

Negotiating Reality

By Anna Holm

The year was 2002. The place Overgaden Institute of Contemporary Art. Here the artist duo Hanne Nielsen and Birgit Johnsen exhibited the video installation *Territorielle udsagn* ('Territorial Statements') for the first time. With its experimental form, it drew a lot of attention and was subsequently shown at several Danish museums, as well as on national TV. In the work six women confide in the camera, recounting an episode in their life where they have felt their personal boundaries were transgressed. It might sound like a classical TV documentary on the trials and tribulations of daily life, but as the stories progress confidence in the premise starts to wane. As they tell their story four times over several days the women's intonation, choice of words and state of mind fluctuate – one even ends up reviewing her story and changing her mind during the process – just as the lighting, camera angle and framing vary from recording to recording. At a direct level the work problematises the idea of there being one true version of any given story: we and the world we live in are in a state of constant flux, and as the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said you cannot step into the same river twice – or in this case tell exactly the same story twice, let alone four times. Any attempt at establishing what happened will always be a (re)construction, which with the video camera as an extra intermediary enters the realm of representation with all the ontological complexity that involves. The interesting question raised by the work, therefore, is not so much which version is closest to the truth, as to why we experience one version as more truthful than another. Via formal and narrative shifts the work engages the viewer in a dialogue on the criteria we use to judge the authenticity of what we see, as well as the role the medium and our expectations of it play in our determination of veracity.

Its critical dispute with reality and the medium of video has made *Territorielle udsagn* a cardinal point in the work of Nielsen and Johnsen. So when Overgaden brings the REVISIT¹ series to a close with an exhibition based on this work here in 2018, the focus is specifically on how – and using which techniques – the duo create narratives. Separating form and content is obviously impossible, but the exhibition's emphasis on form above content has been chosen in the hope of generating new insight and lines of connection in the artists' long-standing investigation of video's artistic potential, effects and genre conventions. Divided into four sections, the exhibition follows key trajectories in their work under the titles 'Technological Meditations', 'Montages of Reality', 'The Punctured Climax' and 'The Dissolution of the Fourth Wall'. Each section presents a selection of new and older works charting continuity and developments within each respective area of focus, as well as providing a survey of the thematic scope of their work. Because while Nielsen and Johnsen are – rightly – associated with both gender politics and humour, the constant development of their artistic production in relationship to technological breakthroughs and shifts in visual culture takes it beyond easy categorisation.

A consistent consciousness of and curiosity about the medium remains, however, a recurring feature of Nielsen and Johnsen's work, also at a purely technical level. Which is hardly surprising given that – as professor and critic Marita Sturken has pointed out – video art is heavily

dependent on the technology that determines the framework for its aesthetic possibilities.² Since Nielsen and Johnsen created their first video work in 1993, there have been numerous technical advances in video, not least the transition from analogue to digital that gained serious momentum in the late 1990s. A work like *Camaraderies* (2007), for example, could hardly have been made just a few years previously, and even at the time it was created was an incredibly complicated installation: a 14.5 metre wide panoramic projection compiled from multiple files. Nielsen and Johnsen's interest in technology is never over-indulgent or fetishistic: technology is instead a productive sparring partner finely tuned to the intention of each individual work. Or literally included as a motif, for example in *Off* (2006), *Staggered Tracks* (2005) or *Busy Circle* (2016), where aesthetic investigations are combined with reflections on how technologies actually function, and how they form and control the content they transmit.

This insistence on making the act of mediation visible is closely linked to Nielsen and Johnsen's investigation of the intricate relationship between reality and representation. Due to its life-like representation, the medium of video – like photography and film – is central to debates on the authentic and the mediated. After the alleged final showdown with any belief in the indexical legitimacy of lens-based media that culminated with the art criticism and theory of the 1980s, in the 1990s a new form of realism emerged and is still alive and kicking in new forms. In an art context this has shown itself in an interest in real-life cases, but also in a more fluid concept of reality where – not least due to the ever-increasing influence of digital media on our lives – there are no sharp distinctions between fact and fiction or reality and representation.³ Both of which inform many of the artists' stagings of the intimate and familiar at the intersection of documentary and fiction. Not only to underline the fact that every statement is inevitably a construction, but also as a way of approaching reality anew. Rather than authoritative statements aimed at convincing us of their truthfulness, these works often bring multiple perspectives, voices and genres into play in montages that underline the heterogeneity and complexity of reality. And as Nielsen and Johnsen's new installational work *Modern Escape* (2018) addresses, the flood of media-generated information has only added to this complexity – partly through the compression of time and space that occurs in the bombardment by multiple realities from the multiple screens in our homes, and partly through its sheer volume. According to German philosopher Byung-Chul Han, "[h]yperinformation and hypercommunication attest to lack of truth – indeed, to lack of being. More information, or more communication, does not eliminate the fundamental absence of clarity of the whole. If anything, it heightens it".⁴ And maybe it is their accentuation of the precarious and ambiguous, which creates space for the viewer's own reflections, that is the most marked aspect of realism in Nielsen and Johnsen's works.

Taking uncertainty as their starting point, Nielsen and Johnsen's video works are not structured by any classical linear plot taking us safely from A to B. On the contrary, a series of *verfremdung* techniques, including repetition, re-enactment, unreleased suspense or abrupt derailments of the storyline, pull the rug from under the viewer's expectations. Through the detournement of familiar genre conventions and narrative patterns, the artists archly lay bare the existential

function of narrative as a generator of meaning in an unpredictable world. With its non-plot *Kind of Noisy Silence* (2017), for example, plays on the fear of nothing happening – a kind of narrative horror vacui – whereas *Outside is Present* (2017) introduces a series of incidents and characters that set the scene for high drama in a sleepy backwater, only to peter out with nothing but loose ends to the sight and sound of monotonously turning wind turbines. With its references to Don Quixote, one of literature's most famous anti-heroes, the implication is that we tend to over-fictionalise reality even in its most trivial aspects and most remote locations.⁵ The artists' efforts to denaturalise the stereotypical narrative templates of popular culture are, however, sharply focused on raising awareness of the cultural and ideological coding of all narratives, as well as our literacy and concepts of authenticity and veracity. In a large number of their works Nielsen and Johnsen use alienating techniques to address themes of gender, identity and global politics, raising questions about the norms, hierarchies and power structures we consume from the media on a daily basis and reproduce in our own lives.

An increasingly mediated society with an insurmountable amount of visual information and the widespread collapse of boundaries between fact and fiction incarnated in contemporary phenomena like fake news only serve to make Nielsen and Johnsen's investigation of concepts like truth, authenticity, reality and representation more relevant. Rather than relating screen-based media to the loss of a sense of reality, the artists see them as adding to our realm of experience and providing new ways of perceiving the world, but also as demanding a critical honing of our visual literacy and understanding of the media that contribute to the formation of our realities right down to the intimate level of daily, domestic life. And crucially, via their open endings, multiple points of view, and flouting of genre conventions, Nielsen and Johnsen remind us that as spectators we are not only passive viewers but also active participants in the omnipresent negotiations with reality at stake in the complex social sphere of contemporary society, where the virtual and physical, private and public, and local and global merge as never before.

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1. The annual exhibition series REVISIT was launched by Overgaden in 2013 to show landmark exhibitions in the history of the art institute from a contemporary perspective. This version is the sixth and final exhibition in the series.
2. Marita Sturken, 'Paradox in the Evolution of an Art Form', 1988. In: Doug Hall & Sally Jo Fifer (eds.), *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*, Aperture, New York, 1990, p. 103.^[1]_{SEP}
3. Britta Timm Knudsen and Bodil Marie Thomsen (ed.), *Virkelighedshunger – nyrealisme i visuel optik*, 2002. Tiderne Skifter, Copenhagen, p. 7.
4. Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, 2015. Stanford University Press, Stanford California, p. 8.^[1]_{SEP}
5. Karin Petersen, 'Outside is Present / Der er andre verdener at vise', 2017. In: *Skulpturlandsby*

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