

When images learnt how to act

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The border between theatre and the visual arts has become more porous again over the past years. Genre restrictions and medium-specific categories don't matter much to those artists who want to devise complex narratives for complex realities. Whether in video art, installation or performance – new experiential environments and thinking spaces are created on stages and in exhibitions, and artistic crew members are changing sides constantly. From Chris Kondek's video loops or Christoph Schlingensiefel's multi-media actions to Janet Cardiff's audio walks into different perceptual worlds, from the Kassel documenta to the Prague Quadrennial: art is a stage, and the stage (often) exhibits art.

The American video artist Chris Kondek has provided the German-language theatre with his special effects, and in his interactive learning plays he demonstrates how to make a good performance out of the stock market and his audience's money. It's not a shiny high tech laboratory but a modest atelier (rather, a cluttered room on the top floor of an old office building) in Berlin's Wedding district, where theatre artists like Meg Stuart, Stefan Pucher, René Pollesch or Jossi Wieler now like to come when they look for visual materials for their productions. Equipped with laptop, camera and LCD projector, and above all the many gigabytes of largely invisible data in his computer archive, video artist Chris Kondek here develops his loops and trailers, often interactively designed and specifically arranged for the needs of the theatre. Then they show up in productions such as Meg Stuart's *Alibi* or *Visitors Only*, in Pucher's *Othello* or, most recently, *Trauer muss Elektra tragen* (Mourning Becomes Electra), or in Jossi Wieler's *Bakchen* (The Bacchae), where they excite the audiences or provide subtle irritations.

His visual images do not simply illustrate or complement what is already on stage; rather, they open up their own imaginary spaces and often intervene into the stage action, for example when they suddenly blow up the actors in huge close ups, indulging in the exuberant cinemascope style and color of Hollywood cinema, or confront them with mysterious black and white fragments taken from the early days of silent movies.

Born in the United States, Kondek has felt at home in Berlin for the last few years. It is easier for him to find production opportunities for his own work in Germany or in neighbouring countries like Belgium or the Netherlands rather than in the U.S., and to some extent he also benefits from the avant-garde reputation he holds for European theatre makers as someone who has worked with The Wooster Group and Richard Foreman, with Robert Wilson, Laurie Anderson and Michael Nyman.

The history of the medium

One might think that the initial hysteria about the new media has long died down. After all, even in the conservative theatre the use of cameras and video projection onstage is no longer considered a futuristic gimmick or, worse, an attack on the

hallowed aesthetic value system of a theatre defining itself largely through “live” presence and manifestation of the actors. The high-minded resistance to new media and the euphoria about their impact have died down in equal measure, and once again the theatre could prove that it is the mother of all mediums, able to integrate digital and reproductive technologies or real time internet transmissions productively without undermining its own immediacy nor diminishing the quality of media themselves. One might go so far as to claim that video has become such a natural part of the stage that productions which eschew projections altogether almost appear to worship some form of quaint atavistic purism.

Nevertheless, the history of the electronic medium in the context of the theatre is a relatively young one, young enough, at least, for the career of a 45 year old artist to have witnessed the main stages of video from the beginnings, if one were to grant the exception that visual artists like Wolf Vostell or Nam June Paik, as well as the Irish conceptual artist Les Levine, already experimented with video and television in the 1960s and – mostly working out of Europe – made them the central media form of a vibrant new art movement. It took a while, however, until video monitors and cameras showed up in the context of theatrical production, so that Kondek, born in Boston in 1962, indeed could be counted amongst the pioneers of an era in which images learnt to act in the theatre. In the beginning it was perhaps more of a playful testing of their potential rather than a purposeful intermedial augmentation of the *mise en scène*.

Find rather than invent – with the Wooster Group

After finishing school Kondek first spent a few years in Montréal where he worked as camera assistant in film production. It was indeed his ambition to work in film when he moved to New York City in the mid-80s, but it wasn't quite as easy in the beginning to find similar opportunities in Manhattan. “I was just beginning to meet the right people in order to be able to work eventually as camera man,” Kondek remembers, “but it surely would have taken another seven or eight years to get there.” Therefore he started to work part-time as lighting designer in the theatre, and quickly noticed that it was easier to get on in the buzzing low-budget world of the down town, off-Broadway scene. “After just three productions I was already lighting designer,” he laughs. During this time he also got to know Richard Foreman, the



Fig.1 Chris Kondek in 1990, working with the Wooster Group. Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

director of the Ontological-Hysteric Theater who had just been creating his *Symphony of the Rats* in collaboration with actors from the Wooster Group.

Although Kondek was engaged in a film project at the time, he decided in 1989 to take on a full time position as lighting designer for the famous garage group under the direction of Elizabeth LeCompte. “I was not a video artist who decided to go to the theatre,” he emphasizes. “That particular profession didn't really exist back then. I just wanted to do the lighting.” On occasion he also found himself onstage with the actors, as one can see in old production photos that show him, for example, in *Brace Up* (the legendary Japanese-style Wooster Group adaptation of *The Three Sisters*) where a young Kondek is seen dancing side by side with Roy Faudree and William Defoe. Already in *Brace Up* it was one of Kondek's tasks to take care of the video components, even though, he admits today, he “barely had a clue how to do that.” Basically, nobody really knew that, which was probably the ideal precondition for finding out on his own. The technical possibilities were limited back then, there were no specialized video studios, and barely any video software programs that would have allowed the kind of digital manipulation common today. And when one could not afford to rent a professional editing suite, the images turned out to jump a little each time one made a cut. In spite of this, Kondek thinks that in retrospect it was a very inspiring time: “naturally it's much easier today to work in digital media, but when you didn't have that many options, you had to think a little harder about how to realize an idea. Sometimes I think that things have become a bit too easy today.”

During rehearsals for *The Three Sisters* the Wooster company looked at a lot of video tapes – Japanese Samurai or Godzilla movies as well as documentaries about Noh or Kabuki theatre. Movies were playing constantly during the rehearsals, simply because LeCompte loved the soundtracks, and at one point Kondek went ahead to make his first little video loop, which then promptly ended up in the show. The group did research, things were tried out, and every day they discovered and discarded new techniques of performance. To find rather than invent was the key rule of those early experimental years during which the alternative theatre liberated itself vehemently from the stalemate of old symbolic conventions. “Liz was in some way the exact opposite to Robert Wilson,” Kondek remembers. “Wilson would all of a sudden have an idea and decide: ‘we need one hundred white trees,’ whereas Liz simply asked, ‘what do have here in the room? What can me make out of it?’ This has been pretty much my way of working until today.”

The aura of images – for Pucher, Wieler, Meg Stuart

Jossi Wieler is another director who knows exactly what he wants. The snowy white fir tree forest for *Die Bakchen* (created for the Kammerspiele Munich) was a precisely executed, commissioned work: the forest looks absolutely realistic in the beginning, then begins to tremble during an earth quake, and finally appears completely desolate as if after a nuclear catastrophe.

Stefan Pucher, in comparison, likes to be surprised. “Generally I solve problems for him,” Kondek laughs. During rehearsals for *Othello* at the Hamburg Schauspielhaus,

it was difficult initially to find a space for the intimate scenes with Desdemona, whereas the grand scenes between Othello and Iago were mostly positioned downstage, facing the audience frontally. It was decided therefore, to stage the scenes between Othello and Desdemona as video projections, which allowed a much greater intimacy between the two protagonists, Alexander Scheer and Jana Schulz.

On contrast to this, Pucher's staging of Eugene O'Neill's *Trauer muss Elektra tragen* (Kammerspiele Munich) has right at the beginning a filmic trailer with pictures of the hotel in Hitchcock's *Psycho* and a huge spider web which build an intensely uncanny atmosphere for the early scenes in the Mannon household. Later Kondek uses large close ups of kissing scenes, reminiscent of *Gone with the Wind*, and war scenes taken from D.W. Griffith's classic silent era film *Birth of a Nation*, which generate the feverish and nostalgic setting of the old decadent South, burning up in a final conflagration when huge flames from a Hollywood action thriller get projected onto the outer skins of the igloo-like stage construction designed by Barbara Ehnes.

In using these visual projections, Kondek is always more concerned with the immediate visual aura of the images rather than the recognition effect of historical film references. "I work with images, not with movies," he maintains, and then adds: "Contemporary films are difficult to use anyway, since they have so many editing cuts. There is hardly a take that lasts more than five seconds. It's wonderful, however, to see these old American documentaries from the 1930 with their long takes."

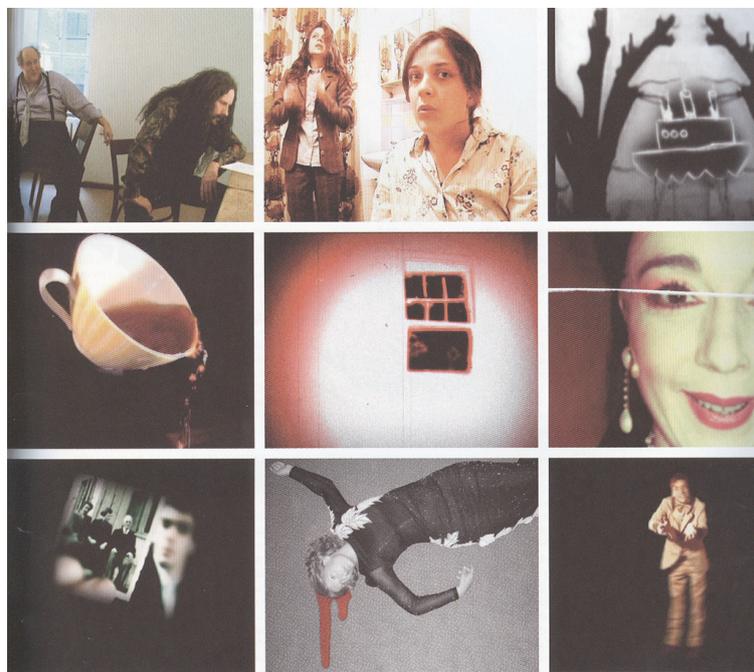
Occasionally he creates his own specific images, for example the dancing tea cup in Meg Stuart's *Visitors Only*, which seems to swallow the dancers and then spit them out again. "It's enjoyable to work for Meg, because we create some very unique images," says Kondek, and he remembers well how the tea cup scene, inspired by reading *Alice in Wonderland*, was done on a rehearsal day when Meg was ill and not even present. "With Stefan Pucher everything depends much more on the plot. But he is very open to my suggestions."



Videostills of Chris Kondek's collaborations with René Pollesch, Stefan Pucher, Meg Stuart and Jossi Wieler.
Photo Courtesy of the artist.



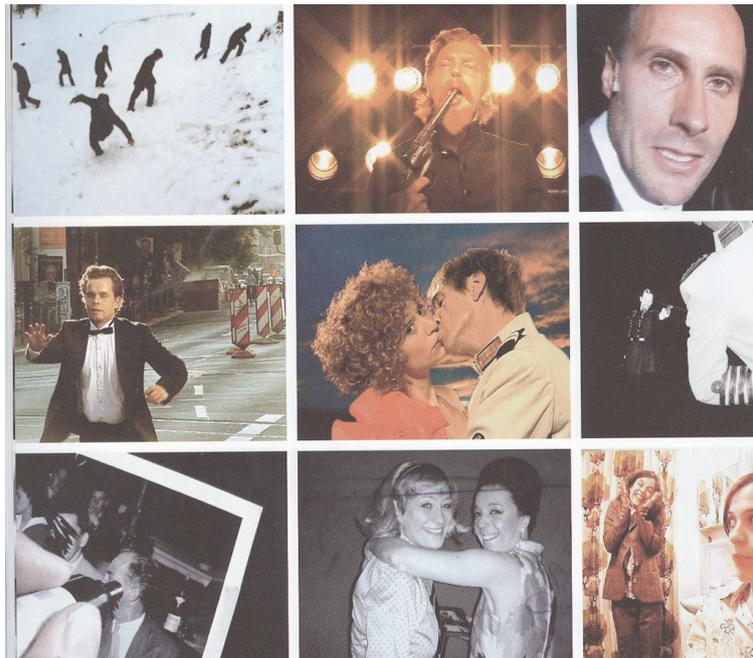
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The concrete interaction between actor and video remains the main characteristic of Kondek's artistic vision to make the medium an integral part of the *mise en scène*, and thus it is the confrontation between actors, who are present live on stage, with largely prerecorded video footage that matters, as it was tested early on in working with the Wooster Group. "One problem, however, is the fact that video images on stage are

often more powerful than the actors,” he admits. “One has to find ways to make them not all too interesting or at least to make them appear as quiet as possible.”



Videostills of Chris Kondek’s collaborations with René Pollesch, Stefan Pucher, Meg Stuart and Jossi Wieler.
Photo Courtesy of the artist.

The bouncing of the dead cat

It is no surprise that such self-constraint gradually motivated Kondek to explore a greater artistic independence of his own. With the interactive performance installation *Dead Cat Bounce*, coproduced with the Productiehuis Rotterdam, the HAU in Berlin, and Künstlerhaus Mousonturm Frankfurt, Kondek drew attention to his work as a director for the first time, and he was promptly invited to “Festival Politik im Freien Theater” in Berlin (2005) where he won an award by the Goethe Institute and a special award of the ZDF theatre channel allowing him to produce a television version of the production.

While Kondek and his crew are speculating at the New York Stock Exchange via the internet with real-time bids made by audience members, the market itself here becomes an invisible, yet at the same time most immediately present actor, in its effects on the stocks and thus on gains or losses. With its incalculable, indeterminate behavior and power over human destiny, the market almost steps into the role of the gods of Antiquity (a kind of *deus ex machina*). “Wait, watch and see, what the market does” – this is the stereotypical stage direction given after buying stock, and it regularly provokes a tense silence which is only interrupted by the softly spoken announcements of the stock and exchange rate fluctuations. The most fascinating aspect of this simple but convincing theatrical construction is not the admittedly entertaining remedial lesson for neophytes in financial speculation, but the alchemist

bravado with which Kondek succeeds in almost seamlessly transforming the economic performance of an Indian IT-corporation, for instance, into a stage performance that in its concrete real-ness naturally (and paradoxically) exceeds any simulated presentation of insider trading knowledge. Titled after stock trading jargon – “even a dead cat will bounce if dropped from high enough” – which refers to the mostly inexplicable rise of shares that had been falling for some time – *Dead Cat Bounce* must now be considered one of the most genuine theatre experiments in recent years which draws its performative power from a complex reflection on a real historical process, while participating in the drama of the stock market via an e-brokerage account at the New York Stock Exchange.

“Here is the apparatus” – where is the truth?

Kondek’s second production, first shown in the spring of 2006, turned out to be a fantastical voyage across the media history of the last century: “Hier ist der Apparat” is an ironic homage to Brecht’s radio play “Der Ozeanflug,” written in 1929 in the pioneer spirit of media euphoria and describing Charles Lindbergh’s legendary flight across the Atlantic.

Fig. 2 Chris Kondek performing in *Hier ist der Apparat*, 2005. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Along with the pilot – “his name is irrelevant,” Brecht wrote in 1949 to distance himself from Lindbergh’s pro-Nazi posture – Kondek also presents other artistic and philosophical media stars on the stage, such as Orson Welles or Marshall McLuhan, and he zaps through a whole range of mediums during the performance, thus continuously reframing the idea of the “apparatus,” sometimes referring to the airplane, then again to technical hardware such as radio, television, or computer, and last but not least the theatre apparatus as whole. The highlight of the evening is a video collage, composed of live shots of the actress Julie Bougard mixed with old black and white footage of clouds and the ocean, which dramatizes the love scene between pilot and storm. The forces of Nature and technology are fused in a passionate embrace, before disillusionment abruptly overtakes us in the final sequence where we witness the imperfect simulation of a crash landing in the format of a video game (with digital design by Victor Morales). What remains, after the initial euphoria regarding the unlimited possibilities of the new communications technologies, is a more somber scepticism, and discomfort vis à vis the unavoidable control

mechanisms which govern even the seemingly democratic surface of the World Wide Web.

“Each medium contains a new promise,” announces Marshall McLuhan, seen here as a guest in a TV talk show taped in 1974, but he doesn't mention that each promise at the same time includes in its kernel the potential for lies and deceptions. However, another truth lies hidden here, and the theatre as one of the most ancient human art forms is still the most likely one to reveal it: when Julie Bougard in her role as co-pilot holds a microphone against an old rattling tape recorder and succeeds in generating surprisingly authentic sounding propeller noises, her action is quite obviously a deception. Yet she produces, while (self-)revealing the deceptive mechanism, her own immediate theatrical reality – which also explains to us why a video artist like Chris Kondek still feels most at home on the stage.

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