

## Tracks and Traces: The Camera in Eric Hattan's Video Spaces

by Eva Kuhn

Hattan's camera glides over variously textured surfaces, moving in close to register the character of their different materials: corrugated paper, Plexiglas, bubble wrap, adhesive tape, felt, cardboard and wood. It pans over the inscription 'R. Long' on a small box wrapped in semitransparent plastic and filled with stones. Before that it picked up the inscription 'Rodney Graham' scrawled on something wrapped in packing paper that provided few clues to the object concealed inside. 'Ben: Boîte noir vide' – the autofocus becomes disorientated. The camera moves on, picking up the red-and-white striped label 'Fragile', an appeal to handle the contents with care. Hand and camera gently part the bubble wrap to reveal bone and wool, fragments that gradually congeal into an animal, a stuffed sheep. Warmly packed in its box, this artwork awaits its next exhibition.

These scenes took place on a monitor, one of 69 of various sizes simultaneously flickering on seven shelves in an installation (see pp. XXX–XXX). It was part of the show *Les Pléiades*, held to mark the 30th anniversary of the Fonds Régionaux d'Art Contemporain at the Abattoirs in Toulouse. Each of the FRACs, which are holding, exhibiting and circulating the French national collection on the federalist principle, had invited an artist to contribute to the institution's anniversary celebration. By invitation of the Provence-Alpes Côte d'Azur fund, Eric Hattan collaborated with cameraman Severin Kuhn to create a *Tour de FracFranceForce*, an installation based on the concept of touring the complete 23 institutions in all regions of France – a process limited to three weeks in which the two covered 6000 kilometres – and screening the resulting videos in the exhibition space. These 23 films – FRAC clips, so to speak – each amounted to the discovery of one of the institutions and the fine art amassed there. Hattan found the works in an unfamiliar, packed state, and used the hand-held camera to comment on them with tender poetry and critical irony. A further 46 stations were devoted to the 'road clips', sequences taken underway of the connecting and exterior spaces, based on the idea of a work in transit associated with the common exchange of objects between the institutions.

The conceptual approach of the Toulouse installation reflects a primary, general function of the video medium in Hattan's work. The camera is used as a recording device to accompany a physical act that involves a subjective experience and produces personal memories – a small-scale action, walk or journey – over a period of time, and, as a kind of transformer, it provides material, manifest remnants of this action. These guarantee an objectified, lasting impression of what is fleeting or immaterial, but without betraying the ephemeral to the fixed or the processual to the product. The monitors perform the function of memory repositories or vessels. In the case of *Tour de FracFranceForce*, the actively or randomly recorded material from their travels underwent a complex selection process before Hattan and Kuhn collected them on the 69 television sets. Each monitor shows an uncut video film, repeating a section of the performative tour precisely measured by the implicit time code of the medium. The idea of memory space is lent an additional dimension in this installation by the way in which its spatial arrangement reflects the FRACs' combined functions of archive and storage space. The volumes of the monitors differ, and each has individual features and quirks that affect the video material channelled

through them in a specific way, making each piece unique. One of the monitors transforms the colour film into black and white, while others flicker or produce static, and the colour saturation, contrast and brightness differ from monitor to monitor.

Ever since Hattan's first video presentations in the late 1990s the monitor, in addition to its role as memory and screening device, has repeatedly functioned as a piece of furniture in a domestic interior – for instance, as a counterpart to the chair so frequently featured in the artist's work (p. XXX). As such, the television set is involved in a process that materialises fleeting actions, in the sense of a domestication of Hattan's filmic surveys of marginal areas. The set serves not only as a medium for the diffusion of imagery but as an aesthetic object that augments the exhibition space as part of the installation work. In contrast to nearly immaterial or ultralight video projections<sup>1</sup>, the monitor provides a kind of borrowed body that lends weight to the ephemeral imagery and in addition – like the chair – brings its own life story into the exhibition space. In earlier installations, Hattan had exhibited monitors together with their packing material, treating the visual medium as an everyday commodity and material, as an aesthetic object that can stand in the way, be moved, stored, bought and sold. In several exhibition setups of the 1996 video collection *Beton Liquide*, for instance, the original boxes served as pedestals for the sets, and in the installation *Vous êtes chez moi*, shown in 2005 at the FRAC Alsace in Sélestat, the running television screens were contained in shipping crates moved from storage into the exhibition space (p. XXX). In this and other ways, Hattan transforms his films into objects and – literally – uses them to furnish existing art collections.

### *Inventory records as embodied acts of production and perception*

What Hattan undertakes in the FRAC depots and the spaces he inspects, amounts to a stocktaking or inventory based on personal criteria and spontaneous intuitions. As the etymology of the term suggests (Lat. *invenire*, to find, determine or come upon something), the possibility of an unexpected discovery is ever-present. The works of art that make up a large part of the FRAC holdings are in a state that is not intended for aesthetic appreciation, but one in which they are conserved, protected from dust and weather, or shipped, transported with care and finally unpacked. The indications of direction caught by the camera, such as 'haut' and 'bas' (top and bottom), along with weight specifications, arrows, grips, cords, foam-protected corners and tape bindings, make this pragmatic context explicit. Hattan follows these directions, which are related to the transportation of the objects, by divesting them of their function and transforming them into another form of handling, that of a camera treatment. The instructions printed on the boxes are occasionally taken up as an impulse, when the camera moves in the direction suggested by an arrow. One tracking shot follows a stapled seam that runs in parallel to a wire on the wall, then suddenly zigzags and finally blends into a patch of colour.

Escape instructions, fire extinguishers, emergency telephones and cable drums are also part of the registered and aesthetically investigated equipment, and are treated no differently by Hattan's camera than the packed art works. The handwritten names of the artists are presented on the same level as the names of the shipping firms. Along the way, Hattan discovers affinities between abstract painting and the surfaces of objects such as

garbage bags and tools; or rather, he creates such relationships through his art. His intrusions transform the FRAC art depots – these institutional buffer zones between shipping and public exhibition – into his private show spaces, a gesture of appropriation that is characteristic of Hattan's employment of the video medium in general.<sup>2</sup> In his installation *Vous êtes chez moi* (2005; p. XXX), for instance, or in the ongoing video collection *Home* (since 1998; p. XXX), the artist explores demolished or abandoned houses, his camera serving as a means to transfer selected objects into his own art archive. By means of monitors, in turn, the visually appropriated material is transported to an anonymous space designated an exhibition space and made accessible to the public. In other words, the video medium is employed to create what might be called a protuberation of a privately recorded, personally appropriated and constituted space into a differently defined space for public viewing and action.

One of the monitors in *Tour de FracFranceForce* follows the camera gaze passing over the artworks stored on the shelves and stumbling upon a rubber glove that has been peeled off by a cleaner or technician and left there. It has the appearance of a cast or a casting mould, recalling other sculptural objects from Hattan's oeuvre, such as pieces of clothing, shed by the artist like a second skin and turned inside out. Their linings, once in direct contact with the active body, now form the outside surface of a sculptural configuration, e.g. in *Coin coin de loin en loin (Pêcheurs d'Islande)* from 2008 (p. XXX). Or in *Schaf* (2005; p. XXX) – screened on a monitor in *Vous êtes chez moi* – in which a sheep stands and moves around on a green field like a kinetic sculpture, dragging the hollow mould of its fleece behind it like a bridal veil. Also related works are the objects in the ongoing series *Unplugged* (since 1995; p. XXX), which are produced by carefully refolding product packagings such as milk cartons, biscuit and chocolate papers. Sometimes the objects themselves, whose glossy or matte monochrome surfaces parody minimalism, sometimes the eponymous videos in which the camera records the process of refolding from a fixed standpoint, make up the final artwork.

It is not only the solid, found objects which the video camera conveys, but also the acts of exploration, detection and spying that provide an intimate insight into the production of the images. Film and the making of film, product and production process, are closely interlocked in Hattan's videos. His imagery is also explicitly the product of his aesthetic investigations, a fact that brings them close to operative images – technically functional images made in the course of a pragmatic enterprise or a project intended to convey knowledge.<sup>3</sup> On one monitor in *Tour de FracFranceForce*, the camera follows a leak which runs from the ceiling over loose wires and palettes and comes threateningly close to the packed artworks. The camera seems to perform the work of a plumber who checks for leaks in heating or water pipes using corresponding tools. In other places, the small camera in Hattan's hand – a vision and palpation tool in one – explores ventilation ducts lined with glossy insulation, as if to test their iconic value.

### *Interspaces, transit zones and variations of the (auto)mobile image*

While each of the 23 FRAC clips portrays an actual site and interior, the road clips activate a referential space of a quite different kind. The filming is sometimes done through the

window of the car door, seldom through the rear window, and most often through the windscreen, where the camera is installed on a homemade stand. The car serves as a dolly on which Hattan and Kuhn traverse the country freely, though by no means unsystematically. On a map, the routes travelled form a network that connects all of the institutions visited, with road taken twice. The activated space thus represents both the country of France, where the works from the FRACs circulate, and – in relation to the subject at hand – an intermediate space bound up with the time required to physically traverse it. The term ‘kilometres per hour’ with its linking of spatial and temporal units provides a clue to this filmic conception of space. The moving view from the windscreen or side windows, and glances at the inside or outside rear-view mirror, reveal or further develop this transit space. In contrast to the gliding views over the FRAC archives, the camera pans from the car are predetermined by paths – highways – and strictly regulated both in terms of course and speed. Road markings, railings, speed limits, traffic barriers and signals, and not least the *péages* – the usually automated toll stations – lend rhythm to the trip from one place to the next.

In the rough, uncut film clips, the video recording is synchronized with the motion of the car, and the uniform speed of the film – measured by the medium’s implicit time code – relates to the car’s varying velocity and the changing speed of the other vehicles in front, behind or in the parallel lane. A scooter appears in the frame, in the passenger’s window, and briefly overtakes the picture frame, but then the camera overtakes it again and the scooter disappears to the right. Then it reappears in the frame and remains, hesitantly wavering in the middle. Races and overtakings of this non-aggressive kind also take place with trucks and railway trains running in parallel with the highway. The filming passenger on his seat offers a contemporary digital version of Dziga Vertov’s cameraman, who stands on a moving carriage cranking his camera as it races other carriages. Depending on the viewing angle, surroundings and features of the road, the resulting visual images almost systematically conduct an investigation of video’s structural possibilities. The windscreen wiper that occasionally establishes a visual rhythm – also moving faster or slower depending on the weather and its frequency settings – has the effect of a rapidly moving clock hand or pendulum, both determining and visualising the cinematic and travel time. Its sweeping motion across the windscreen, parallel to the picture plane, repeatedly reinforces the filmic image as something between a transparent window and an opaque, composed surface, and formulates a basic critique of the moving image.

Immobile elements, coordinates of the landscape that briefly appear in the image – houses, trees singly or in rows, masts, posts lining the road or the trusses of a bridge – are likewise accelerated by the (auto)mobile camera. Flickering and juddering across the image as abstract, formal components, they provide structure and rhythm and reflect the film as both a composed surface and a mobile entity that constantly redefines the on- and off-screen space. Foreground, middle ground and background of the framed landscape shift past each other, because the more distant the background, the slower it appears to move, or – by comparison to the closer planes – even seems to run in the opposite direction.

Thanks to the highest density of dash cams in the world, a meteor shower that fell over

Russia on 15 February 2013 was recorded from a thousand points of view and posted on the Internet.<sup>4</sup> Nothing as spectacular happened during Hattan and Kuhn's trip, though the stage for a host of random occurrences was set. Everything that fell within the viewing area of the windscreen was recorded – oncoming light and whatever the airstream brought with it: flakes of dust, raindrops, showers and the constantly changing, more or less distinct view of the road and the traffic. This illustrates a further general principle of the use of video in Hattan's work: the medium provides a defined and at the same time focussed and controlled arena for chance. This is what Siegfried Kracauer has described as film's affinity to the street, the street offering a concrete site and metaphor for life and contingency.<sup>5</sup> Due to the monotony of an automobile ride, concentration on the image is enhanced and the aesthetic character of the road becomes an event in itself. Centre and lateral markings, arrows pointing left or right, gleaming guideposts, random patterns of old and new asphalt, a reflecting asphalt seam that evokes a drawing in the state of emergence, the hot tar lending it a hesitant, expressive look. In contrast to the driver on the expressway, who must resist falling asleep, the camera never shuts its eye and seemingly seismographically registers over long distances whatever appears in front of the lens.

*The formative power of time: Haptically sculptural and optically structural*

In Hattan's work, the medium of video enables the artistic evaluation of unspectacular situations or objects that have been gathered up in everyday life, and the transformation of these into things worth seeing or aesthetic objects. To this end, the found objects are examined and structured according to formal criteria. In terms of their sensuous qualities, Hattan's videos can be categorized in accordance with two tendencies that imply different physical positions and articulate differing relationships between camera, human being and world: The wide range of sculptural forms and volumes shown in the FRAC clips reflect a rather haptic sensibility, mainly from the fact that the camera is hand-held. It functions like an extension of the sense of touch, seeking and creating a physical proximity to things and investigating their sculptural aspects. The window and the speed of the road clips, in contrast, have a more divisive effect on the relationship between the subject and the recorded world: they emphasise visual rather than haptic perception. The automobile camera functions at an optical distance, holding the world at arm's length, or rather, showing the physical world in passing, which creates visual effects, abstracted, rhythmical perceptual images.

Crucial for both tendencies is the capability of the filmic medium to express the formative power of time. In one case, this power compresses, explores or displaces matter, builds it up or tears it down. In the other case, it takes a more insubstantial form, of visual rhythms, metres or cycles. The video notation work *Beton Liquide* (p. XXX), begun in 1996 and still continuing, is a collection of appropriated sculptural configurations from the everyday, shaped by wind and weather, time and chance – mundane scenes or objects heedlessly discarded and picked up at random by the 'rag picker' with the camera.<sup>6</sup> A wind-driven cup or a billowing curtain, a recalcitrant wedding dress that resists the expectations of a wedding photographer, the absurd leaf blowers of city gardeners, or the legendary plastic bag rolling in the wind. This accumulation of airy sculptures stands in a rich tradition of film

history; cinematography has long focussed on wind rustling in the trees and the trembling of glossy leaves in the sunlight, about which Kracauer wrote with reference to the first prophets of film.<sup>7</sup> Besides the animated empty shells that populate Hattan's video collection, animals are among the preferred subjects whose sculptural qualities are revealed and whose unpredictable movements are analyzed and synthesized, as they have been already since Muybridge's day. Hattan is impressed by the 'matter-of-factness with which cats change direction',<sup>8</sup> by an owl's highly economic use of energy, by waddling and waiting ducks, a goose appearing in sharp contour by the side of the road, dogs, and again and again sheep in various states – from extremely shaggy to shorn and bare.

The installation *All the While* (2008, p. XXX) consists of six videos projected directly on the wall, in different sizes and in varying combinations depending on the exhibition context. Unlike the road clips of *Tour de FracFranceForce*, which are characterized by their speed, the videos of this installation have a slow-motion quality in which things congeal almost to the point of immobility. For the most part, the camera in *All the While* remains fixed inside a house where Hattan and Silvia Bächli lived. The decision to install the camera at a this fixed point which offered a view out of the window can be seen as a typical reaction to the circumstances of the artist's life. During a protracted stay in Seydisfjörður – a small town on the eponymous 'fireplace' fjord in eastern Iceland where Hattan was invited to produce a work for exhibition – everything froze solid and the sensitive video gear simply did not function in the cold outside. The winter of 2008 had been the harshest since 1960, and snow lay until May.

The camera remains focussed on the 'remains of landscape, information or action', a concentrated gaze that brings out the sculptural force of the weather and temperature and their impact on water, ice and snow.<sup>9</sup> Ice crystals on the windowpane parallel to the picture plane filter the view of the red roof of the neighbouring house against a background of nebulous white. The boundary between a heated interior and a cold exterior is not only defined in compositional terms by the semi-opaque window pane but concretely visualized by a slight thawing movement in the ice crystals. Another projection shows an icicle dangling in front of the window and camera frame, simultaneously melting and growing. What may appear paradoxical is actually the natural principle on which icicles develop. When a melting drop of water stops and freezes at the end of the icicle, this extends it; when the drop falls, the icicle shrinks. This process, along with the visible fracture points of the icicle, provides the suspense of the video. In a third projection window, a wind-driven nocturnal snow flurry flies through a cone of light from a streetlamp, giving the impression that the snow is standing still, as if in imitation of digital image noise. A similar paradox of standstill and motion is found in a further video, in which a departing or arriving ferry appears more to stand still than to move. thanks to the mist and the flattening effect of a long focus.

The question of how the videographic view through a window can produce an aesthetically relevant image, is addressed specifically by a further projection in *All the While*. The video shows a water surface with ice floes, opaque white forms floating on the reflecting, dark water. The image frame is occupied by changing compositional patterns that seem to reflect the relationship of tension between on and off screen. Passing ships float on the

water and their reflections as well, distorted by the waves – their masts appearing liquid in movement like rubber. The initial translation of the motif into a moving image has already been undertaken by the water surface, before the video medium performs the second step by means of determining the focal length setting and the framing.

*Inhabiting and exhibiting: Sites of production and sites of reception*

The shallowness of the white ground and the milkiness of the windowpane through which the camera in *All the While* filmed – from the interior of the house into the exterior space – refer not only to the actual flatness of the filmic image but to the space beyond it – the off-screen space behind the fourth wall or that ‘off-screen space of enunciation’ in which the camera stands and which in this case corresponds to the warm living space.<sup>10</sup> Fully in keeping with Hattan’s signature method of turning things inside out, this private interior space is now conveyed into the publicly accessible exhibition space. The process of visiting the installation interlocks with that of occupying the site recorded in the video material. The representation of the videographic view from the window runs counter to the lighting situation. Crucial to this reversal is the projection process, which – in contrast to the monitor as a piece of domestic furniture – combines projector and screen in a single ‘miniaturized apparatus’.<sup>11</sup> Rather than forming an additional element in the space, the projected image blends into the architecture, plausibly evoking a blind window. In addition, the audience moves through a pictorial space crossed by cones of light, becoming physically integrated in the image. Unlike an installation with monitors, here the inherently immersive effect of traditional cinema appears to be heightened, or rather the work engages the affective experience of the audience by drawing them into this protected atmospheric space with a view of images of ice and snow.

The white light does not enter through the windows of the exhibition space but instead is projected from the always visible beamer onto an interior wall. From there, the light-filled images of ice and snow reilluminate, as it were, the dark chamber of the camera. Thanks to the projection of videographic views of the exterior space, the living space occupied by the artist and camera is shifted into the art space, and the history of the exhibition space where *All the While* was first shown embodies this reflection of a reversal and lends the installation its site-specific nature. In fact, the Espace Beaux-Arts in Toulouse was formerly a sculpture museum with light-flooded galleries whose numerous windows opened it to the outside. To meet a growing demand for more wall area, these apertures were closed with wooden panels and the room transformed into a black box, oriented inwards, or a white cube illuminated by artificial light. So the projections in this installation refer not only to the windows of Hattan’s former living room in Iceland but to the obscured windows of the exhibition space in Toulouse.

The temporal qualities of the situations investigated almost systematically in Hattan’s video pieces are invariably linked to the form of existence from which the videos emerge – living, travelling, staying somewhere. The conception of these video installations engenders a relationship between the space of image production and the space of image reception, which together convey specific forms of perception developed in the context of a project. The comfortable stay in the interior of *All the While* stands in contrast to the restless or

sometimes abrupt changes among the monitors in *Tour de FracFranceForce*. In both pieces, however, the exhibition space is identified as a site where a certain form of attention is provided with a closed context. A third form of attention is ensured by the diverse combinations in *Beton Liquide*, in which the film of randomly appearing jetsam is programmed in a loop and played on monitors. In the first installation of this work at Aargau Kunsthaus, the simultaneously flickering television sets stood on their shipping crates, scattered over the spacious floor, encouraging the visitors to undertake a leisurely stroll. It was hardly possible to discover all of the found pieces in the course of a single walk through the show, and a complete understanding emerged very slowly, if at all. The course of reception was instead determined by spontaneous attractions and stopping to view certain things.

In these combinations of fleeting imagery that moves through time and its location in space, Hattan emphasizes temporal coincidence. Due to the different durations of the video loops, no combination of images ever occurs twice. Videos can be copied and reproduced, a trait of the medium that preconditions the presentation of videographic perceptions – it enables the transfer of Hattan's working life or everyday occupations into art exhibition spaces. Yet due to the distribution of the videos in the exhibition space, this trait becomes secondary, and what emerges from the spatial installation is a shifting, continually changing presence of ephemeral images that cannot be taken in from a single standpoint. This situation of diffusion and lack of overall clarity is clearly intended by the artist, and it induces in the viewer a sense of the now, of a presence of mind amplified through Hattan's mindful regard which makes both the senses and the camera react to that which is there. It is like a focussed travelling, an open and conscious living, or a wakeful everyday life. In his very specific handling of the recording and exhibition potentials of the video medium, Hattan reflects the interpenetration of art and life that is so crucial to his work.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dominique Païni, 'Should we put an end to projection?', *October* 110 (Fall 2004), pp. 23–48, here. p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> On the notion of the 'intruder' see Maja Naef and Ralph Uhl, 'Eric Hattan's Transitions and Passages', in *Niemand ist mehr da / Vous êtes chez moi*, Berlin: Holzwarth Publications, 2008, pp. 120f.

<sup>3</sup> On 'operative images', see e.g. Harun Farocki, 'Aus der Phantom-Perspektive des Krieges', in Beatrice von Bismarck (ed.), *Grenzbispielungen: Visuelle Politik in der Übergangszone*, Cologne: Walther König, 2005, pp. 161f.

<sup>4</sup> The dash cam, invented for legal reasons, is an example of a generator of operative images. Mounted on the dashboard of a car behind the windscreen, it continually records video material in a loop, much like a surveillance camera. After the end of a programmed time period, or when the memory is full, the earlier images are over-inscribed without transition. In case of an accident or traffic violation, these video images can be employed as evidence.

<sup>5</sup> See Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 62.



<sup>6</sup> Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1939), London: New Left Books, 1973, p. 79; Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gay-Lussac's speech in the French House of Peers on 30 July 1839, quoted in Kracauer, *Theory of Film*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Erich Hattan, in Sabine Schaschl-Cooper (ed.), *Idee à voir: Eric Hattan*, MuttENZ: Kunsthau Baselland, 2003, p. xx.

<sup>9</sup> Harriet Zilch, 'The Discovery of Slowness', in *Schnee bis im Mai*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Nürnberg, Cologne: Snoeck, 2011, p. xx.

<sup>10</sup> Dubois' original term is *hors champ énonciatif*, Philippe Dubois, *Der fotografische Akt: Versuch über ein theoretisches Dispositiv*, Amsterdam and Dresden: Verlag der Kunst, 1998, p. 179. First published as *L'Acte photographique* (1983).

<sup>11</sup> Dominique Païni, op. cit. (note 1), p. 24.