



Monika Oechsler
Parallel Worlds

Site Gallery
18 October – 29 November 2003



Parallel and Oblique and Overlapping

At first sight, Monika Oechsler's *Schauspiel*¹ appears as a film about theatre. Theatre provides location, topic and material, and it is tempting to read the whole piece as a metaphor: life as theatre, the world as a stage. Taking on the secondary world of the theatrical stage, the work enters the kind of arena where all the other weighty tropes of modernity make their appearance: a narrativity that is always cancelled, the simultaneity of movements, lights and sounds in an overall motion; even the redemptive perspective of art as a new church after the demise of other forms of faith seems to stake its claim. Putting up the stage results in an empty space dominated by a cross, gigantic and shining, hovering above.

The cross is the only manifest content of the theatre piece ever to become visible in the film. Yet it is an ending in this piece, not a beginning. Instead of indicating the nature of the play to come (anticipation), the cross seems to emerge from the rigid formalism of the stage design as a conclusion, not a preparation. Obviously, the stage design is a response to the piece to be staged, but here, in Oechsler's film it is put into the place of primary occurrence. By the time the cross appears, this *schauspiel* is complete.

The setting is its own horizon, and that installs a whole series of conditions that Oechsler negotiates and re-configures. Setting up the stage is a linear process predetermined by the expected outcome of an appropriate stage-set. This can be the illusion of a setting or the unity of a design, geometrical and reduced in nature like it is here. In either case and all the consequent variants, setting a stage is a process of homogenising space and creating an illusion of coherence. The whole development of the piece, its rhythms and speeds seem to be organised in this way, becoming more and more homogeneous.

Things start fitting more and more, even the noise dies down; both the ambient buzz of activities and the hum of the hydraulic stage machinery which Oechsler has laid over as an added amplifying device.

But then Oechsler takes these preparations for a theatrical presentation and turns them into a *schauspiel* that is itself film. The stage is one of its dimensions, the screen is the other, and between the two the work is made up of what is filmed, how it is filmed and what it then becomes when projected onto three screens in a space one walks into. When a backdrop goes up on all three projection screens, they inevitably block both vision and space, and even the finished inclined ground is never just a flat surface to play on, but also a screen folded flat, supporting action and projecting it towards the audience. In this double framing, the work itself generates its own kind of production.

All the footage used comes from closely following the setting-up of a stage, but its very structure defies the coherence and linearity of that process. There are close-ups and panning shots, more and more machinery disappears in the process, elements, operations and operators are shown in all their clarity, but they never add up. Completion happens, and there is an inclined stage platform there at the end where there was none before, but this is precisely the end, not the beginning of the work, and relevant only in terms of this progress.

Focussing on the process of this putting together, on the arrangements and movements, *Schauspiel* constitutes from these very elements, and in itself, a fundamentally mobile type of reality. Things are neither really assembled nor taken apart or removed; all that is left is a continual transformation. Before the space becomes a clear space

towards the end, walls go up and down, screens are lowered, unrolled and rolled up again, and it is almost despite this activity rather than because of it, that the stage appears as complete as it does in the end.

Part of the ambiguity comes from an attention to detail that carefully foregrounds what is normally kept invisible. The other part is the result of three cameras imposing their rules and condition on the material. The opening pan establishes the space only by turning full circle, the frontality of the theatrical stage is supplanted by viewpoints on and off the stage undoing hierarchical differentiation of theatre's distinct territories, audience and stage. There are also the very relations between the three sets of material as arranged in editing and presentation. Juxtaposed closely, they run alongside each other, converge to intensify, generate rhythms of delay, accelerate or simply displace, mirror or complement each other.

Against setting up as a spectacle in its own right, relationships of preparation and outcome, background and event need to be inverted. The logic of the piece is not one of preparation but one of process where the focus on outcome is supplanted by an attention to the workings, speeds and directions constituting the spectacle of this schauspiel itself. This is no longer a question of representation or documentation, not even of showing, but of production – not the theatrical production of the stage for a finished piece, but the filmic production of the stage itself as machine. Cogs, pulleys as well as their filmic images are intertwined machines, not metaphors or illustrations, which then develop their own dynamics.

One of the fundamental tensions in all of this lies between what is being set up and what actually then happens. In

earlier works, Oechsler has worked with this slippage by setting up situations within which her actors can then improvise, setting up scenarios around which the surprising or the revelatory can then occur. When four adolescent girls attack one another verbally (*High Anxieties*, 1998) or five adults enact their worst version of antisocial behaviour (*Involuntary Corpses*, 2001) this slippage between improvised and set situations develops a psychological framework within which interaction exposes social norms as a veil behind which other dynamics are hidden. These dynamics reveal themselves in moments of sudden eruptions on the screen of an otherwise controlled environment.

But all of Oechsler's situations are also very clearly staged in relation to a physical setting. The lounge and its adaptable modular furniture in *Involuntary Corpses* is hybrid in its near-anonymous domesticity. And the casino in *Johari's Window* (2000) is more than the simple backdrop to a game of poker. Rather it figures prominently in relation to the action itself: surround as well as atmospheric charge, void against which the psychological dynamics of the game are played out. It is also medium for the filmic charges and cinematographic atmospheres of the casino, as well as mirroring the vastness of the space around the actual installation of the work in exhibition, which in turns continues the rotating camera movement of the filmed images themselves.

The settings add a supplementary frame to these works, enabling situations to a degree but also determining them. Part of their dynamics result from the fact that they never quite fit. Always slightly juxtaposed, the backgrounds contribute to the setting up of dynamics. *The Chase* (2000/2001) is a case in point. Filmed on an athletics race-track, *The Chase* is a race that is also a chase and thus

combines two fundamentally contrasting modes. Races take place in a scripted pattern and on a designated ground whereas chases can happen anywhere exactly because they are not scripted but improvised. They occur out of necessity and in an attempt to overlap trajectories (flight is an attempt to separate them). Fusing race and chase, Oechsler activates the slippage between the two. The track becomes not the ground of the race but a condition of the chase and is turned into an element of the overall assemblage. The racetrack is only one frame, and what takes place is a nudging and stumbling where supposedly separate trajectories constantly overlap and interfere with each other. Exercise, rather than providing an aim and scripting a trajectory for movement, becomes a setting for disturbances.

In *Schauspiel* these slippages implode into a configuration played out between machinery, stage and film. This new work is the first where Oechsler does not stage what she films. But through the way in which action and setting are fused to become one, this incorporates all kinds of unfitting and resistant elements that focus our attention on their slippages very much in the same way that the atmospheres of previous pieces also did. Staging, in this new work, is taken back to the choreography of filming, editing, combining and presenting.

Both film and theatre are visual and acoustic spectacles, and this structural similarity lies at the bottom of their fusion in Oechsler's new work. But the way they come together is not one of analysis. The work does not reflect on the conditions of the spectacle because it is itself far too imbedded and intertwined to ever gain the type of distance necessary for a detached, critical/ analytical assessment. Instead, Oechsler fuses both machines, the

filmic and the theatrical one in a 'becoming schauspiel' made up of blocks of sensation, movement, speed and overlapping conditions of the screen. Animation takes place as an overall communication between the various contributing factors. They include the workers as well as the strings and hydraulics of the stage machine, the lighting on stage as much as the cameras filming the process and the projectors and loops re-configuring it in the showing. The result is an overall animation that undoes any clear distinction between the animate and the inanimate, where even that which remains static in the setting up of the stage is animated through the camera, its movements and the editing across three big screens.

The result is film as a representation of process, in the same way that the stage serves the staging of a text as a representation of the world. In both, reality only ever exists as an affect to be experienced and constantly remade. It is in this sense that *Schauspiel* produces film between two complementary historical models: firstly Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* that stages sets and action for the camera, and then Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* that stages reality through the way in which it becomes film. Any clear-cut distinction between fiction and documentary is lost behind this fundamental understanding of reality as effect.

From this develop two overlapping dynamics: that of dual machinery premised on construction in the theatre and montage in film; and that of an overall assemblage that incorporates all of this as well as its reception into the making of spaces. Advanced machines generate two types of production, observed Félix Guattari: they are autopoietic (self-productive and continually reproducing their component parts) as well as allopoietic (searching for their

components outside of themselves and constituting themselves from them). Both dimensions need to be thought of as two different aspects of one and the same feedback loop between machine and world, and so even if the stage now only plays itself, it still generates other spaces too (mental, literary, physical, theatrical) that expand outward and need to be inhabited in order to be activated.

This ambiguity also determines the presentation of the work. Unfolding as a triple projection it is opened up, but then also imposes its own rhythm not only on the constitutive parts but also on the space in which it is viewed. The viewer occupies a double position in this: a central position of access that grants control as much as it subjects them to the piece's permutations of rhythm and mood. The centrality of the viewer's position is one of control only as much as it also means they are caught in the disorienting middle.

Whilst *Schauspiel* engages space in a filmic production of process, Oechsler's new sound work *Solar Plexus* creates multiple audio environments that frustrate the desire for closure by installing a range of overlapping and dispersed dialogues in the gallery. Under the conditions of spatial and temporal fragmentation, it becomes impossible to isolate and focus on any one of the dialogues. Instead the work sets up an experience of disorientation that replaces overall coherence with a near-ambient soundscape and thus places the visitor in the ambiguous position of being immersed on one hand and having to physically negotiate space through movement on the other. Offering different entry points through their spatial arrangements and engaging different modes of perception, *Schauspiel* and *Solar Plexus* engage the viewer in fundamentally different ways: frontal vision mainly in *Schauspiel* offsets an

ambient, lateral register mainly premised on sound in *Solar Plexus*. And whilst *Schauspiel* shifts attention away from the interaction between players and settings towards the making of the stage as prerequisite for any experience of reality at all, *Solar Plexus* opens its making up to the viewer. It is up to them to assemble environments, dialogues and characters from bits of sound and their dynamics, in a physical and mental act of putting things together. Whether this is a fragmentation of the mind or an enhanced expansion of the self is secondary. Primary concern for both works are the processes and conditions (psychic or theatrical) putting it all into motion.

Edgar Schmitz

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¹ Schauspiel: thea. (stage-)play; drama; fig. spectacle, sight.

Schauspiel 2003

Three channel video projection installation
Duration sequence: 23 minutes
Synchronised looped playback
Exhibition format DVD

Commissioned and produced by Site Gallery, Sheffield

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Produced in co-operation with Schauspiel Staatstheater, Stuttgart
Artistic Director: Friedrich Schirmer

Stage: 'Brand'
Play by: Henrik Ibsen
Stage Direction: Hasko Weber
Stage Design: Frank Hänig

And with the assistance of:
Andreas Zechner, Technical Director, Schauspiel
Florian Vogel, Dramaturg

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The Technical Team, Schauspiel Staatstheater, Stuttgart

Produced with the support of Akademie Schloss Solitude, Stuttgart
Director: Jean-Baptiste Joly
Production Co-ordination: Dorothea Reinhold

Production Team: (ti:m)Werk

Camera 1: Alfred Ruoff
Camera 2: Guenter Moritz
Camera 3: Heiko Bokern
Camera 4 & 5: Johannes Maier
Sound Assistance: Christoph Dreyfuss
Production Assistant: Johannes Maier

Post-Production:
Editor: Steve Sprung
Finishing: Ralf Bosch, Matthew Jarvis

Solar Plexus 2003

Multi-media sound installation
Duration sequence: 9 minutes
Synchronised looped playback
Exhibition format: DVD and CD
Speakers, Sub-woofer, 'Cyclone' light

Commissioned and produced by Site Gallery, Sheffield

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Voice Actors:
Robin Arthur
Andrew Cullum
Alison Kahn
Cathy Naden

Casting Agent: Philippa Howell, PHPM

Sound Recordist: Jacqui Bellamy
Sound Edit and Design: Justin Randell

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