

Who Speaks? Who Speaks? The Dynamics of Speech and Space in the Work of Monika Oechsler.

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Monika Oechsler's work follows a trajectory in which two fundamental questions are asked of us, as an observant audience. One, it seems to me, emerges out of the other in the course of her career, representing perhaps a sophisticated shaping and rethinking by the artist of the issues raised within her oeuvre. The first might be phrased as "who speaks" – that problem, raised by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*, that knowledge is not a matter of distinguishing the immanent characteristics of good and evil, but one of knowing who was speaking at the point where self and other were distinguished. As Nietzsche points out, accompanying this distinction are a set of assumed character traits and binarisms that separate self from other; by which one defines who and what one is, against those persons and their characteristics that are not you. This question pervades much of Oechsler's work through the 1990s in its concern with the construction of subjectivity in the speech of others, our "scripting"; something that is most obviously present in works like *High Anxieties* (1998).

More recently the question seems to have become "how do we speak?"; an interrogation not simply of articulation, but of the mechanics and dynamics of the subject's relation to others in space and time. The issue here is not *that* we are "scripted" (performing texts that were, to a degree, written in advance of us), but *how* we are. It's a question that is, in a sense, still in process; still being refined by large-scale multi-screen works and sound installations such as *Schauspiel* (2003), *Ghost* (2004), *Solar Plexus* (2003), and *At the Far and Farthest Point* (2004). It's a question that undermines the simple binarism, which allows you to assume that you are wholly constructed in someone else's definition of otherness – and that your difference is therefore, somehow, radical – but rather insists that you recognise that the scripts which construct you, and those who construct them, are themselves "scripted" in advance. For Oechsler there is no original speaker who may in the spatial relation of subjects distinguish, as Nietzsche suggests, between the self as *Agathos* and the other as *Deilos* [1].

In this turn to the constitution of the speaking subject in space, and the dynamic relations of subject to space of speech and to other speaking subjects, I'd suggest that Oechsler makes a pertinent comment on the concept of the 'public sphere' formulated by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. [2] I'd also suggest that in the subjective possibilities of her installations – what we might term their 'room for play', which first manifests itself in the work *Johari's Window*, and

which is *almost* literalised in *Schauspiel* – Oechsler offers a pertinent critique of both the mass media *and* much other contemporary video installation as nothing more than disabling spectacle. Both the questions raised by Oechsler presume subjective capacities – attention; the reflective internalising of experience - that may have been disabled by the mass-media she critiques, and potentially, by the very technology that she deploys. [3] This is, if you like, her gamble: one first made manifest by the poker-playing women of *Johari's Window* (2000).

It's a gamble that we might understand as equivalent to that of Walter Benjamin – a thinker who was himself fond of the gambler as a motif for the experience of the subject in modernity [4] – with his theorizing of the subjectively liberating possibilities of film in the 1930s. As Miriam Bratu Hansen has recently pointed out in a compelling essay, 'Benjamin wagers that the only chance for a collective, non-destructive, playful innervation of technology rests with the new mimetic technologies of film and photography – notwithstanding their uses to the contrary.' [5] Those uses would include the subjugating of both individual subjective capacities – such as attention and reflection – and collective agency through the effects of mass-culture effected by the mass-media. (The condition of modern culture pointed to by Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.)

For Habermas the mass-media as an element of culture both potentially extends the public sphere – in that we have more places in which to speak both individually and collectively – and immediately cuts off that potential by denying the subject the capacity for self-articulation through its denaturing effects. I'd suggest that Oechsler's recent work restores, or more accurately *reemphasises*, the possibility of that capacity, one which was so sincerely wished for by the early practitioners of video, sensing the medium's radical, democratic potential. In particular, I'd argue that Oechsler's work opens out the possibility for the kind of reflective, accumulated, subjective experience, termed as *Erfahrung* by Benjamin, to distinguish it from the modern subjective experience of isolated shock, repeated but from which we never learn, that he termed *Erlebnis*. [6] Such a possibility was once, of course, the norm for the bourgeois subject, but now, after a century and a half of modernity's denaturing effects and the penetration of mass-culture into every sphere of existence, with its shocks both actual and mediated, it seems utopian. This condition, *Erfahrung*, is also, it seems to me, the fundamental capacity for a functioning subject within the Habermasian conception of the public sphere.

I don't want to suggest that Oechsler is unique in achieving this, nor that such a project is specific to video, nor that there is no history within video installation of similar ambitions. We can see similar deconstructions of the visual field of the filmic and video spectacular in the work of a number of contemporary artists whose work critiques the ideology of installation even as it

appropriates its technical forms. Anthony McCall's *Long Film for Four Projectors* (1974) was an early filmic installation that attempted the kind of self-aware subjective, and corporeal, disorientation that I'd argue is fundamental to Oechsler, and which is also at the core of Benjamin's utopian hope for cinema. Similar experiments, within video, can be found in the oeuvres of Bruce Nauman and Peter Campus in the early 1970s – with works such as *Going Around the Corner Piece* (1972) Nauman and *Interface* (1972), Campus.

What I do want to suggest is that Oechsler's recent installations reconstitute (or more accurately deconstruct) the space in which the subject is constructed, and in their rendering that space as participative [as such](#) transform the possibility of experience as a model for participation in the public sphere. She creates what I term "inchoate space": an unstable visual and experiential field that is at once observational and participatory, which demands attention, and which above all encourages the accumulation of experience. Where the deployment of film and video as media of mass communication and sensation has so much depended on the effect of shock [*Erlebnis*] and the fragmentation, or shattering of the subject – and art film/video installations such as Bill Viola's *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2000) are as effective in this strategy as a Hollywood film, such as *The Matrix* [7] – the fragmentation of screens, sounds and participating subjects in Oechsler's work seems to encourage a self-conscious internalisation of, and reflection upon one's "shattering". This is the utopian possibility of film, as single screen projection, imagined by Benjamin in his comments on Charlie Chaplin's parodic "disintegrations" in his early comedies; films in which, as Bratu Hansen notes, Chaplin 'renders self-alienation productive by making it visible'. [8] It is also a return to the capacity for experience as *Erfahrung*. Oechsler, I would argue, restores the potential for a dialectical transformation of the subject not only by making self-alienation visible, but by simultaneously rendering it haptic – that is, tangible, experiential, "sculptural". [9]

The video installation, perhaps more effectively than any other medium of contemporary art, allows us to think through how subjectivity is enacted in the space of the world. Speech does not exist in a vacuum: it is present with actions, and it takes time; but neither time nor space are linear, nor are they constants. Film, of course, depends upon such a regulation in its ratio of framed space to metered time: video as medium produced by the signal rather than the chemical trace, and the installation as 'inchoate space' is not so determined. This constant dynamic is apparent in the play between the characters on the screens in a work such as *Johari's Window*.

What's central to this installation is what is not central at all – the spectator. To shoot the piece Oechsler used a rotating device with four cameras attached, allowing her to record the action from the centre of a circular table. This material was then edited to create a rhythmic relation

between the seven women seated at the poker table, projected over four screens in an X arrangement, but with the figures themselves circulating from one screen to another. Here no point of view is ever stable, no relation of one character to another is ever stable, and nor, therefore, are any of our relations. There is a sense in which, with this work, Oechsler takes the practice of rhythmic montage from film – where it was confined to a single screen, and used as a strategy to create meaning through alienated relationships of images – and locates it in an inhabited space.

Confronted by this visual maelstrom, if we attempt passivity as spectators we are not simply absented from the work; rather, we are made into the object of the 'game' – becoming both the poker cards that are played between the characters, and the inter-subjective relationships that are played out between them on the installation's screens. In order to truly participate in this artwork we must surrender the pretence of control and distance that is encouraged by the static relation to the single screen; it is necessary that we engage with the space. The images of *Johari's Window* are, therefore, haptic – in that they establish a space in which we must move our bodies, and I'd suggest our intellects, rather than sitting, or standing, still and waiting to be 'moved' emotionally by the narrative played out before us.

Oechsler's subsequent works have moved beyond this to make the space of installation – whether of image or sound - itself an integral element of the artwork. So much of film, with its emphasis on a static, seated spectator, and its reinforcement of the camera's single point perspective through the adherence of theatrical architecture to the same principles, establishes a myth of visual supremacy for a subject that is outside the action, and participating in it only in their imagination. The video installation *can* establish, by contrast, a choreography of relation – spatialising what is otherwise textual, rendering participative what is otherwise merely spectatorial. This is what Oechsler does with installations such as *Schauspiel*, *Solar Plexus* and *At the Far and Farthest Point* – and in them she exemplifies what are, for me, the subjective possibilities of 'inchoate space'.

In *Schauspiel* we are confronted with the dismantling of theatrical space – the place of play. Where the single screen of cinema, and its narratives, makes phantasmatically 'real' the haptic artifice of theatre, *Schauspiel* simultaneously dismantles the stable relation of subject to screen by having three back-projected screens offset, through which the spectator must walk, which allows that spectator to see the dismantling of the spectacle rather than the spectacle played out. The screened action – the preparation of a stage-set for a production of Ibsen's *Brand* in the Schauspielhaus, Stuttgart – is analogous to what the novelist André Gide called a *mise-en-abyme*, a motif within the work that comments on its own meaning. [10] The installation itself is a

deconstruction of the mechanics of seeing – in the cinematic sense. And this is a proper ‘deconstruction’ in the Derridean sense, since those disassembled elements of the gaze are reconstructed in a different way that solicits a new form of subjective experience for the spectator. This is not simply that what would ordinarily be on one screen is on three, with the spectator having to relate one to another; nor that the spectator has to move between those screens in an environment that might itself be a stage set. What leads me to describe *Schauspiel* as “inchoate space” is that accompanying this instability of the viewing subject and the instability of the screened object of the gaze is the element in which what is screened is itself a deliberate undermining of stable subjectivity, through use of different camera positions, through editing, and through its very subject. All three elements of the gaze – subject, screen[s] and object screened – are in a dynamic relation. Space is constantly reconfiguring itself – with the removal of material from the stage what you see in the end of *Schauspiel* is like a three-dimensional rendering of perspectival space. The work is in a sense a construction of its own disappearance, its fragmentation, which then leads the spectating subject to an awareness of its own unstable status within it. Benjamin closes his classic essay on the radical potential of the cinema with the disclosure of the effects of its apparatus on the spectator who was previously merely distracted by it: it seems to me that *Schauspiel* asks the spectator to make that connection to understand the work and their relation to it. [11]

This sense of a disorientation which is more than a surface effect – a disorientation of which one is conscious – is at the heart of both the sound/light installation *Solar Plexus* and the sound installation *At the Far and Farthest Point*. In both works the spectator moves through a sound architecture that is constantly reconfiguring itself. Both, however, become so complex that it becomes questionable whether you hear or think the statements that are being spoken within the space. Here the question of experience becomes vital: how do you conjoin mind and body in such an environment? There is, in these spaces, an absence of original speech. The fragmentary statements that we hear are drawn from mass-media scripts, from a variety of feature films and television crime dramas. We are disembodied in this architecture of sound, surrounded by fragments of “scripts” in which we construct ourselves, and are simultaneously constructed in the speech of the mass-media. We seem here to be nothing more than the sum total of the representation around us. How do you speak in this space where you are already spoken for in a sound landscape of generic scripting? The answer, I’d suggest, lies in the correspondence of fragments: if we are inchoate at this point, so to is the address to us. We are aware that there is no stable point of address, any more than there is a stable point of view in *Schauspiel* or *Johari’s Window*.

Ghost by contrast, with its unedited, real time projection on a single screen and fixed perspective, might seem to return us to the register of cinematic experience. However, if *Schauspiel* is concerned with the deconstruction of space as artifice, here Oechsler's target is time as artifice. We might control the space of perception, but that control demands attention – a capacity of which we are robbed by precisely the medium through which we now observe a space, and a space, which not incidentally, solicits our participation through its 'sculptural' reaching towards us, in the extension of the stage as image into the floor of the installation. In order to apprehend this experience, which refuses instantaneous effect, we must stay with it, apprehend and internalise it – construct, as it were, a play between surface and depth.

In several senses, therefore, Oechsler's recent installations propose a genuinely participatory subjectivity, because they offer a field - however historically constrained – in which we experience as 'real space' that domain of the exchange of communication which Habermas defines as the public sphere. This is in contrast to that 'imaginary space' for the spectator of television and most narrative film, which degrades subjectivity even as it fantasises a simulacrum of agency through its deployments of transgression and autonomy as spectacle. There is something optimistic about "play" in Oechsler's work, without it ever being utopian. I think that there is, in the necessary insistence on experience that is acquired in one's passage *through* works like *Schauspiel*, *At the Far and Farthest Point* or *Solar Plexus*, rather than its straightforward appearance before us, a recovery of the capacity of accumulation and agency. The unstable relation of screen, subject and space reflects the inchoate processes that structure our identity: we may be scripted, but the scripting is itself constantly open to rewriting by our mobile experience; we may be located in space, but we are not sedimented there. What is true for us as subjects is as true for those who address us: the language we learn does not come from a fixed, coherent place. The onus is on us to participate *in space*. Where we speak from may be as important as what we say and how we say it, but we constantly have to reformulate our place in the world.

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Notes:

[1] F. Nietzsche, (W. Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale, Trans.) *On The Genealogy of Morals* (Vintage Books, 1969), Section 1: 5, p. 30.

[2] J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992).

[3] On modernity and the transformation of attention as a subjective capacity see J. Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999)

[4] W. Benjamin, 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire' in *Charles Baudelaire, A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1997) pp. 107 – 154.

[5] M. Bratu Hansen, 'Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema', *October*, 109, (Summer 2004) p. 11.

[6] 'Some Motifs in Baudelaire', p. 117 and 154

[7] See my 'Call Me Old Fashioned, But...: Meaning, Singularity and Transcendence in the Work of Bill Viola' in C. Townsend (ed.) *The Art of Bill Viola* (Thames & Hudson, 2004)

[8] 'Room-for-Play', p. 26.

[9] In this linking of the field of the image to the dimensionality of sculpture, Oechsler might also be seen as returning to and extending the play between sculpture and film undertaken by Richard Serra in the late 1960s and early '70s. See my forthcoming 'Moving Target: Richard Serra's Public Sculpture and Film', Henry Moore Institute, March 2005.

[10] A. Gide, *Journal, 1889 – 1939* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard, 1951), p. 41.

[11] W. Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility' (Second Version) in H. Eiland & M.W. Jennings (eds.) *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935 – 1938*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 119 - 120.

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