

Solo Show: RANBIR KALEKA  
Bose Pacia Gallery  
New York Sep 15 - Aug 29 2005

### CASTING ANCHORS IN THE DIGITAL FLOOD OF IMAGES

by Michael Wörgötter

Despite having certain insights into the context of contemporary Indian art, as a German-speaking foreigner with different cultural origins, the range of poetry and drama and the specific cultural references contained therein may not be accessible to me in their entirety. I will not therefore attempt to grapple with the specific and subtle complexity of the cultural connotations in the works of Ranbir Kaleka, instead I cite the nature of the strong appeal exerted by his works and my delight in reflecting about them.

Before approaching Ranbir Kaleka's work more closely I should like first of all to emphasize something that, from the very start, surprised me in his work and which has continued to fascinate me more and more. The issue here is the question of the new in art. Hereby a brief and possibly somewhat banal insight that nevertheless is still worth recalling from time to time: if you see an artwork for the first time this does not necessarily mean that you are faced with something essentially new. It is something that was previously unknown to you and, at first, it may seem incomprehensible but then you search for explanatory texts, the artist's biography etc and, as a rule, this "new" thing, this thing that had seemed foreign can pretty soon be allotted to a particular segment of your mental archive.

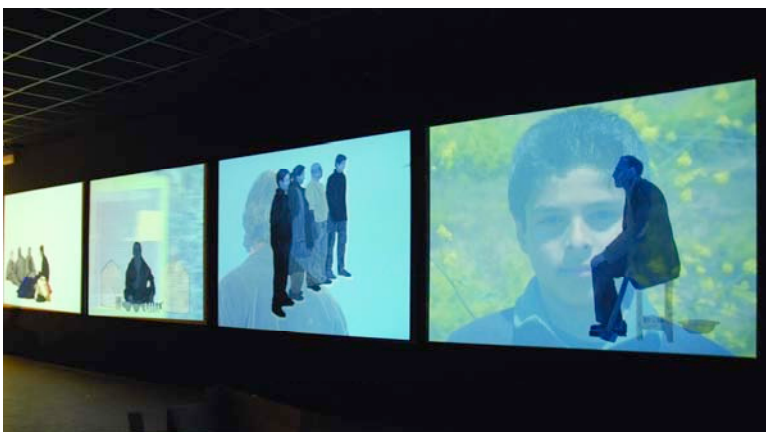
In contrast to this and in order to explain my experience with Kaleka's art I want briefly to look more closely at one of his exemplary works, which I regard as one of the most interesting pieces in recent art history. When I saw "Man Threading a Needle" for the first time I was really surprised and increasingly confused by the fact that my normal mechanisms for placing art works were rendered completely ineffective. I felt that I was confronted here with a work that was, in some way or other, outside my repertoire of ways of looking at art and all its categories.

And this being "outside" bore no relation to the usual way in which one encounters something strange or unfamiliar but quite the contrary – and this was the first part of my surprise – at the very first glance I saw something completely approachable and familiar, something that quite clearly was not battling for acceptance in the canon of art but that explicitly referred to the traditional centre of what we recognise as art: a painted image hanging on a wall. This picture depicted, clearly and completely recognisably, an elderly man attempting to insert a sewing thread in the eye of a needle. Although I was aware of the work's Indian background not even the subject of the man seemed strange – for he could just as easily have been a southern European or an American. But a slight glow emanated from this work and only after a short delay I realised that this painting was part of an art installation in which an identically sized video projection of the man was projected onto the painting, along with his minimal movements that the camera had recorded, despite his attempts to stay completely still.

In retrospect I still have to laugh at myself somewhat, as the first thing I thought was: this is actually quite a nice piece of work about forcing models to keep entirely still, an obligation that certain painters impose upon their "chosen ones". However this idea vanished almost immediately, as I knew that the artist's concern in this work could not be something so superficial. What was it that I saw there? As a next refuge I looked into the motif itself – the old man with needle and thread. But this didn't help me much. Was this a subtly ironical reference to the strength of my own eyesight? How long would I still be able to thread a needle, but, above all, how long would it take before I would recognise what was really to be seen there. My gaze sank for a while into a kind of oscillation between this legible, stable surface and the simultaneous instable shimmering of the same subject. I was fascinated and simply drifted away. Here a foreground that was essentially clearly defined was able, at the same time, to form its own background and vice versa.



installation still  
MAN THREADING A NEEDLE 1998/1999  
Single channel video projected on  
59 x 91 cm, (23.3 x 35.8 inch) oil painting  
6 minute loop with sound



Bose Pacia Gallery, New York  
Sep 15 - Aug 29 2005  
CROSSINGS 2005 (installation still)  
4 channel video projection on 190 x 250cm  
(75 x 98 inches) acrylic paintings  
15 minute loop with sound

I don't know any more how long I "meditated" in this way but at sometime or other I attempted, still half hypnotised, to come back to my senses. Whatever the case, a question occurred to me: is this a doubling or a synthesis? I thought of Andy Warhol – two copies of the same photograph beside each other... And it was this question that brought me to a point where, gradually, something seemed to become clear. At the media level – particularly at the level of the completely different representation of time in these media, namely the medium of the painting hanging on a wall on the one hand and the medium of film projection on the other – what we are dealing with here is an absolutely astonishing and, at the same time, extremely successful synthesis.

But on the level of the subject or, to put it more precisely, on the level of the codes it is quite clearly a doubling. And precisely this is the point where we encounter the next surprise. The doubling achieved by Kaleka in this work is especially interesting because it neither leads into the serial nor has it anything to do with the process of double coding that dates from the Renaissance. I mention this process, in which Benjamin West achieved an early mastery and which, through photography artists such as Cindy Sherman and Jeff Wall, conceptual painters such as Mark Tansey and film makers like Denys Arcand, Derek Jarman or Peter Greenaway also extends to the present day, because I want to come back to it later, when dealing with the work "Crossings"



MAN WITH COCKEREL 2001-02  
2 channel video, 19 minute loop

But first of all, allow me return to “*Man Threading a Needle*”. Although Kaleka doubles the subject (the code), unlike with Warhol this double code is not the same thing twice. Kaleka succeeds in introducing a new vector, so to speak, and thus in giving the principle of doubling a different direction. Therefore, although both artists take the principle of doubling as their starting point, Warhol pursues an extensive movement via the serial and its extensive variations and thus arrives, practically automatically, in the direction of the peripheral, whereas Kaleka, in contrast, moves towards the “centre” and intensification.

Therefore in his case doubling something singular does not automatically mean the creation of something plural, instead it suggests the possibility of difference within this singular. Looked at from the discursive perspective the issue here is the origin of difference and the beginning of distinguishing. And I find it most remarkable to discover here, in a purely visual artwork, a structure normally found only on the level of text.

In addition to this conceptual density and its masterly poetic qualities the intensification found in Kaleka is certainly based on the fact that, by using the medium of film, he succeeds in integrating or making perceptible the presence of human temporality in the medium of the painting. This makes it all the more fascinating for me that in the work “*Man with Cockerel*” he leaves this achievement behind and dispenses with the painting altogether. Put metaphorically, however, I immediately had the feeling that here a thoroughly professional musician has merely put aside his main instrument and, using all his consummate ability, is simply playing another instrument. And in fact in “*Man with Cockerel*”, which (viewed technically) is purely a film work, Kaleka’s work on the painting is by no means absent but, on the contrary, is constantly present. We again encounter the principle of doubling. This time, however, not as a simultaneous “in one another” but as an asynchronous reflection. Once again the sign of a basic distance is positioned that makes the singular relative, but without sliding into the inflation of the serial.

As an artwork “*Man with a Cockerel*” is for me the most persistent and complex questioning of film as a medium from the perspective of the medium of painting that I know. I shall try again briefly to reconstruct my first encounter with the work. Although to me the black and white image of a man with a cockerel seemed to refer to an archaic time or at least a time before the age of film, I saw first of all in this work questions that I previously knew only from certain areas of radical, analytical experimental film. When does a picture change to being a scene, what is movement and when does film narrative begin? What about the asynchronicity of what we have just seen (which still reverberates inside us) in relation to the newer impressions we receive during the further course of the film?

Questions of this kind raced through my head and it became more and more clear to me that I had never seen them formalised in such a way. Although definitely not a painting, nevertheless decades of experience as a painter that goes far beyond brushes and canvas are revealed here. And the fact that colour had been extracted from this work seemed to me suddenly to be a hidden reference to this background of experience: I closed my eyes and tried to imagine how what I had seen might look like as a painting...

Against the background of a painter consciously leaving his medium I find the “*Man with a Cockerel*” Ranbir Kaleka’s most courageous and in a certain sense perhaps also the most intimate work. Here he moves towards a radical perspective outside his most essential intrinsic quality – his painting. And one could also interpret this piece in the sense that Kaleka works through the notion of what would happen if he were suddenly to lose this most essential part of himself. In this sense this not only a highly intellectual but also a very violent work because it deals with loss and the efforts to fill the void left by this loss. But perhaps these thoughts, although provoked by the work, go too far in the direction of a film dramaturgy.

Before, in conclusion, I come to “*Crossings*” I want once again to emphasize that I lack the necessary extensive knowledge about his symbolic allusions and worlds of reference to interpret the motifs in the work of Ranbir Kaleka or to interpret the sounds in some of his works. Therefore I could only attempt to describe those basic structures (which I could recognise) on which his work is based.

In “*Crossings*” everything described so far comes into full bloom and at the same time goes further in several respects. I want to point out that here Ranbir Kaleka also integrates the process of double coding referred to earlier, while at the same time emancipating it from its ties to historic references. He achieves this artistic amelioration by placing his own reference points in the artwork with a remarkable lightness that then allow him to refer to it freely and in a varied manner. This innovation cannot be too highly appreciated, as it represents a true expansion of the possibilities of formalisation and its reference potential.

From my viewpoint, which tends to confine itself to more structural aspects, when confronted with “*Crossings*” it seems superfluous to add anything about the new, expanded and at the same intensified dimensions in the art of Ranbir Kaleka, as this work speaks for itself – quite literally. In summarising I merely want to say that Ranbir Kaleka’s development over the past few years and the masterpieces he has created in the process will exert a long-lasting influence.

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Translated from German to English by James Roderick O’Donovan*