

# Divided Consciousness

On the Video Works of Vittorio Santoro

Kathleen Bühler

Vittorio Santoro's works are test fields of consciousness to the extent that they explore the perception of a certain situation, at the same time reflecting on the process of experience and comprehension. They lead beyond pure perception of a spatial or narrative situation, and do not merely represent an object or a scene. Instead, especially in the videos, they draw attention to the conditions that frame perception as well as the process of creating meaning that also inheres in forging links with prior knowledge and things remembered. This focusing results from gaps in information, contradictions, reflections, and doublings. In this way, the beholder is disturbed, bothered, and challenged, for example, to think a sentence through to the end, to create relationships between text and image, or to find meaning in the ambivalence of a word or image.

As a conceptual and media artist, Santoro mobilizes these strategies as part of thinking about his own "position in reference to social reality,"<sup>A</sup> a reality that today is no longer merely mediated, but in fact constructed by the media. Even though his video works often show specific individuals, he is less interested in individual sensation than the social reality and the interpretation of an act or information in its political-social context. His works apparently suggest that the tight interweaving of media construction with actual events surfaces most strongly in remembrance; perhaps here the most overlappings between fiction and fact, perception and sensory deception obtain because events are superimposed with longings and come to color our memories. This can be seen in banal occurrences like a walk in the forest, or two individuals' diverging memories of a boyhood friendship in Sicily.

The starting point in the labyrinth between fact and fiction is thus often the biographic, the artist's own and that of others, not just for the anecdotal treatment of things individual, but as a familiar example case representing many, with sociopolitical significance.<sup>B</sup>

## Media Critique and the Boom in Memory

Santoro's occupation with perception as a sensor for various configurations of reality links his work to -media-critical positions from the 1970s. But it also corresponds to a contemporary need to engage with memory and remembrance as a reconstruction of experience in both personal and social dimensions. The last decade, for example, is culturally marked by a "boom" in memory, not only in reference to public forms of commemoration, but also recalling what was once suppressed or remembering the historically known.<sup>C</sup> This is tied to a boom in the documentary genre, and is taking place to an unprecedented extent in photography, painting, film, and video. There is a trend in art towards apparently documentary works, where, as in nineteenth century realism, the documentary is employed as a style to thematize perception and the construction of memory in an essayistic form.<sup>D</sup> As in the 1970s, lurking behind this is a discourse critical of the media that points out the illusionary power of film and television as engineering reality, at the same time subjecting the indexical media photography, video, and film to a reevaluation.<sup>E</sup>

A similar tactic can be found in Vittorio Santoro's video works: situations and events where perceptions, sensations, memories, quotations, and actual experience are layered on top of one another show the complex process of visual perception. Santoro does not distinguish between various degrees of reality, but places them directly adjacent to one another, which seems to point out that a perception is always experienced in mutual interaction with previous perceptions. It thus makes no difference whether he films pages of newspaper, a bit of landscape, or a fictive scene: independent of origin, they are used to trigger processes of thought. In so doing, he often works like a structural filmmaker, using repetition or synchronous representations of - supposedly identical things to sensitize, by way of eventlessness and repetition, the perceptive capacity to such a degree that minor things ignite it. One example of this is his video installation *Waldstück* (1999), a double projection. While one projection shows a camera moving towards a tree in a bit of forest, in the other image a camera pulls away from the same tree, alternating between a perspective from slightly below and slightly above. The artist does both three times, and then changes trees. Due to the different lengths of the two video film projections, the synchronous watching of the front and back of the same tree gets out of sync: the represented spatial experience is thus split, while the structure of the video remains always the same. Such subtle but constant deviations mark Santoro's work. The uniformity of the filmic approach suggests on the surface an always-identical experience of vision, while in reality perception has long broken free by falling victim to a deception. The artist concentrates on the moment when familiarization numbs attention, where ultimately new visual experiences are concealed, while perception and understanding first have to be located.

A similar etude on perception, but this time shifted to the realm of the acoustic, is offered by *Fence* (2002), where the camera moves along various fences in the windless summer heat of desiccated Sicilian pastures. Parallel to this, we hear the rustling of leaves in the wind and some agitated birds in song, although nowhere can a diegetic sound source be found in the image. Distracted by the intrusive sound track, our eyes and ears are ultimately led to different landscapes, and reference is made in passing to the treacherous habits of vision, controlled as a matter of course by certain conventions.<sup>F</sup>

An entirely different approach characterizes those videos in which Santoro overloads the beholder's capacities with allusions, quotations and unconnected narrative fragments to such an extent that it becomes impossible to distill any univocal meaning from it at first sight, as in his most recent video, *Moving -Towards You, Moving Around You, Moving Against You, Moving Away From You* (2005-06). A strategy confirmed by the fact that the plot culminates in three different endings, thus making the narrative logic absurd. All the same, at issue is not a coherent plot, but rather various compilations of what is called reality. The title of the work, as in *Fence*, metaphorically expresses the beholder's hopeless attempt to subject these situations, constructed from different literary and media elements, to a strict meaning; these attempts are ultimately for naught, for strict meaning is in the end dissolved by the three different endings.

Further variants of Santoro's thinking about the interplay of perception and memory can be traced out in his video work. Most of his videos already refer in their titles to the tension between personal remembrance, private experience, and mediation. They mention discrepancy, splitting, (in)dependence, and thus circumscribe the intermediate zone where fact and fiction, experience and media event, perception and reflection overlap. On a formal level, the artist realizes this

thematic concern using split-screen compositions or double projections. Or as in *Split (Fragments 1-4)* (2000-02), he builds spatial-installative projection situations that as an architectural arrangement introduce a further level of perception.

The temporal and spatial disorientation created in this way is intended, and the disturbance enables a new critical examination of one's own perceptions and thinking about the process of understanding as well as the creation of meaning in and of itself. The collision of various media fragments allows a kind of unspecificity and openness to emerge in the beholder, an unspecificity that as an attitude of beholding enables perception that goes beyond clichés and pre-formed opinions. Ultimately at issue in Santoro's essayistic explorations is recognizing the anesthetic power<sup>G</sup> of media constructions as well as the media-influenced interaction among perception, memory, and its representation. As in Jochen Gerz' or Joseph Kosuth's actions and photographic works from the 1970s, for Santoro at issue is responsibility and taking a stand in society. However, without the ideological rhetoric typical of the time, without didactic gestures, but with lyricism and grace.<sup>H</sup> It is, then, especially the playfulness and lightness of the supposedly everyday situations and perceptions that distinguish Santoro's works from those of his predecessors. With an easy casualness, he points to the constructed nature of reality and perception.

#### Discrepancy: Examples of Personal and Public Memory

How multiple and fragmentary personal memory as well as public-political commemoration can be, is shown finally by the work group *Discrepancy I* (2003-04) und *Discrepancy II* (2004).<sup>1</sup> The first tells the story of George, who in real life got back in touch with Santoro after many years, because the two supposedly attended elementary school together for a few months in Syracuse, Italy. Santoro can only vaguely remember him, but finally visits- the man, and lets him tell his story.

The meeting resembles an interrogation where all that can be heard are the answers of the person being questioned, who at the beginning can just be seen from behind. Like his face, the background of story also remains hidden. The narrative of the family's motivations is full of gaps, and interrupted by silent sequences in which the various camera shots are superimposed onto one another so that the outlines begin to vibrate and the discrepancy between Georg's and Santoro's memories is made clear. Georg's descriptions become more personal with time, he remembers how Santoro became his friend. But gaps in the soundtrack signal that the memories of the narrator in the image and the narrator behind the camera are not congruent. Midway through the video, the camera zooms in on the back of the head, as if it wanted to penetrate it. Now, Georg begins to tell how he began his search for Santoro. The camera changes perspective, and shows Georg's face in a front close-up, but again only fragmentarily, as if even with this recent memory, which Santoro shares, a part remained a bit unclear. In the end, the camera focuses on Georg's right eye, and twice superimposes a vacation snap shot from the 1970s that shows him with his mother in Sicily. With this media gesture of -authenticity, Santoro's camera seems to suddenly tap into Georg's store of memory images, resulting in a brief consensus about what is remembered. But the extreme focus on the eye again leaves in doubt whether the whole thing might not have been more imagined than remembered.

The alternating camera shots as well as the camera manipulations are part of a reflexive filmic process that suggest to the viewer that she or he is able to witness indirectly the act of remembering. Santoro thus -follows the contemporary drive to not just record memory or "oral history," but to re-model it in light of the spectator's reliving this emotion. The focus thus moves

away from the visual documentation of memory to the event of remembering itself. The involved witnessing of remembrance thus takes precedence over any clarification of the puzzling gaps in the memory of the artist.

Santoro creates a similar zone hovering between memory, witness, and finding truth in *Discrepancy II* (2004), an installation made up of two video-projections on wood panels that placed in a corner facing each other, show two equally long videos. On the floor also lies a transparent foil that reflects the film like water, while metal wire fencing is spanned over both panels. In this way, barriers and visual distractions are set up in the spatial arrangement that from the outset prevent unlimited access to visual information, and fundamentally express the doubt of the accessibility of information in the mass media.

The two loops show similar situations. The camera follows a piece of paper that is blown across a country path. On the left panel, the paper bears a typed text: "SOMEWHERE BETTER THAN THIS PLACE," while on the other piece we read: "NOWHERE BETTER THAN THIS PLACE". The two statements cancel one another in their meanings. Ultimately the camera rests on a newspaper title page of the same day: on the right *The New York Times* of October 6, 2000 with a not entirely revealed headline: "...slavs Claim Belgrade for a New Lea[...]" and on the left *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* of the same date with a headline that reads "Opposition Storms Parliament and State Television in Belgrade," subtitled "Kostunica Calls for Peaceful Power Change: Milos̆evic´ in Flight?" Both newspapers are considered in the Western world guarantors of high journalistic quality. But they present the same event with different accents. In the one, a gesture of triumph predominates, while the other somewhat nervously points to the turmoil in Belgrade. The reports' shift in accent might be just as minimal as the exchange of letters that makes "somewhere" out of "nowhere," but it also points to the constant incongruence of reporting, and especially the incongruence of remembering.

- A) "I see more and more how important it is to explore the linkages between private and public" (Vittorio Santoro, portfolio statement, April 5, 2002).
- B) One possible reason for the interest in the conditions of understanding and remembering might be of a biographical nature. The experience of various cultures increases our sense of the fragmented quality of the supposedly self-evident.
- C) Vinzenz Hediger, "Konjunktur des Gedächtnisses, -Konjunktur des Dokumentarischen," *Documentary Creations*, ed. Susanne Neubauer, Kunstmuseum Luzern, 2005, p. 50.
- D) See Neubauer 2005 as well as the exhibition *Reprocessing Reality. New Perspectives on Art and the Documentary*, Nyon, 2005, and *Covering the Real*, Kunstmuseum Basel, 2005.
- E) "Indexical" refers to those media in which the event leaves its mark in the medium as a real trace, like photography or film, where the light influenced by the object inscribes itself in the photographic or filmic emulsion. This definition has become increasingly obsolete in the age of digital photography and digital video due to their manipulability.
- F) The metaphoric title *Fence* addresses the "annexation of the other" as explored during the 1990s that takes place with the "mediatization of our contemporary culture in its global orientation," but also a consciousness for the limits of understanding "the Other." See Ursula Frohne, "Video Cult/ures," *Video Cult/ures: Multimediale Installationen der 90er Jahre*, Museum für Neue Kunst, ZKM Karlsruhe, 1999, p. 19.

- G) The issue of deception resulting from the mass media is also central to Santoro's *AN/ÄSTHESIE Part I & II* (2004-05), which could be seen for the first time at *Temporary Import*, 10th ART FORUM BERLIN 2005.
- H) With this media-critical position that emerges in particular in connection with remembering, Santoro approaches the work of other contemporary artists, see on this Neubauer 2005.
- I) Both works were shown at the 11th Biennial of Visual Arts 2004 in Pancevo (Belgrade).

Translated by Brian Currid, Berlin

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**Kathleen Bühler**, Curator, lives in Zürich. Studied aesthetics and film theory. Wrote her doctoral thesis on the experimental film as autobiography in the work of Carolee Schneemann. Curator of the Grison Museum of Fine Arts, Chur, and art critic for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* she will soon be curator for contemporary art at Kunstmuseum Bern.