construction and potential aberrations lie open before us, and become subsequently apparent, in the search for new representations and the uncertainties it involves. Such modes enable us to recognize the unforeseen, which perhaps explains why I find the incipient stages of scientific experiments intriguing.

With regard to your question about what my work in the airport car park was about, I was at first somewhat helpless and uncertain about the exact nature of this seemingly commonplace facility. It gradually occurred to me that this sense of helplessness and non-comprehension about this particular social space actually fuelled the project. The resultant interventions appear to me as attempts to inquire into its specific spatial design. They helped lay bare layers in which the aesthetic could be determined as a social reality.

Peter Geimer: One of the videogram motifs recurs in your description of the car park project: your interest in the inactual, that is, the aesthetics of what occurs incidentally or casually and

does not really count or matter. In the Kracauer passage, cited beforehand, consciousness is what disturbs and intervenes, inhibits and interrupts. Consequently, the unconscious or peripheral would be precisely where matters emerge and come to light. That is, not amidst bustling traffic, but in the multi-storey car park; not in a heated vehicle or well-defined workspace, but on our walk from one location to the other, in a space that has “no” meaning, so to speak, but nevertheless exists and must therefore be somehow refurbished or redesigned. As you mention, this is precisely where the aesthetic finds its fiercest expression. I might add that I have no driving licence. Nevertheless, I am also very familiar with the uncanniness of car parks from being a front-seat passenger. I suppose the role of the passenger appeals to you: we are involved in driving a car without, however, being directly responsible for forward movement, leaving us free to observe the side-effects or concomitant phenomena of advancing through time and space. We have no idea when and why to use the clutch and our knowledge of traffic regulations is inadequate, so we are well-situated to observe traffic. Front-seat passengers are dispensable in a remarkable manner: they are the unconscious element of driving, the “surplus” or excess value of the highway code...

Hannes Rickli: The artist as front-seat passenger: what a splendid image! So how could his or her work as a producer of art be described? In which perceptual state do artists travel through time and space? Since the artist as passenger is unfamiliar with the abiding procedures, but even more so since these elude him or her, they experience a state of latent tension. Considering this situation, artists suspect that foul play is involved; after all, their physical inviolability is at stake. What should they do about their suspicion that the system ultimately lies beyond their control? The artist as passenger becomes mindful of anything that indicates the course of events; like a physiognomist, he or she becomes an unknowing interpreter. Even the minor or incidental becomes suspect, and the artist tentatively saves such matter for later consideration.

To return to the formless, and to dust, dirt, and the discarded as distinguishing features. In the multi-storey car park, inhaling exhaust fumes and carbon black makes us aware of the materiality of the traffic system. While we are familiar with this perception of dirt, impurities and dust are also charged with other meanings. For instance, the Dadaistic avant-garde employed dust as an iconoclastic gesture in its endeavour to redirect aesthetics toward the authorless shaping work of time. [6] In contemplating the image that Christian Schad produced through exposure to light in a Geneva hotel room eighty five years after the event, that is, the shadow cast on a minute, irregularly cut piece of photographic paper by fallen out

hair and amorphous dust particles, we are actually looking at one of the first traces of waste and modern technology making contact in art: this is a primordial scene, so to speak – a fledgling moment with an uncertain outcome, yet nevertheless fully resonant.

I would like to pursue the dust metaphor somewhat further. Let us return briefly to the experimenter in the videogram, wearing a headlamp and preparing the experimental system for use. His work consists in detecting and eliminating disruptive potential in the shape of dust particles. Through removing the dirt, he prevents undesired artefacts from entering the system, since the camera makes no distinction between dust and flies. I would consider this scene to be crucially symptomatic: where science and politics are largely engaged in cleansing procedures, art picks up the dust to examine it more closely.

Translated by Mark Kyburz

Notes

1 Jean-François Lyotard, Beantwortung der Frage, was ist postmodern?, in Wolfgang Iser (ed.), *Wege aus der Moderne*, Berlin 1994, p. 203; original emphasis – TRANS.

2 Wolfgang Iser, *Tiefer hängen. Über den Umgang mit der Kunst*, Berlin 2003

3 Siegfried Kracauer, *Über Arbeitsnachweise* (1930); in: *Ibid.*, *Strassen in Berlin und anderswo*, Berlin, 1987 – TRANS.

4 Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche [The Uncanny]*, Studienausgabe Bd IV, Frankfurt a/Main, 1990

5 Walter Benjamin, *Das Passagenwerk [The Arcades Project]*, vols. 1-2, Frankfurt a/Main, 1983

6 See Christian Schad, *Schadographie "Ohne Titel"* (8,2 x 5,9 cm), 1919; see also Marcel Duchamp/Man Ray, *"Elevage de poussière"*, 1920

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Hannes Rickli is a practising artist. He studied photography (1984-1988) and the theory of art and design (1999-2002) at the Zurich School of Art and Design. From 1986 to 1992, he worked as a photo journalist for various newspapers (Tages-Anzeiger Magazine, NZZ, Weltwoche) before embarking on his career as an artist. His work, widely exhibited, spans numerous projects in public space and in art and architecture. His publications include various contributions to catalogues and professional journals as well as “Spurenkugel – ein Schreibspiel” (1996). He has been a lecturer at the Zurich School of Art and Design (now the Zurich University of the Arts) since 1996.

Peter Geimer holds a PhD in art history. Until 2004, he served as a research associate at the University of Constance Literature and Anthropology Research Centre before moving to the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin. He was appointed senior research associate at the Chair for Sciences Studies at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH Zürich) in 2004. His publications include *Die Vergangenheit der Kunst. Strategien der Nachträglichkeit im 18. Jahrhundert*, Weimar: VDG 2002; *Ordnungen der Sichtbarkeit. Fotografie in Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technologie*, ed. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2002 (2nd edition 2004); he is also the co-editor of *Kultur im Experiment*, Berlin: Kadmos 2003.