The Productivity of the Prototype

On Julien Maire's 'Cinema of Contraptions'

Edwin Carels

In his artworks and performances, Julien Maire (b. 1969, France) systematically re-invents the technology of visual media.[1] His research is a manifest hybrid between media-archaeology and the production of new media constellations. His output consists of prototypes that perform exactly what their etymology promises (from '*protos*', 'first' and '*typos*', 'impression' or 'model'): proposing unique technological configurations that produce a new, specific image quality. As industrial prototypes, these original creations – no matter how technically clever and refined – are rather useless: they are too complex, too delicate and too clunky to ever be considered for mass production. As artistic statements, the main function of these full-scale constructions is to provoke an effect of wonder, alerting the viewer to the ambivalent status of moving images produced by a machine.

In a contemporary context of mutating media, Maire's works are at once innovative and archaic, seemingly simple yet unique in their radicality, both at the conceptual and the aesthetic level. This radicality is one that incites fundamental questions about the characteristics of the image and the position of their viewer. Working on the interstices between installation, performance and media art, Maire's creations are decidedly original, as he never combines art forms merely for a provocative or innovative effect. His manipulations are always motivated by a questioning of prevailing categories and visual strategies in the digital era.

Deconstructing time-based media such as video, film, slide projections and performances, Julien Maire underlines in the first place their durational aspect, making us aware of our own experience of an image in time. His prototypical contraptions confront immobility with movement, reality with illusion, and interrogate the notion of time and memory in the moving image. With his work, Julien Maire clearly enters into dialogue with the history of media, paradoxically through the design of new technological *dispositifs*. Working against the rhetoric of technology as progress and promise, Maire instead recalibrates technology and its effect on mediation. He modifies obsolete cinematic techniques to develop alternative interfaces that produce moving images.

Overcoming a simplistic opposition between analogue and digital media, Maire's work readily invites both a strategic reconsideration of indexicality and of apparatus

theory. As this highly reflexive oeuvre has thus far triggered very little theoretical writing, the first step is to map out the terrain, introducing the work and at the same time establishing the discursive vantage points that are implicated in the work. A multidirectional approach imposes itself, motivated by the problematizing of any linear tradition that forms a subtle yet systematic concern throughout Maire's work.

Julien Maire operates at the intersection of two complementary approaches to the history and genealogy of media. 'The contents of one medium are always other media,' Marshall McLuhan already proclaimed in the opening chapter of his *Understanding Media* (1994: 18). But conversely, the past is also important to go back to and rediscover what we forgot to see in earlier media configurations. Siegfried Zielinski's self-proclaimed 'anarchaeological' approach to media-archaeology promotes the motto: 'do not seek the old in the new, but find something new in the old' (2006: 3).

The media that Julien Maire wants to remind us of are less distant in time from us than the pioneers reintroduced by Zielinski (e.g. Empedocles, Giovan Battista Della Porta, Athanasius Kircher). They are actually quite recent, yet their unique characteristics are constantly being contaminated by ever newer media. While slideshows are replaced by PowerPoint presentations and other data projections, Maire revives the legacy of the magic lantern that fed into the traditional presentation with a slide projector. His most popular work to date, the performance *Demi-Pas* (*Half Step*, 2002), is a high-tech update of the mechanical slide principle, allowing the limited animation of transparent flat or three-dimensional objects during projection. With its duration of approximately half an hour, Maire's only narrative piece to date evokes through consecutive series of animated slides a wordless tale with an extremely simple storyline: the daily routine of a factory worker walking, working, eating and sleeping. This deconstructive mini-movie elegantly demonstrates a critique on Taylorization, the automation of human labour, the industrialization process that concurred with the advent of cinema (Banta 1993). This monotony is constantly reinterpreted by the process of projection, which problematizes the cinematographic image, the fluidity of time, the consistency of reality.

Figs. 1-2 *Demi-Pas / Half-Step* © Julien Maire, 2002.

The live production of small, often looped movements within the projected image (e.g. smoke coming out of a chimney) gives the presentation a paradoxical sense of immediacy and hypermediacy at once, the two complementary characteristics that come together in what Bolter and Grusin have described as the effect of remediation (2000). Updating McLuhan's ideas, they use the term 'remediation' to refer to the representation of one medium in another and turn it into a defining characteristic of new digital media. Immediacy in their terms denotes a 'style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium (canvas, photographic film, cinema, and so on) and believe that he is in the presence of the objects of representation' (ibid. 272). Hypermediacy, on the other hand, is a 'style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium' (ibid.), making us hyperconscious of our act of seeing (or gazing).

With *Demi-Pas*, however, Julien Maire performs an act of reverse remediation: instead of smuggling old content into new technology, he reactivates and updates old technology and invests it with new imagery. The impact on the viewer is an unsettling combination of analytical observation and pure fascination. A computer-assisted slide projector is able to produce a 'film' consisting entirely of three-dimensionally projected objects, a collection of *diapositives* or 'projection modules'. 'By layering image and performed interventions into the projected scenes, the images and operations differentiate themselves spatially with perceived realities weaving in and out of perceptibility' (Druckrey 2003: 447). *Demi-Pas* is a performative piece that cannot exist without the manipulation by Maire himself. It plays on the interaction between machine and image to provoke an intricate reconsideration of what Timothy Druckrey has described as 'the cinemaginary interface' (ibid.).

The technicality of the performance is in itself as much part of the spectacle as what appears on the screen. His mechanical slides could only be made with laser cuttings and micro-electronic aids; the interfaces applied are both pre- and post-cinematographic. Instead of reconfirming the dualism between analogue and digital paradigms, between the industrial and the post-industrial, the photographic and the post-photographic (Mitchell 1992), Maire infuses the convergence of media with a strong sense of materiality. Against the illusive ephemerality of new media culture, Maire posits a materialist approach. Through his reverse engineering practices, he analyses the new imaging technologies by linking them up to older, still familiar formats of optical media.

Cinema Extracts

Julien Maire describes his references to the cinema as 'extracts' in the culinary sense: as juices or a kind of paste that contains a distillation of what is essential in cinema.[2] For instance, in several of his works he revisits one of the most typical effects of cinema, or 'the cinemaginary interface' – slow motion. In the performance *Ordonner/Tidying Up* (2000), he demonstrates an improbable slowing down of cardboard boxes being

Fig. 3 *Model for the Apocalypse* © Julien Maire, 2008.

passed on from one person to another during a house move. In *Double Face/ Two-Faced* (1999-2000), the cinematographic slow motion predominates the theatricality of the staging as the viewers witness (the illusion of) a gradual slowing down of the movements of a coin during several heads or tails, until the coin stops completely in mid-air. In *Model for the Apocalypse* (2008), a man shapes amorphous little heaps with 'slow-motion material' made from micro steel balls with a special glue. This time there isn't any manipulation of the viewer, the mass actually appears to disintegrate in slow motion. A camera records the 'action' in detail and this live transmission is projected onto a screen next to the performer, thus conflating real-time perception with mediated vision. Resembling a bizarre form of minimalist tabletop animation with caviar-like matter, the performance is preferably stretched out for many hours, adding another layer to the already conflated perception of time by the slow movement of 'sculpture' and the mediated slow motion on the screen.

Maire thus questions to what extent our vision is conditioned by tropes from diverse media. How does our eye distinguish the features of three-dimensional silvery grains on the table from the recording of the grains, translated into a frame filled with fuzzy pixels? What connotations does this automatic reading trigger? Whether in the form of installations, performances or two-dimensional objects, the work of Maire is making obvious the slippage from analogue to digital media. From his earliest pieces onwards, the artist has been addressing the process of mediation rather than the epistemological, the content of the media.

With *High Voltage/Tension Photographs* ('Photographies à Haute Tension', 1995), he demonstrates the organizational principle of photography: putting things in perspec-

tive from a singular point, fixating the image as captured by a *camera obscura*. As each image – a geometric constellation of points that suggest a three-dimensional drawing not unlike Ucello's famous perspective study of a vase – is a multi-exposure consisting of nothing but minute dots, taking up to ten hours of exposure time per picture. Maire simultaneously alludes to the composite nature of electronic imagery. Not a 'single' moment is captured in these multi-exposures, and nothing really existed in front of the lens. They are virtual images, made up of electronic sparks produced in total blackout. And still these hollow images (almost holograms) are essentially photographic, literally 'written with light'. Only the 'warm' texture of the images and their imperfections distinguish them from synthetic imagery.

This investigation of the sensuous qualities of the images and their accompanying connotations inevitably raises the question of their aura. Already in 1931, Walter Benjamin (1979) wondered why the oldest photographic portraits possess an aura that seems evaporated from more recent ones. In *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* from 1936, he explains how the loss of 'aura' is a cultural process whereby the artwork as cult has gradually transformed into the artwork as exhibit (1955). The authenticity that comes with the aura is traded for an increasing scrutiny of reality through lens-based, automated technology.

But whereas Benjamin signalled the loss of aura accompanying the mechanization of the image, Maire makes a reverse observation about the delicate distinctions in picture quality when the same image or visual motif migrates from one medium to another. In his *High Voltage* pictures there is no room for any optical unconscious – in Benjamin's eyes a revelatory quality compensating for the loss of aura – as there is nothing to see, just an empty construction, no factual content. Maire analyses media less as a tool for a better, sharper, more detailed perception of the world but rather turns our attention towards a deeper awareness of the medium itself. With his installation *Les Instantanés* (2008), Maire imitates the distinct phases of a drop of water hitting a surface, in the style of Harold Edgerton's famous stroboscopic photo captures. Yet the frozen moment comes to life again through alternating slide projectors. On closer inspection, Maire's image-cycle appears to consist not of 2D images but of a series of framed miniature glass sculptures, a stunning *trompe l'oeil* that reminds us always to look twice.

'The photograph opens up a passageway to its subject, not as a signification, but as a world, multiple and complex,' claims film historian Tom Gunning (2004: 46). With his visualizations, Maire also invites a cultivated attention for delicate differences in image resolution and for the characteristics of the image, eluding a simple true-or-false opinion about the status of what we see. Debating the notion of the post-photographic and the presumed shift in paradigm from the analogue to the digital realm, Lev Manovich argues for a graphic essentialism, claiming that we should see the digital mode not as a post-photographic but simply a graphic mode, one of whose many possibilities is the photographic effect and, by extension, the live-action cinematic effect. Gunning prefers not to polarize:

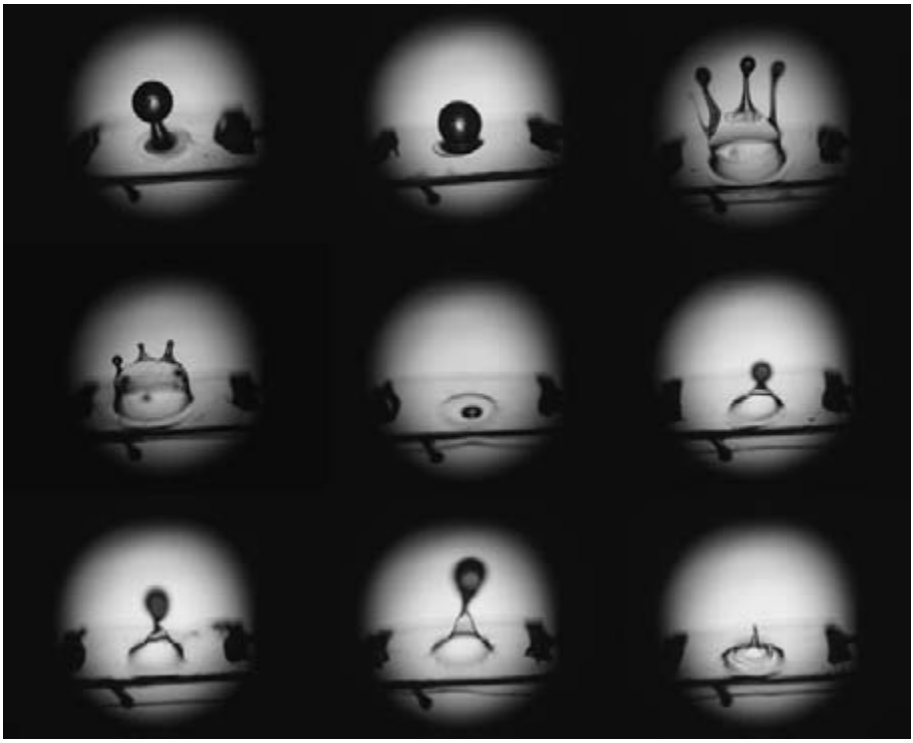


Fig. 4 *Les Instantanés* © Julien Maire, 2008.

> To refer to the digital as the 'post-photographic' seems not only polemic rather than descriptive, but most likely mystifying. The translation of photographic information into a number-based system certainly represents a revolutionary moment in photography, but one not unlike the replacement of the wet collodion process by the dry plate, or the conquering of exposure time with instantaneous photography, or the introduction of the hand camera. (2004: 47-48)

Although the transmission of information is not a central concern in Maire's work, indexicality nevertheless plays a role, questioning to what extent a lens-based image is a record, or rather a product, a construction. Are we really looking for truth, or for images that live up to certain conventions and expectations? Both photographic chemicals and the digital data must be subjected to elaborate procedures before a picture will result. Gunning: 'The indexicality of a traditional photograph inheres in the effect of light on chemicals, not in the picture it produces. The rows of numerical data produced by a digital camera and the image of traditional chemical photography are both indexically determined by objects outside the camera' (ibid. 40).

According to Thomas Elsaesser, digitization could be understood to have 'freed' us from a long-overdue superstition, namely that 'to see is to know':

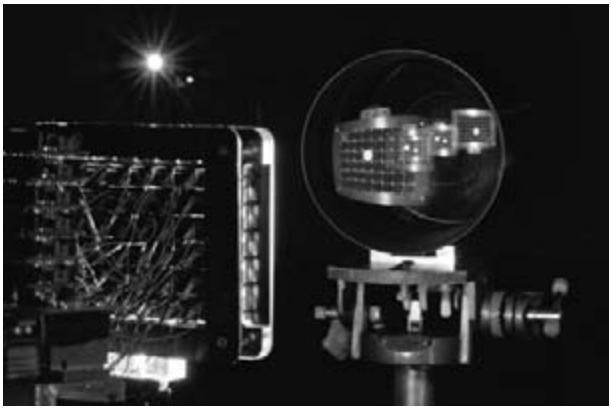
> So deeply ingrained and widely shared was the belief in script, imprint and trace as the foundation of our concepts of record and evidence, and the (peculiar kind of) 'truth' preserved in them, that even where this presumed truth of the image was denounced as illusion, as ideology and cultural constructions (as in the Althusser-Lacanian critiques of the cinematic apparatus), there remained the implicit assumption that a certain type of veracity could be ascribed to the products of mechanical vision, once its ideological operations had been understood. (1999: 33)

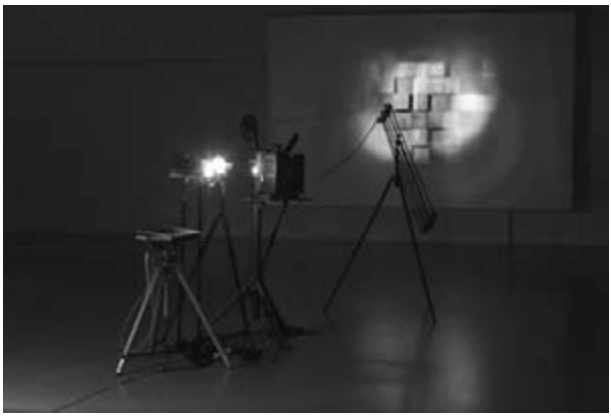
In this era of hyper- and hybrid mediatization, medium-specificity remains as complex as it is crucial. Understanding the characteristics of technology is essential for understanding its impact on our awareness of the world. Whereas consumer electronics become increasingly smaller and at the same time continue to expand their memory capacity, Julien Maire celebrates the sheer materiality of a deconstructivist display, foregrounding a whole configuration of machines necessary for the production of just a few images. Traditionally, photographic media are said to keep our memories alive. But how do we perceive the historicity of the image as such?

Mnemotechnology

The attention to resolution and image definition is elaborated upon in a much more complex framework within *Memory Cone* (2009), a performative installation that again produces a perception of paradoxes, aiming to activate the memory of the participating viewer. It is a crucial work for Julien Maire, as it brings together all his concerns into one constellation, adding an important new dimension: the agency of the viewer. For his first large-scale solo exhibition *Mixed Memory* (M HKA, Antwerp, 2011), Maire confronted a collection of artefacts from the history of cinema with four variations on the principle of *Memory Cone*. With each of his 'mnemotechnical' works, Maire problematizes the status of a transparent slide that travels through different technological mediations to emerge as a single yet unstable image, endowing the visual outcome with a quiet sense of duration. These images feel like they have always been there, always incomplete, always in need of reanimation, waiting for the act of remembrance.

The set-up is each time an intricate combination of machines that conjure up an experiment in image production, whereby a slide-image is downscaled through projection rather than being enlarged. The still image is reduced by lenses and is concentrated on a 'digital mirror' or DMD (Digital Micro-Mirror Device), as currently used in video projectors for digital light processing or DLP. At the same time, a video camera records the hands of a person organizing strips of white paper on a table, literally recompositing an image of a bygone era. For this installation, Julien Maire uses family pictures, pedagogic images and miscellaneous slides bought on a flea market. (This again makes clear that although Maire is not entirely indifferent to the choice of images, his





Figs. 5-7
Mixed Memory at M HKA: exhibition overview and details © Alexandre Causin

interest lies not so much in the pro-filmic world as such but in the materiality of an image and the process of mediation.) The whiteness of the empty paper puzzle triggers the micro-mirrors that orient a section of the 'found' image on a screen and thus seem to open up 'photographic windows'. By moving the strips of paper, the visitor of the installation selects and gradually reconstructs an image from the past.

Fig. 8
Memory Cone projection view
© Julien Maire, 2009.

For any cinephile, witnessing this meditative process, two obvious references spring to mind: *Blow Up* (Michelangelo Antonioni, 1966) and *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982). In *Blow Up*, a fashion photographer obsessively enlarges details from an outdoor shoot, penetrating the flat image with the desire to walk around the scene of the crime. In *Blade Runner*, a 'replicant' electronically zooms in and investigates a polaroid-like image, hunting for a detail that might help him understand his own identity. This close reading of the image is a reading against the logic of the grain, or of the pixel. Although the algorithms for image enhancement may have developed considerably, to endlessly enlarge an image step after step, without a radical loss of definition, remains an illusion. The same goes for spatial immersion in or penetration of the image – no matter what the 3D technology of our contemporary multiplex cinemas promises.

With his *Memory Cone*, Maire invites us first of all to explore the nature of the grain in the image and to question its apparent motionlessness. Ever since the Lumières first projected a photographic image and stunned their audience by putting it into motion,

Fig. 9
Memory Cone
© Julien Maire, 2009.

the tension between the fixity of a recording and the 'live' effect of its animated presentation continues to fascinate due to the oscillation between document and illusion, stasis and motion, past and present. People were by then used to seeing large still projections of black and white photographic recordings, but in 1895 the reproduction of the intricate movement of trembling leaves in the background reputedly caused a big sensation.

The status of the image in *Memory Cone* can be described neither as a photograph nor as a slide, a video still or a film still. A video image without pixels? A quietly vibrating photograph? The projection on the white paper fragments seems neither purely digital nor analogue. To a simple opposition, Julien Maire prefers a conflation, or hybridization, a new prototype. In one of his variations on the project, *Memory Plane* (2009), he infects a static slide projection with the restlessness of a digital animation. What we see is again neither a video nor a still, but a kind of discretely disorientating electronic composite.

Memory Cone is a work that deals with memory and, for the first time, Maire also literally alludes to the past through the title of this interactive installation: the concept of *Memory Cone* is admittedly taken from Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (1896). At the heart of his constellation of machines is Julien Maire's translation of Bergson's metaphor into an optical process: the inverted cone that hits the micro-mirror. As Bergson explains in his book, the base of the cone represents the entire collection of memories of our lived past – the *pure memory* that exists in the recesses of our mind and of which we are mostly unaware. The summit is our present condition, our recollection of the past at the time we interact with the world. Our perception is continuously injected with past experiences.

Bergson distinguished two types of memory: the automatic, strictly utilitarian one, inscribed in the body as a habit or automatic behaviour, and the pure (personal) memory, registering the past in the form of *image-remembrance*, and at times re-entering consciousness. Memory can thus be understood as a form of remediation of the past in a new context each time, either unconsciously or consciously, with immediacy or with

hypermediacy, to reprise Bolton and Grusin's terminology.

But for Bergson, memory is in the first place duration: a prolongation of the past into the present. An image is immobile, while duration is 'pure mobility' (Bergson 2002: 165). Bergson was the first to devote an essay specifically to film ('L'illusion cinématographique', in his 1906 book *L'évolution creatrice*), but he later realized that cinema could only represent immobile images of movement, and hence no filmed image can actually represent duration. Thus, although Bergson was the first philosopher to turn to cinema as a metaphor for the mechanism of our thinking, he preferred the image of a cone or a telescope when describing true memory in action, to suggest a continuous spiralling movement downwards. For Maire, the cinema is also a major reference and yet, far from a self-evident *dispositif*, there is no stable visual regime anymore. Considering the dimension of time, an important distinction is to be made between an electronic image and the image captured on film, the latter always implying an 'after the fact' whereas the former allows for instant, live representation and manipulation. Playing with new technologies, Maire is concurrently testing our memory and experiences of 'old' media.

Disciplining the *Dispositif*

With his reference to Bergson, Maire takes us back to the very beginning of film theory, when film was not yet entirely separated from other media and when the technology itself was an important component of the spectacle. At the end of the nineteenth century, the phonograph and the cinematograph were the new storage systems that finally allowed time to be recorded with other means than still text or images. The theorist Lev Manovich has looked at morphological similarities between early data storage devices and film projectors. He thus creates a connection between information storage machines and visual technologies that predate the electronic computer.

For Maire, it is not the volume of memory capacity of the machine that counts; his works are, on the contrary, rather minimalist in their use of imagery or data. What matters is the (re)animation of the image, the live moment when man and/or machine activate an image. This perceptual self-awareness is largely due to the restrained, yet theatrical way in which Maire presents his works, both performances and installations. 'Theatricality is a way of highlighting representational strategies that more or less openly acknowledge the beholder/spectator and, thus, in a sense, the alterity of representation,' Jan Olsson notes (2004: 3).

It is not just the image/representation nor the presentation of the machine producing it but the dynamics of the whole constellation that make up Maire's *dispositifs*. But whereas Michel Foucault, 'the last historian or the first archeologist' (Kittler 1999: 5), introduced the critical notion of *dispositif* (and archaeology) as a theoretical approach to look into social formation and the disciplining powers at work behind it, Maire is more focused on the technology as such, freeing familiar *dispositifs* from their conventional use by reconfiguring them. As he does not want to entertain us with any conventional

dispositif (the transparency of most narrative cinema, the television set as a technological fireplace, etc.), he deals with prototypes, or specific hybridizations. Instead of a movie theatre, where oblivion rules and everything is arranged so as to forget the fact that we are watching, Maire invites us to step into a distinctly theatrical configuration, a 'cinemaginary interface'. His installations are laboratories for self-reflexive research on our cultural and cognitive responses to an image. What do we know of cinema, still? What is the common sense of the contemporary use of the word 'film'?

Every kind of cinema (and film theory) presupposes an ideal spectator, and then imagines a certain relationship between the mind and body of that spectator and the screen. The apparatus theory of the 1970s maintained that cinema is by nature ideological because its mechanics of representation are ideological. So is the central position of the spectator within the perspective of the composition. Ideology is not a topic, it is structurally inherent in the construction of the *dispositif*. Structuralist (or materialist) film, on the other hand, militated against dominant narrative cinema. On many accounts, Maire's works tie in with the demystifying, non-illusionist strategies of structuralist film, always reminding us that 'viewing such a film is at once viewing a film and viewing the "coming into presence" of the film, i.e. the system of consciousness that produces the work, that is produced by and in it' (Gidal 1976: 2).

In his high-tech sequel to the structuralist (or materialist) cinema of the 1970s, some of Maire's recent works (*Horizon* and *Ligne Simple*, both 2008) even physically resemble the austere mountings of *Arnulf Rainer* (1960), the black-and-white filmstrips projected or pinned like an abstract mosaic against the wall by Peter Kubelka. Only Maire's mosaics are now infused with a sense of duration, and they are essentially electronic. *Low Resolution Cinema* (2005) is a projection installation based on a high reduction of the image resolution. The projection is produced with a special projector using two black-and-white Liquid Crystal Displays (LCD). Each LCD has been half destructed – literally cut in half – in order to display only the upper or lower half of the image.

In the decades that followed the heyday of apparatus theory, the technological *dispositifs* have become increasingly complex, the screen itself has become extremely versatile and ubiquitous (mobile phones, game consoles, GPS, hybrid portable objects, etc.), and now even mainstream filmmakers often switch between formats and media. The interface has replaced the *dispositif* as a theoretical model, and the agency of the user (formerly 'viewer') has been drastically increased, so the notion of the *dispositif* seems to have become less relevant. Yet it remains important to understand the agency of a medium in all its dimensions – including the setting and spatial implementations – as Maire indicates by his demonstrative configurations.

The Operating Room

According to media-archaeologist Friedrich Kittler, 'aesthetic properties are always only dependent variables of technological feasibility' (2010: 3). Devoting such strong attention to optics and technology does not make Maire a formalist – on the contrary.

As Kittler distinguishes: 'Optics is a subfield of physics; vision is a subfield of physiology, psychology, and culture' (ibid.). Maire may spend a serious amount of work on elaborating unique optical pathways for the image, not taking any mediation for granted, but his real topic is vision, the orchestration of our contemporary viewing patterns.

The installation *Exploding Camera* (2007) offers his most direct allusion to the ideological power of the media. Maire conceived a seemingly chaotic installation that produces 'live' in the exhibition space an experimental historical film reinterpreting the events of the Afghanistan war. The premise of the installation is that the camera that exploded during the assault on Commander Massoud continued filming the events that followed his death. Two days before 9/11, Commander Massoud, the most senior war commander and the most credible opponent to the Taliban was murdered. Two al-Qaida suicide bombers posing as journalists killed him with a booby-trapped camera at his camp in Afghanistan's remote Panjshir Valley.

As if on an operating table, the piece is constructed with a TV monitor connected to the dissected body of a video camera lying on a table. The camera still works, but the lens has been taken out and is not used anymore. A transparent disc containing a few photographic positives is placed between the lights and the light sensor. By using simple external light in the room that the installation is in, as well as LEDs and lasers placed on the table, the video images are produced live by direct illumination of the camera's light sensor. Illuminating the picture from different angles makes the picture appear to move. The resulting imagery, projected in real time on the wall, evokes the grainy, saturated night vision and infrared aesthetics we have come to associate with war reports on television.

'It confronts us not with the camera eye as a Virilio-esque fatal projectile, but with the speculative perceptions of a machine eye that lingers in a state of near-death,' states Andreas Broeckmann (2007). Indeed, Maire's take on the exploding camera – at once a reconstruction and a deconstruction – does not cultivate speed as both essence and form of contemporary logistics of perception, instead he reverses the whole process, slowing us down to contemplate a surgically 'vivisected' camera still in operation. 'To understand cinema also implies breaking open the machine,' the artist confides.

Fig. 10
Exploding Camera installation view at Wood Street Galleries, Pittsburgh
© Julien Maire, 2009.

'I work in a similar way to Leonardo Da Vinci's one, when, to draw in the best possible way the interior of a human body, he simply needed to look into it to understand what it was like. I have many ideas on how to work exactly when I understand the deep functioning of a machine' (quoted in D'Alonzo 2008).

Maire literally dissects and amputates cameras, and presents this as a contemporary version of the anatomy lesson. With his recent *Open Core* performances (2009), he revisits the public anatomical dissections from the sixteenth century. In the performance he opens up some machines of vision such as cameras and webcams while also feeding a VHS tape through a 16mm projector in operation. The anatomical theatre was indeed one of the original sites for the construction of modern spectatorship in its early stages. Matching the highly theatrical spirit of Renaissance science, painters such as Rembrandt and medical instructors like Fabricius of Aquapendente shared audiences devoted to the workings of the human body (Bleeker 2008). Yet Maire never suffices with a dismantling or paralysing analysis; he always implies a new synthesis, a re-animation, creating new forms of 'living' images without any negative, Frankensteinian bias. His approach is always constructive. 'Media are spaces of action for constructed attempts to connect what is separated,' Zielinski professes in his *Deep Time of the Media* (2006: 7).

Cinema of Contraptions

'We knew nothing of our senses until media provided models and metaphors,' writes Kittler (2010: 34). Or, as McLuhan noted before him: media operate at the intersection of technology and the body. Throughout history, media has always offered us a training of our senses. And so does the work of Julien Maire. Almost ervery one of his pieces includes a performative component, converging the agency of the machine, the live artist and the viewer.

The performance *Digit* (2006), for instance, is located between a cinematographic process and the process of writing, only achieving its effect in the presence of a live audience. A writer sits at a table, writing what appears to be a script. Simply by sliding his index finger over a blank piece of paper, printed text magically appears under his finger. There is no visible hardware, no computer, no display, no noise, no projection. The spectators can come very close to the 'writer' and read the text following the movement of the finger or during the short pauses when the writer, thinking of what to write next, takes a walk around the space. The performance is simple but quite disturbing. The striking visual absence of any interface or extension problematizes our whole notion of the 'graph': in this very fluid and controlled demonstration of 'automatic writing', nothing seems to come between the thoughts and the printed words.

'*Digit* is a kind of "soft machine",' posits Maire, referring to William Burroughs. An invisible one at that. The attractiveness of the performance lies in its demonstration of a pertinent absence, the actual source of the printed text. It is a magician's act, relating Maire's working method back to Méliès' at the time when he was incorporating cinema into his live acts when working as an illusionist at the theatre Houdin. In the early days

Fig. 11 *Digit* © Julien Maire, 2006.

of cinema – best characterized by Tom Gunning and André Gaudréault with their influential term 'the cinema of attractions' (Strauven 2006) – the wondrous productivity of the machine was still an integral part of each séance, a projection felt like a performance and cinema's connotations of circus, magic and vaudeville were still very strong. Here again, we can draw an analogy with the principles of immediacy and hypermediacy: the alternation between a focused admiration for the machine and captivation for the magical effects it produces. From this often funfair-like setting of the earliest film projections, amidst a host of other visual attractions, film screenings started to develop their own distinct conventions with the success of the nickelodeon and its non-stop projection of short films.

Zielinski is currently expanding on his concept of variantology in the 'deep strata between art, science and technology' (2005). Beyond its obvious association with the variety theatre and with the musical praxis of the variation and difference in interpretation, variantology refers further back to the era 'before their categorical split from the performing and fine arts' (ibid. 10). Zielinski notes that since classical antiquity and even before – in Byzantine, Arabic and Chinese civilizations – there have been both artistic and scientific praxes of technical experimentation realized with and through media that form relevant case studies of contextualizing the hybrid origins and development of media applications. Before their categorical split from the performing and the fine arts, generations of philosophers, medical doctors, engineers, physiologists and mathematicians were using all sorts of audio-visual contraptions to develop and then manifest their insights.

Maire is not so much a historian who recuperates prototypes from the past but someone who conceives his own variations. The agenda of Zielinski is just as contemporary: 'Cultivating dramaturgies of difference is an effective remedy against the in-

creasing ergonomization of the technical media worlds that is taking place under the banner of ostensible linear progress' (Zielinski 2006: 259). The investigation of ergonomization is intrinsically aimed at economic profit. Besides the illusion of a controlled speed of rotation in his performance *Double Face/Two-Faced* (1999-2000), several other works by Maire present coins. These *trompe l'oeil* studies in anamorphosis question perspective, trace, presence, seriality. For his *Pièces de monnaie* (1997), Maire has made a series of fifty twenty-centime coins, perfect copies of real coins, but in perspective. Laid out on five trays, they describe different stages of the rotation of a coin in space or at different distances. For example, one coin gradually shrinks to become tiny. Maire also makes rubbings of his coins on A4 paper, combining a forged perspective view with a sculptural consistency, thus causing puzzlement in the spectator by being both true and impossible.

Fig. 12
Pièces de monnaie rubbings
© Julien Maire, 1997.

From his earliest works onwards, Maire has kept on reminding us, as Pingree and Gitelman write, that all media were once 'new media':

> There is a moment, before the material means and the conceptual modes of new media have become fixed, when such media are not yet accepted as natural, when their own meanings are in flux. At such a moment, we might say that new media briefly acknowledge and question the mythic character and ritualised conventions of existing media, while they are themselves defined within a perceptual and semiotic economy that they then help to transform. (2003: xii)

When successful, each new medium helps to produce a distinct audience. As Jonathan Crary describes, each technology always brings along a set of rules to observe: 'Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product *and* the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification' (1990: 5). In Crary's terms, an observer is more than a spectator, it is someone who unconsciously confirms his actions, complies with what he sees and observes certain rules. As an engineer of hybridity, conceiving impractical prototypes and contradictory contraptions, Julien Maire purposefully produces a set of paradoxes: between old and new media, between absolute control and total freedom of the viewer, between the machine and the image as the centre of our attention. He allows us to become conscious contributors, experiencing, exploring and completing mediated images with our own memory and subjectivity.

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NOTES

1 A selective overview of the work of Julien Maire can be found on his website, containing text and illustrations to all works cited in this paper: <http://julienmaire.ideenshop.net/>

2 From a conversation with the author.

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