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Gebhard Sengmüller - Statement on Main Artistic Work

I'm an artist working in the field of media technology, currently based in Vienna and Salzburg, Austria. Since 1992, I have been developing projects and installations focussing on the history of electronic media; creating alternative ordering systems for media content; and constructing autogenerative networks. My work has been shown extensively in Europe, the US and Japan, among others in venues such as Ars Electronica Linz, the Venice Biennale, ICA London, Postmasters Gallery NYC, the Museum of Contemporary Photography Chicago, the FCMM Festival Montreal, or the ICC Center, Tokyo.

My main project for the last few years has been "VinylVideo". This is a fake piece of media archeology, a "forgotten" invention for the storage of television signals on longplay vinyl records. I presented this project, a collaboration with scientists and artists, in numerous exhibitions, live shows and talks since 1998. Also, this work has been covered widely in art and mainstream media, among others in Frieze Magazine, Wired Magazine, FAZ and the New York Times. In 2004, VinylVideo collaborated with Perry Hoberman and Julia Scher, who created new works for a VinylVideo installation at the opening of the FACT Center, Liverpool. VinylVideo is represented by Postmasters Gallery NYC (http://gebseng.com/03_vinylvideo/).

Currently, I'm showing two major new projects: "VSSTV - Very Slow Scan Television", which premiered at ars electronica, Linz and at the DEAF festival Rotterdam, addresses a parallel TV universe dating back to an era of television monopolies, and incorporates bubble wrap as a new image carrier (http://gebseng.com/02_vsstv/). "Slide Movie" is an installation that de- and at the same time reconstructs a common media apparatus; it has been exhibited at the EMAF festival Osnabrück recently (http://gebseng.com/04_slidemovie/). For a more detailed description of my works, please see the attached statement and brochures.

At the moment, I am also working to realize my latest concept, "A Parallel Image" (http://www.gebseng.com/08_a_parallel_image/), an electronic camera obscura, that seeks to facilitate an unusual, non-linear live transmission of moving pictures. This project has won the "Salzburger Landespreis für Medienkunst" (media art prize of the province of Salzburg) in 2008.

Since 2005, I have been lecturing a class on media archeology at the Kunsthochschule Linz, Institute Interface Cultures.

My work always reflects critically the historic and social context of current media art. Its focus is on the tools through which art is generated, be it my myself, in collaboration with others, or "autonomously" by the tools themselves. My work often has a didactic component in the sense that a critical engagement of the audience – not only with the work itself, but with the wider context in which it is placed – plays a central role in it.

The following list comprises the six main projects that I worked on since 1992. Most of them are about television. In some sense, they also deal with putting things into order and trying to preserve them for posterity. They represent attempts to create systems/environments/tools that produce art instead of me actually having to create that content myself. With this, they examine the interrelation between the specifics of the tools/platforms and the content created with them.

TV Poetry, 1992-1996

(http://www.gebseng.com/05_tv_poetry/)

Has been shown first at ars electronica 1992, later in different settings at the Medienbiennale Leipzig, St. Gervais in Geneva and V2_Organisation in Rotterdam. This early installation is a self-constructed and invented network of satellite dishes, tv-sets and computers that all have one goal: to create poems from television. I remember a statement from the Austrian writer Alfred Polgar from the 1930s about radio. He describes how he listens to radio with headphones. When he takes the headphones off, the radio keeps working, even without him, and the sound trickles into the table top. In this sense, TV Poetry

deals with the impossibility of absorbing all the available information on television myself, and instead tries to create a system that will put this information to use in an unexpected way.

TV Poetry is an experimental set-up which can be put together at any location. Combined with precisely adjusted receiving equipment, it rapidly scans the various television transmissions it receives (commercials, news, quiz shows, etc.) for text passages visible on the screen. In an ongoing, realtime process, the text is recognised, filtered out, processed, and output as an endless stream of text, generated by TV programs and CPU programming. Through imponderability, inaccuracy, video noise and misinterpretation within the system, the source text is radically transformed, giving rise to new meanings. Very powerful content (headlines, slogans, ...) "shines through" and tends to remain intact.

Signal processing takes place in parallel process on separate machines and only comes together in the final stage. The quality of the results in terms of density, continuity and recognisable content is in a direct proportional relationship to the available power and capacity of the equipment (number of TV channels, number and operating frequency of the CPUs, bus width of the connections).

"TV Poetry 2/94", which I produced for the Medienbiennale Leipzig, works entirely decentralised. An arbitrary number of field agencies located all over Europe (in this case: artists apartments and studios in Rotterdam, Lüneburg and Vienna) gather TV signals via cable television or satellite receivers, process this raw information automatically and send resulting poetry to the central computer placed in Leipzig. This unique design (externalisation and compression to only one CPU per field agency) relying heavily on the existing telecommunications infrastructure offers the opportunity of cheaply incorporating even distant locations into an open network. Compared to the previous set-up (TV Poetry 1/93 at ars electronica) this decentralized version results in an increase of channels and available raw information. The gathered information is sent to the Leipzig central station at scheduled times via telephone. In the Leipzig exhibition hall a monitor continuously displays the gathered text. Except from three photographs that represent the the field agencies, the observer will not be aware of the poems distant origin.

Furthermore the system spreads towards a higher degree of virtuality as the text is fed to the UnitN -room in M.I.T.s MediaMOO. Internet users have access to this virtual reality, where TV POETRY will be available in a verbal/virtual "room". Using an internet terminal in the Leipzig exhibition hall, real visitors can experience and perceive this level.

My Television Archive, 1996

(http://www.gebseng.com/07_my_television_archive/)

I did this for the Viennese Galerie Cult and never showed it again, even though I really like it. That's probably because it is pretty much bound to the German language. The work brings together the two personal obsessions of late-night TV-watching and of constructing ordering systems. The choice of the scenes and the categorization might tell you something about Austrian public broadcasting in the '90s, but also about my viewing habits.

The "My Television Archive" interactive database is an encounter with my personal collection of TV shows I've taped over recent years. I spent a week ensconced in the middle of the exhibition space during the gallery's opening hours conducting a fast-forward review of my entire TV archive of VHS video cassettes.

Utilizing "subjective" selection criteria, I picked out short excerpts (lasting 2 seconds to 3 minutes) and saved them to the computer's video system. In a second phase, the accumulated video sequences were then sorted according to "objective" criteria (for example, "Kissing Scenes", "Three Actors", "Tracking Shots"). The computer system that was provided had been enhanced with a specially developed user interface to make these compiled video sequences available for perusal by gallery visitors during the second week of the exhibition.

In concrete terms, the database looks like this: two video monitors are sitting on a desktop; the left monitor displays the user interface. Proceeding from a start menu, the user can select via mouse-click one of the various theme groups. This brings up a sub-menu that presents the user with a page of icons representing an overview of all available scenes. When one of these icons is selected, the corresponding TV scene (picture with sound) is displayed on the right monitor. This runs as a loop, meaning that the scene is repeated over and over again until the user makes another selection.

The exhibition space is also outfitted with a set of shelves holding the video cassettes that contain the raw material. Each cassette that could be examined during the first week's viewing process is marked with a red dot.

The project can be continued at another exhibition venue, where additional TV material can be viewed and sorted into the existing databank system.

The databank's categories: Title / Two Actors / Three Actors / Four Actors / Five or More Actors / Endings / Nutrition / Transitional Elements / Music / News / Advertising / Kissing Scenes / Telephones / Moderators / Interviews / Off-screen Voices / Substantive Highpoints / Cars / Firearms&Chainsaws / Tracking Shots / Monologs

Vergessen© Erasure Coils, 1997-1998

(http://gebseng.com/06_vergessen/)

Produced for the Vergessen© project, a collaboration of about 20 artists and art theorists working on the topic of forgetting in different ways, trying to cope with a phenomenon which seems inaccessible to known methods of epistemology. The vergessen© project is an attempt to actively embrace one aspect of life which is almost entirely ignored by our usual machines of knowledge. "Forgetting is usually mentioned in relation to diseases, mistakes, trouble of all kind. we forget history. is there a pattern to it? a system? is it possible to talk about it, is it possible to work with it, is it possible to become aware of it? Do we want to know more about forgetting? is it even possible to know more about forgetting? we are working on projects dealing with various aspects of forgetting and its limitations, projects which should move forgetting into the realm of our experience, that we might better see and hear it.", as Herwig Turk writes. (please also see <http://www.vergessen.com>)

A photo series showing Erasure Coils: large electromagnets which are used in broadcasting companies to instantly erase the content of audio and video tapes. The series consists of seven photos of these devices, located in the regional studios of the ORF (Austrian Broadcasting Corporation). In my opinion, these machines represent a mechanical/industrial form of "forgetting".

Christoph Cox on the Erasure Coils series: "Photographs and recordings may stem the tide of forgetting and preserve the passing moment, yet they are equally subject to erasure and loss. Gebhard Sengmüller's Erasure Coils series presents a kind of technological analogue to human forgetting: the electromagnetic bulk eraser employed by broadcasting companies to delete videotapes. Far from mourning the loss of sights and sounds, Sengmüller's sober photographs seem wryly to celebrate these black holes of audio-visual information that promise relief from the bureaucratic clutter surrounding them and from the information overload to which their owners contribute.

Sengmüller's series form part of a larger collective project ([vergessen.com](http://www.vergessen.com)) to affirm forgetting as a necessary but neglected feature of human and technological memory. Self-effacing in more ways than one, Sengmüller's documents imagine, in their very content, their own consumption and erasure as images."

VinylVideo™, 1998, on-going

(http://gebseng.com/03_vinylvideo/)

My main work for the last years, existing in many different settings and still growing. Apart from the obvious aspects of media-archeology, timetravel etc., it is also about artists who create their own tools and environments instead of using the ones provided by the industry.

VinylVideo™ is a new, wonderful and fascinating development in the history of audio-visual media. For the first time in the history of technological invention, VinylVideo™ makes possible the storage of video (moving image plus sound) on analog long-play records. Playback from the VinylVideo™ Picture Disk is made possible with the VinylVideo™ Unit, which consists of a normal turntable, a special conversion box (the VinylVideo™ Home Kit) and a television.

At the same time, VinylVideo™ is a vision of new live video mixing possibilities. By simply placing the tone arm at different points on the record, VinylVideo™ makes possible a random access manipulation of the time axis. With the extremely reduced picture and sound quality, a new mode of audio-visual perception evolves. In this way, VinylVideo™ reconstructs a home movie medium as a missing link in the history of recorded moving images while simultaneously encompassing contemporary forms of DJ-ing and VJ-ing.

I describe VinylVideo™ as a fake archeology of media. We designed a device that retrieves videosignals stored on a conventional Vinyl (LP) record. The discontinuity in the development of electronic film technology constitutes the historical background for this fictitious video disc technology: Even though television, the electronic transmission of moving images, had been feasible since the late 1920s, storage of these images became possible only after development of the video recorder in 1958. Recording images for private use did not become available until the mass introduction of the VCR in the early 1980s (!). Before, the average consumer was confined to use 8mm film, a technology dating back to 1900, usually without sound. Recording of television was not possible at all.

VinylVideo™ reconstructs a homemovie technology of the late 40s/early 50s and thus bridges a gap in the history of consumer technology. The images are stored on a conventional analog record, with a running time of appr. 12 min/side. These records are played on a standard turntable with an ordinary diamond needle, the signals are then processed by the VinylVideo Home Kit into a videosignal that is displayed on a black and white TV-set.

Lack of bandwidth poses the main problem for the mechanical storage of video on a record: Unlike TV with a bandwidth of 3-5 Megahertz, LP's hardly provide capacity for 1/200 of this, ca. 25 Kilohertz. To accomplish the storage of film, radical data reduction has to be used: The number of frames per second and resolution are drastically reduced, storage of color is not possible. But this is not enough: switching from frequency modulation, that delivers stable signals but takes up a lot of bandwidth, to amplitude modulation results in additional data reduction. The downside of this is a loss in the quality of the stored images, the pictures become more sensitive to disturbances, like imperfections of the LP. The difference in quality can be compared to the difference between FM and AM radio broadcasting, the latter being much more sensitive to interferences. Instead of building a circuit based on vacuum tubes, VinylVideo™ uses proprietary computer technology developed by Martin Diamant and Günter Erhart for real-time processing of the

video signal.

Timothy Druckrey writes, "Part subversion, part retrieval, VinylVideo™ stands on the border between the current frenzy for cut-and-paste home production and the nostalgia for pseudo-retro emerging in the reissue of the VW Beetle and its computational cousin the iMac. Posing as a "fake archeological relic of media technology," VinylVideo™ provokes a range of questions around the expectations of "a fictitious technological past" (as Charles Gute suggested), the faux-status of innovation, the ploys (and plots) of advertising, the quotidian benefits of aesthetics, the esteem of media theory, the vacuous virtual venture of investment, and the participation of artist collaborators producing editions of "records".

In refusing virtualization, VinylVideo™ avoids the dead-end of another web project destined for obsolescence by coyly integrating itself into the materialized and mechanical system of objects and the semiotics of the tele-visual. Often omitted from the discourses of state-of-the-art media theory, the flickering black and white images are both deeply coded by their intimations of authenticity and historically destabilized by the collapse of the broadcast ideology that sustained their so-called authority. This oscillation, between credibility and disavowal, surely characterizes an approach to media that straddles the line between the parodic and the farcical while proposing to reflect on the status of the image and the technologies that empower them."

VSSTV - Very Slow Scan Television, 2002, on-going

(http://gebseng.com/02_vsstv/)

This project is in many ways a successor to both TV Poetry and VinylVideo. It shows us a parallel TV universe, dating back to an era of television monopolies. It also shows a historic predecessor to current streaming and netcasting technologies. And, once again, it tries to construct a machine that makes use of content which would be lost otherwise.

Very Slow Scan Television (VSSTV) is a new television format that we have developed building upon Slow Scan Television (SSTV), an almost 50-year-old image transmission system used by Ham Radio amateurs. In contrast to regular TV, SSTV runs on a dramatically reduced frame rate. VSSTV uses broadcasts from this historic public domain television system - available anytime over freely accessible frequencies - to construct an analogy: it recreates a cathode ray tube (CRT) with regular bubble wrap taking the role of the aperture mask. Just as a CRT mixes the three primary colors to create various hues, VSSTV will use the surprisingly similar yet magnified structure of bubble wrap, commonly used as a packing material. We developed a device to receive images and output those images onto a new visual medium. A plotter-like machine fills the individual bubbles with one of the three primary CRT colors (red, green, and blue), turning them into pixels on the VSSTV screen in a continuous process. Observed from a distance, the clusters of pixels/bubbles merge into the original image. Large and permanent television images are the result, images that take the idea of slow scan to the extreme: due to our process, the frame rate decreases to only one frame per day, down from one frame in 8 seconds possible with the underlying SSTV format! The combination of Ham Radio SSTV television and the new output medium's extremely reduced frame rate suggests the name for this system: VSSTV - Very Slow Scan Television. VSSTV thus devises a process that incorporates analogies on many levels: the transmission of images vs. the transmission of sound; digital vs. analog technology; CRT screen vs. bubble wrap. VSSTV makes us recall the elements present in every television image, it also reveals a hidden universe of amateur television broadcasting (going back to 1957). A world of public domain television, accessible even with simple technology, independent of the commercial or monopolized television networks prevalent in Europe and the US. At the same time, VSSTV adds an ironic twist to the use of a material familiar to every artist. Bubble wrap, normally used to wrap and protect art, becomes a medium and an artwork in itself.

Slide Movie - Diafilmprojektor, 2006, on-going

(http://gebseng.com/04_slidemovie/)

Another recent work, currently finished. The de- and at the same time reconstruction of a common media apparatus.

Black cube installation: a film sequence (35mm motion picture, 24 frames/sec.) is cut up and the individual frames are mounted as slides. They're then distributed among 24 slide projectors that are all focused on the same screen (the exact same point). Via electronic control of the projectors, these individual images are then reassembled - in an extremely cumbersome way - into a chronological sequence. The formula "one projector per frame" thus gives rise to something that at least rudimentarily (and inevitably very inaccurately, due to the lack of precision of the mechanical devices) suggests a motion picture. The film soundtrack emerges as a byproduct - the mechanical clattering of the projectors changing slides.

Felix Stalder on "Slide Movie": "Tapping into the wealth of overlooked, forgotten or even repressed experiences in dealing with media is one of the most important aims of media archeology. This is also the approach that Gebhard Sengmüller takes, allowing himself not only the freedom to recall alternative approaches to media development, but

also to propose some of his own. As fictive archeology, apparatuses are set back in time, so that the scope of action is radically expanded. If we can allow ourselves the freedom to reinvent the past, would it not then also be possible to imagine a future beyond the high-gloss techno-fetishism that the industry overwhelms us with?

Slide Movie, the most recent of Sengmüller's apparatuses, is located not only in the field of media archeology, though, but also in the field of media theory. With the infernal noise produced by twenty-four slide projectors changing pictures, the "film projector" is liberated from the sound-proof projection room and opened up. With the inside out, we find ourselves no longer in the audience space, but in the middle of the projector. The film, whose content is conventionally the focal point, moves into the background. What becomes visible, as though under a magnifying glass, is the medium, the illusion, the way still images are turned into moving pictures. In the terms of cognitive psychology, from which Heideggerian phenomenology also draws, this can be understood as a displacement of "figure" and "ground". The figure is that, to which attention is directed; the ground is everything that first makes the figure possible, but which is omitted by perception, so that we can concentrate on the figure.

The ground of the figure "film" is the cinema, the box office cashier selling tickets, the darkened projection room, the muted projector, the electrical currents that provide the projector with energy, and so forth. All of this must be present, in order for us to see the film. At the same time, however, we must also fade it out, so that we can concentrate on the content of the film, the "figure". Although - or perhaps specifically because - they are faded out, all these things have a much more lasting influence on our culture than any single film, which often disappears again after a few weeks, only to be replaced by the next film.

Slide Movie succeeds in shifting perception in the direction of the medium. The figure of this work is not the film that is projected, but rather the apparatus that carries out the projection with such great effort. This figure has actually always been there, but it is due to the intervention in the structure of our attention that we first really become aware of it. The essence of the projector, the transformation from still images to moving pictures becomes manifest."