Trackeds 1.0

by Dr. Gerald Geilert

Fig.1: BridA: *Trackeds 1.0* / Como / Piazza del Popolo, 2009 (Projection in the Kunsttempel, Kassel)

The group *BridA / Tom Kersevan, Sendi Mango, Jurij Pavlica* was established in 1996 while the three Slovenians were studying at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice. In this text, their latest project *Trackeds 1.0* will be introduced; whereby, the history of the locations, the recording technology and the processing of the information will be explored. Furthermore, the notions of visibility which form the basis of these dynamic, audio-visual installations will be discussed.

On the way to our jobs, while shopping or at public events, we are increasingly being monitored by cameras nowadays. Aside from our physical movements, which are recorded and documented, our Internet activities, our bank transfers and our telephone calls are also being registered. Data about our activities are saved on servers or other types of storage medium, creating clouds of data, which fluctuate through electrical cables or even through the air. Sometimes such clouds create downpours at unexpected locations. Private data suddenly appear somewhere on the Internet; bank statements or information about accounts in tax havens are sold to revenue authorities.

In Venice the artistic collective *BridA / Tom Kersevan, Sendi Mango, Jurij Pavlica* presents three audio-visual installations titled *Trackeds 1.0*. The series has until now been tested in the northern Italian city of Como, at Checkpoint Charlie in Berlin, and on the square in front of the town hall of Kassel, a city in northern Hesse. The black-and-white stills of the public places—which appear on a screen or are projected depending on the

presentation form—are reminiscent of a surveillance camera image. They serve as a stage for the real action.

In Como the *Piazza del Popolo* was monitored from a bird's eye view. In the lower left of the frame, the view shows the flat roof of the *Casa del Fascio*, built by the fascists as their party headquarters. It was designed by the architect Giuseppe Terragni and built between 1932–36. It is considered a prime example of Italian fascist architecture. The building's facade is directed towards an earlier center of power belonging to the Catholic Church, the Duomo di Como, which was completed in 1770. One can only see the lower portion of the apse's outer wall and the right-hand portion of the transept in the upper right of the frame. Here, the two seats of power confronted each other.

Moving yellow and light blue points, superimposed over this historically loaded scenery, emerge and vanish. During their brief existence, they are connected by curved lines. This results in two permanently changing, dynamic optical webs that over-

lap one another. The at times rhythmical movement is accompanied by a symphony of low and droning to short, clear and high-pitched sounds. However, they can't be clearly attributed to the lines or points, which buzz over the picture plane like mosquitoes. Any attempts to understand the composition's structure are quickly thwarted by the complexity of the information created by *Trackeds 1.0*.

The fact that the framing of the background stills evoke memories of surveillance cameras suggests that the trajectories of the cars, streetcars and pedestrians are being delineated. However, if one follows the spots, it becomes apparent that very few of them move in an uninterrupted path across the frame. Nevertheless, the lines and points are based on the movements of the above-mentioned objects and subjects. Image sequences are fed into the system and processed by software developed especially for this purpose. The coordinates of pedestrians, who cross the square, are captured and transfigured into yellow points. People stopping at a crosswalk before they cross the street literally vanish into thin air. The same holds true for the light blue points—a vehicle might be held up by red light. Thus, only the movement on the square is visualized.

Unlike surveillance systems, the recorded data isn't used to track down the identity of the individual it pertains to. The data are not being saved. They are only transferred to a dynamic information processing environment which computes a real-time scenario. The audio-visual symphony is based on a process in which motion data is converted into a new system. The data is interpreted and modulated by an autonomous, sophisticated device, which gives it a different tonality. Via an arithmetic operation—which in *Trackeds 1.0* uses mathematical equations that are based on the observation of the Brownian motion of molecules—, the basic numerical data are transmitted to

a new system of sequences. Rather than merely portraying science, knowledge and understanding of scientific principles has become an integral part of the work.

This approach is insofar significant for art history as *BridA's* works are no longer based on the rules of geometrical optics. They can also not be considered abstractions created according to classical rules of composition. The artists take into account the previously mentioned everyday reality of bits and bytes, and thus enter uncharted waters.

The data processing systems designed by *BridA* belong to a new generation where visibility is no longer understood as a view through an open window, as Leon Battista Alberti described it in the 15th century. Also the notions of interiority and distance from the outside world, which the camera obscura made possible, can't be brought in line with these lively images. Instead of simply retreating to the seclusion of the dark room, the artists use the digital camera as a measuring instrument. They aren't interested in making nice snapshots or high-quality digital prints; instead, they extract small pieces of information and create visual counterparts of our modern information society.

As indicated at the beginning of this text, personalities might be described by using collected data. If all of the digital data about an individual were gathered centrally, digital portraits could be generated that would have even more explanatory power than photos, paintings or drawing—which only represent the visual level. To a certain extent, this method is already being used today in small, useful digital applications, such as Google's predictive search, for example.

Medical science's body image has also changed through the centuries. To diagnose patients, doctors measure blood pressure, blast the body with ultrasound, shoot

x-rays at it or count the number of active blood cells. A completely new picture of the individual emerges that is no longer exclusively based on visibility; non-visual methods are widespread among the diagnostic tools of today. In the case of ultrasounds, distances measured from echoes are transformed into an optical images. Taken to the extreme, the portraits physicians draw of their patients should provide information about heartbeat, blood pressure, body temperature, blood sugar levels, etc.

In accordance with this method, the former painting students from Venice's Accademia di Belle Arti no longer only concentrate on external optical manifestations. Instead of people, however, the artists study public places, such as in *Trackeds*. Rather than creating history paintings, they collect data like scientists that's fed into information manipulation systems, which processes the data autonomously as described above. As in a Petri dish, merely the parameters are specified. Within this setting the information oscillates. Almost any place can be examined using this method. As is also the case in science, the experiment can be repeated at the same location. However, unlike in science where the goal is to achieve an empirical result, the aim is to allow the object of investigation to be appreciated by the senses.

The instrument was used a second time at Checkpoint Charlie. Unlike Checkpoint Alpha at the border between West and East Germany and Checkpoint Bravo in the south-west corner of West Berlin, this border crossing at the south end of Berlin's Friedrichstraße was only open to foreign tourists, diplomats and Allied military personnel. The crossing was opened on August 23, 1961, ten days after the Berlin Wall was erected around the American, French and English sectors. The checkpoint—between East Berlin's Mitte district and West Berlin's Kreuzberg district—became internationally renowned only two days later on 25th of
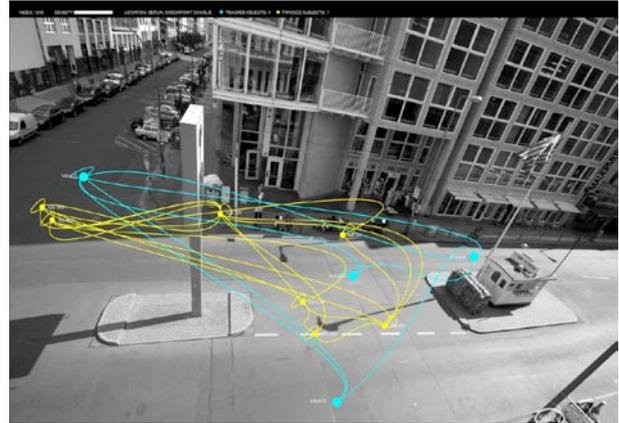

Fig.2: BridA: *Trackeds 1.0* / Berlin / Checkpoint Charly, 2009 (Screenshot)

October, 1961, after the Soviets decided that East German guards should examine everyone passing through. As a reaction to this violation of an agreement between the Allied forces, the Americans stationed tanks at this border crossing. The tracked vehicles stopped at the corner of the building across the street. The outer wall of the building facing Zimmerstraße, which passes vertically through the upper left of the image, sits directly on the border.

Even the spot from which the image is shot is directly located on the former national border. Only a few vehicles would have been recorded, if the data had been collected shortly after 25th of October, 1961. The tanks, even if they must have seemed menacing, would not have been visible, because they hardly or didn't move at all. While only a few yellow points would have appeared in the animation back then, in 2009—20 years after the fall of the Wall—many tourists, pedestrians and souvenir sellers move freely across the former border. There are also no longer any barriers to stop cars from driving to former East or West Berlin. Even though the American guardhouse still stands, the graphics seen on the projected image show that the political situation has changed.

A third and for the time being last experiment was conducted on the square in front of Kassel's town hall. The building—whose

gable can be seen on the left of the image—is situated on a property that the Jewish industrialist Sigmund Aschrott donated to the city of Kassel on the condition that a permanent civic center would be build there. The hall was inaugurated in 1914 and used for trade fairs up to the 1960s. Today congresses and conferences take place there. The Aschrott Fountain, which was financed by the same benefactor, was heavily damaged by Nazis in 1938 during the Kristallnacht and then officially torn down. By contrast the civic center, constructed during the Kaiser's reign, remains a popular venue. In 2002, the square was redesigned and hardly anything reminds one of it's history. Only the two small temples bare witness to the fact that the city's border used to be here.

The artists' approach to historical locations is not one in which past events are turned into a visual equivalent, such as a painting or collage. Alone the transmitted, abstracted motion data from Checkpoint Charlie suggests that no one is being checked here anymore.

As opposed to the surveillance cameras, the graphics don't provide any clues to who is crossing the street. It is not of interest whether a sports car or a truck, a woman with a stroller or a lecturer is being taken in the system. The behavior of individuals is not being studied in *Trackeds*. People are not being controlled, identified or monitored.

As in statistics, information is made anonymous. However, as opposed to statistical methods, *Trackeds 1.0* does not systematically analyze data in order to reach empirical results. Nevertheless, scientific method plays an integral role in *BridA's* work; whereby, science isn't glorified or simply put on display. In order to implement their complex systems, the artists depend on a close cooperation with scientists and experts in information technologies. This in-

terdisciplinary cooperation allows them to explore the possibilities of information processing and to question present conceptions of visuality.

BridA's work defies the rules which are normally attributed to paintings by art critics. For example, art critics will first seek the subject when dealing with paintings. In the three examples described above, public places have been investigated by the apparatus. However, it might as well be attached to a microscope. Thus, the movement of microbes might be examined. Bees or flocks of birds could also serve as a subject. A wide range of applications or updates could be thought up. This is because the artists have specified the process and not the subject.

A further important difference to conventional painting is that the artwork isn't completed and supposed to hang on the wall for all eternity. The apparatus creates vivid, oscillating images, which lack an artist's signature. An anonymous data center is in fact directing the fluctuating graphics. The artists don't try to give the image a final touch. The point isn't to catalog something or to store it for the future. They are interested in the process of image production. Only here do the artists consciously intervene.

Archetypes in art history can be found in Slovenian art, for example. Before the appearance of today's digital means of image reproduction, Bogoslav Kalas developed a painting machine that could copy color by color. A further point of reference is the Slovenian artist Marko Peljhan's Makrolab, a laboratory where scientists and artists could cooperate. One is also compelled to draw a comparison to the media artist Nam June Paik, who in 1965 distorted the picture of an analog television set with a magnet. However, *BridA* has taken another decisive step: The artists act according to the logic of the prevailing digital information world. Unlike Kalas, their apparatus doesn't cre-

ate finished products. Instead of creating a solidary place for cooperation, they quite simply work together with scientists. Nam June Paik's Magnet TV seems to have the most affinity with the work of *BridA*; whereby, Paik's manipulations now seem antiquated, even though they seemed just as fresh at the time as the Slovenian art group's work does today.

As stated in the introduction, diverse digital systems process and administer personal data in this day and age. Our notions on reality are based on systems that record personal data, process and sometimes visualize them. The artists explore the fact that many images are calculated and simulated by computers nowadays. Through their work they point out that everything depends on how the compiled data is handled.