

The Theater of Operations

The *Dispⁿ* series, interactive images on the Web and in installations

Sniper [1999], ***Keep Your Guard Up*** [2000], ***What's More With Many*** [2001]

A *Dispⁿ* is always played by one person set before the image. For its complete realization, the main role is filled by the viewer; it is he who, through his movements, animates the images he is encountering. Here, representation is first and foremost an exercise of consciousness.

Sniper confronts us with frames from a few seconds of video showing the collapse of a woman hit by a sniper. These images were extracted from the film to which this work responds: *Warshots* by the German filmmaker Heiner Stadler. Each frame is divided into twenty-five sections. Every time the viewer rolls the cursor over a section, he reveals the corresponding section of the subsequent frame. Putting different instants of the fall on the same plane, the screen is thus composed of fragments from different images. This kind of “depth of time” becomes the object of “the viewer’s manipulation.” Placed in a position parallel to that of the sniper, the viewer progressively sees himself as being responsible for the situation and becomes fully aware of the result of his movements.

In *Keep Your Guard Up* (*Ta Garde*), two boxers fight through interposed images. Placed side by side, the same background—a still image of the ring—is repeated twice. A boxer appears in each image. One boxer surreptitiously moves as soon as the viewer rolls over the other with the movement of the mouse. The cursor on the right side of the screen stirs an action from the boxer on the left, then vice versa. Once understood, this mechanism remains nonetheless annoying: putting one’s movement and sight out of phase, it is not ergonomic. Right, left, is going faster perhaps a solution? Each waits his turn to be in action, including the viewer. A three-party combat emerges. The opening directive, “keep your guard up,” given to one boxer, then the other, is gradually turned around: it is equally directed at a “third person,” the viewer. Prompted by the desire to bring together the two protagonists in space and time, and to synchronize them, the viewer is caught in a situation that conditions his movements. But, as in this entire series of interactive images, he is far from being immersed in a credible environment; the game of putting the viewer to the test leads above all to exercising one’s consciousness.

What's More With Many (*D'autant qu'à plusieurs*) employs a picture of two people seated on bleachers one behind the other. Repeated like a wallpaper pattern, the image forms a crowd. As each motif is small and its colors are faded, it is difficult to date it, situate its context, or identify its bit players. Is it a historical document? A current event? A political meeting? A sports event?

Initially still, the crowd is animated when the cursor passes over each image: the person seated behind starts applauding, then the other gets up and gesticulates, raising one arm. Then it is the viewer’s turn to be animated. The more he moves the mouse, the more he makes the motifs react one after the other, creating a movement in the crowd that follows the movement of the mouse—which produces a sort of “wave” or, depending on one’s interpretation, a “collective and orderly salute.”

While, at first, the playful discovery of the process sets in motion our movements and leads us to organize them with the aim of animating the crowd, rather quickly, these same gestures acquire substance, a meaning that implicates us. The ambivalence of the crowd’s movement, which motivates and integrates our actions, makes us wonder about the impulses that shoot through collective situations, which are not always easy to resist. But the more the situation is played, or represented, the more our role in it is central and strongly

individualized. Here, all questioning is to be taken upon ourselves and not diluted in any kind of collective lack of responsibility.

These three setups condition the movements that animate the image. Strategies of "manipulation" are implemented on both sides of this image: provisions are made for the other, the viewer, so that he becomes active, actualizes, and manipulates the image at his turn. In order to prompt the viewer's participation, some hypotheses on how deep affective motivations can enter the game of relationships to the image have been envisaged. Thus, as Umberto Eco proposes in *The Open Work*, "art deliberately frustrates our expectations in order to arouse our natural craving for completion." Since the model of the loop is taken and this end is impossible, our desire for "completeness," animation, and synchronization can be endlessly revived. In these active relationships to the image, it would seem that the traditional pattern of the cinematographic storyline "situation-action" is combined with one of "displeasure-pleasure."

While these setups do produce situations in which the viewer progressively sees himself as being responsible by coupling his gesture with the desire to look, any intention to make one believe, or rather to "immerse," is nonetheless revoked. The montages in the image, which are factors of manipulation, are perfectly visible as such. However, it is a return to the self that is privileged. The game of the viewer taking control of the image gives way to a second level of reading in which our movements are to be reconsidered within the context they occupy. The latter becomes apparent and can be understood as a site for negotiation with the image—that place in which we operate and by which one's hold on the image can be combined with consciousness. First and foremost, it concerns intellectual and physical operations.

These propositions actively work to make the vast theater of operations, our realities, belong to us and as such replace the resigned idea of a representation already set and always imposed.

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