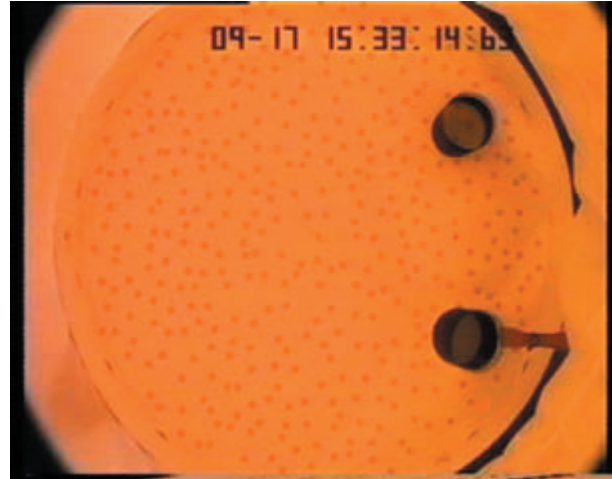


Precision of Vision
by Frances Guerin

Videogramme

Helmhaus Zurich
Limmatquai 31, 8001 Zurich,
Switzerland
September 6, 2009 - October 25, 2009

Critics and historians of modernity have remarked on the precision of vision that is enabled by the introduction of the photographic image. In particular, photography, and later the cinema's, capacity to mimetically reproduce reality in a two-dimensional image were celebrated until around the 1960s. Hannes Rickli, a Swiss multi-media artist, might be one of a number of contemporary artists who discourse on the spuriousness of photographic images' claim to truth, but Rickli's moving images engage in such issues from novel perspectives.

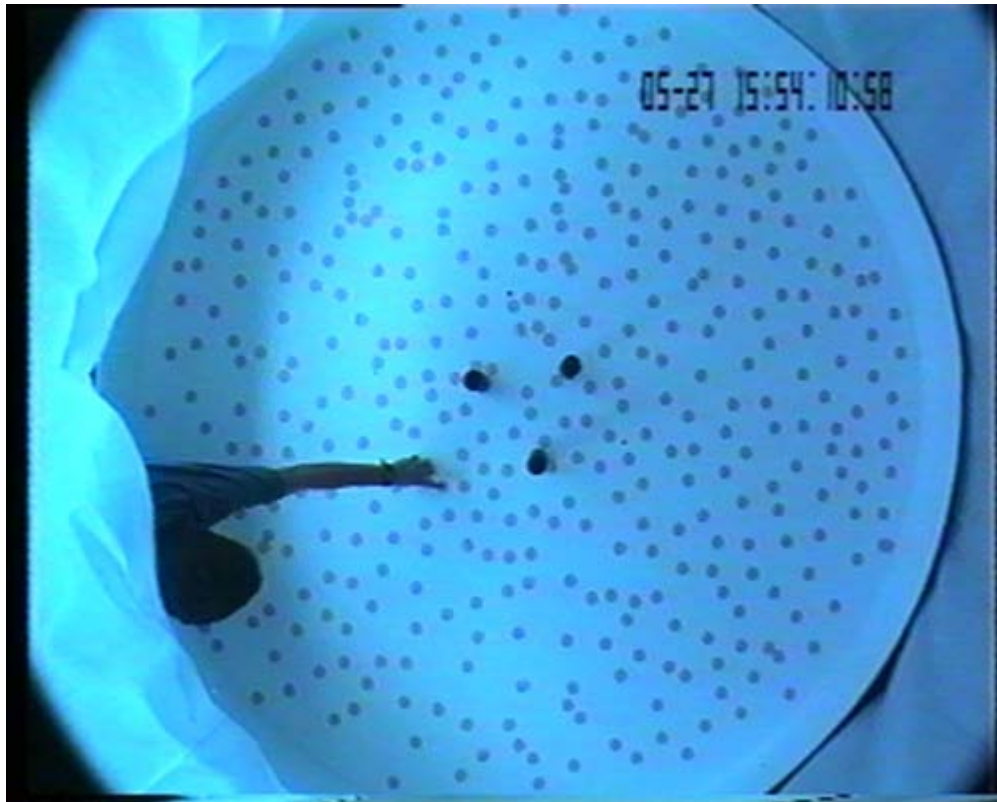


Peter Geimer has noted in relation to another exhibition, that Rickli's work occupies the threshold of science and aesthetics. Rickli's current installation at the Zurich Helmhaus adds the dimension of technology to this crossroads. Rickli's installations bring science, art, aesthetics, and technology together to create an image that is captivating for its revelation of the minutest of movements of the filmed object. To the point where we forget we are watching something, and begin to watch ourselves watching.

In *Roter Knurrhahn (Trigla lucerna)*, Rickli installs a data-encoder that transmits live audio- and videodata being recorded by scientist Philipp Fischer as he watches the social behavior of fish in an aquarium in Helgoland to the Zurich Helmhaus. Thus, we watch the fish in their controlled environment simultaneous with the biologist. The piece dominates the floor of the museum and as we stand, looking down, we are fascinated not only by the movements and behavior of fish as they are

transmitted live from far away Helgoland. But in those moments where there is an absence of movement, indeed, at times, an absence of fish in the image, we begin to watch the movement of the water, shadows moving across the screen. As a child approaches the aquarium, we watch the fish become excited at this alien presence. In addition, a microphone records the sounds of the children enchanted by the fish. Like all of Rickli's work, *Roter Knurrhahn (Trigla lucerna)* is most rewarding when seen over time – if we have the patience to watch, we will become familiar with the fish behavior, the strange sounds they make transmitted by a microphone, the commotion when they are fed, their transformation into shadows that cross the image depending where they are in relationship to it. This piece also has the fascination of an image coming to us live from Helgoland, translated from one country to another, from one medium to another, from aquarium to museum, from laboratory to art work. In this translation, *Roter Knurrhahn (Trigla lucerna)* engages with discourses of the instantaneity of image production, the veracity of the observational documentary image, the possibility (and simultaneous impossibility) of rationalizing knowledge (about the fish), the coincidence of science and art as both are transformed into representation that searches for knowledge.

To give one example of the many fascinating questions raised by *Roter Knurrhahn (Trigla lucerna)*, when we see shadows move across the surface of the image, at the periphery of the frame, the fish, just off screen, swim in relation to the light in such a way that they become spectres of their real selves. And we wonder if they and their behavior can ever really be caught by the moving image? How close to reality are those images that claim to document and observe animal behavior? And, by extension, it is a short step to making a human analogy: can we and our behavior ever be caught by the CCTV cameras that watch us incessantly in an attempt to capture the reality of our movements?



This coupling of fish and human behavior, of fish and human observation came to life for me as I wandered the exhibition with one of the biologists, Hans Hofmann, with whom Rickli collaborated. In *Afrikanischer Buntbarsch (Astatotilapia burtoni)* three monitors are stacked vertically, and we watch a

180 degree pan around Hofmann's laboratory in which the social behavior of the African cichlid fish are being observed in Austin Texas. Hofmann explained the logic of the experiment. The female fish swims in a central chamber, flanked on either side by male fish in their respective chambers. An area on either side of the bottom of the female's chamber enables interaction (without sharing the same physical space) between male and female. In this space, the courting between fish is performed. As we watched what might, to an untrained eye be an uneventful video, Hofmann related his students' fascination with the mating behavior of the fish: one new student who dutifully observed the fish announced, "this is no different from being in the pub." It's true, when we spend time with fish, we start to watch ourselves watching others.



Rickli's work also continues the conversation about observation, the simultaneity of perception and the codification, or rationalization, of behavior through technology in a work that maps the behavior of cichlids fish. The activity on the database in Hofmann's laboratory is fed into Led light code, a code that flashes across the walls of the art museum. In Zurich, I am able to observe the activities of the researchers in Hofmann's lab. Again, the three green and red horizontal panels of text and numbers become aesthetically pleasing. The rational sciences are transformed into aesthetic objects as they transmit data that is no more than an image.

What is interesting about this work is that it also engages with concerns of privacy and the capacity of observational systems to see into the private lives of individuals. But the opposite is also true – how easily decoded is

this information? As he watched the activity in the lab for a period of months Rickli explained that he was surprised to find isolated weeks of intense activity. When he pointed this out to Hofmann, Hofmann laughed and said, "that's because the undergraduates term assignments are due in that week!" While Hofmann might be able to survey his students' use of the lab, because of the coding of the system, we don't get access to this privileged information. Even after we have left the Helmhaus, indeed Zurich, we can continue to watch the activity in Hofmann's lab as it is streamed onto the internet at: <http://texas.nextcode.ch/three/> - much like the reality TV that streams into our living rooms, there is not an awful lot for the uninvolved eye to notice in this data. And so, I find myself watching myself watching.

Along these lines, Rickli's videos remind me of the 1990s work of video artist Gary Hill – for their

challenge to the visual perception of the viewer. Moving images of bees and fish sit on top of a pedestal, we get queasy as we watch the underwater camera of Peter Fischer in its observation of fish in the sea, we strain to see the image of Stephen Fry's fruit flies high up on the wall. And when the fish and flies move outside the space of the screen, we are left just watching ourselves watching. This physical extension of the spectator makes the exhibition demanding. As we reach beyond our habitual viewing practices, this, for me, is what anchors Rickli's works in the realm of aesthetic practice. As Rickli himself acknowledges, he may explore the boundary between science and art, between the laboratory and the museum, but ultimately, questioning the reality and viability of both, his work is resolutely artistic. As we are confronted with our own sense of mastery over the image, and by extension, of our habitual viewing practices, Rickli pushes the capacity of the moving image to new and exciting levels.

--Frances Guerin

(Images courtesy of the artist and Helmhaus Zurich)