

Sounds from the Future

Utopian Imagination in Ann Lislegaard's *Science Fiction_3112-3114*

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Die Signatur eines Künstlers bedeutet nicht mehr, daß der Künstler einen bestimmten Gegenstand produziert hat, sondern daß er oder sie diesen Gegenstand verwendet hat – und zwar auf eine besonders interessante Art und Weise.¹

When Boris Groys suggests that the main function of an artist today is to *use* already produced objects (material as well as immaterial) through an act of selection, he brings up questions that were initially posed by the historical avant-garde movements considering the role of the artist, the quality of the work of art and the site of exhibition, in Groys' perspective primarily the museum.

Without wanting plainly to answer the question whether an avant-garde position exists or is at all possible today, it should still be worth considering how a work of art displaying traits of “established” avant-garde practices functions within its contemporary frame. This article thus discusses the methods employed by Norwegian-Danish media artist, Ann Lislegaard, in her installation pieces *Science Fiction_3112* (2007), *Science Fiction_3113* (2008), and *Science Fiction_3114* (2009). My focus will be on the artist's role as consumer of already existing images and narratives of contemporary culture and on the negotiation with different exhibition- and circulation practices.

The artist as consumer

In her latest work of art, *Science Fiction_3114*, Ann Lislegaard has manipulated, stretched and compressed the soundtracks from five seminal science fiction movies into a multi-layered soundtrack looping every 28 minutes.²

This new soundtrack bounces off the walls in the gallery space where it is installed and serves to create a strange atmosphere inhibited by voices, characters and plots that you as a visitor cannot immediately decipher. The soundtrack is apparently not limited to being a remix of the musical score from the movies referred to. The mix includes dialogues and auditory signs of movement and actions as well. At some points you hear a person breathing. But what *actual* scene these acoustic traits are representations of, i.e. what is really being said and which action is taking place, however, is not made clear. In end effect the remix leaves an impression of a *presence* of one kind or the other: the presence of something distant, metallic, yet organic.

According to the artist the idea has been to re-alienate the fictions of the future, which have now

become strikingly familiar.

”Ann Lislegaard sees these films as cultural manifestations of the 'unknown', and speculations of the future, which by now have become overly familiar.” It is the artist's aim through a rearrangement of the films' narratives to subtly undermine them to recover ”some of the strangeness which once radiated from these futuristic scenarios.”³

Science Fiction_3114 is the third installation piece in the series of *Science Fiction* works by Lislegaard, following *Science Fiction_3112* (2007) and *Science Fiction_3113* (2008). In her *Science Fiction* series Ann Lislegaard makes use of the soundtracks from existing movies to create new mixes and soundscapes. *Science Fiction_3112 (after 2001: A Space Odyssey)* is based on the soundtrack from Stanley Kubrick's movie from 1968 and e.g. includes a high-pitched, speeded up version of the iconic *Also sprach Zarathustra* from the beginning of the film. This edited soundtrack was originally installed in a former residential area in Copenhagen thereby using public space as exhibition site. The latter two pieces *Science Fiction_3113* and *_3114* have both initially been installed in clearly demarcated exhibition contexts, at the U-Turn quadrennial in Copenhagen 2008 and at two galleries, The Henry Seattle in Washington and Raven Row in London, both in 2009.⁴

Ann Lislegaard has made use of science fiction narratives and imaginations of the future in general in her art practice also prior to the series entitled *Science Fiction*. In the works *Crystal World* (2006) and *Left Hand of Darkness* (2008) she takes departure in the sci-fi novels by J.G. Ballard and Ursula K. Le Guin, respectively, using the novelistic ideas of future societies as models for her own animations and installations. For the 3D animation of a deserted hotel slowly crystallizing in the *Crystal World* piece, Lislegaard has furthermore been inspired by the futuristic architecture of Oscar Niemeyer and Lina Bo Bardi.⁵

*To me these references are like characters in the animated cosmos. [...] These objects, artworks and architectural elements are the protagonists of this mindscape.*⁶

The use of pre-existing cultural products in what Nicolas Bourriaud calls an act of postproduction is a common practice of contemporary artists, derived from the Duchampian *objet trouvé* and the *detournement* of the Situationists.⁷ The philosophy of the *objet trouvé* was to expand the field of art by placing an industrially produced object in the museum and insisting on its qualities as art. The situationist *detournement* on the other hand is meant to reconstruct culturally inscribed images or narratives in order to give back the creative and discursive power to the consumer. If the first practice concerns the *things* on display in the museum or the gallery, the second one is a method

that puts emphasis on the creative act of producing and using objects and images – a method that builds on the premises, that the boundaries between art sphere and social life have already been broken down, that both areas are part of a greater visual culture, which from the pessimistic view threaten to colonise the subject. Nicolas Bourriaud cites the filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard for pinning this attitude. "Sometimes", Godard writes, 'the class struggle is the struggle of one image against another image and one sound against another sound.'"⁸

With Lislegaard's *Science Fiction* sequence we have moved beyond the notion of the *objet trouvé* in a strict sense, as the artist does not keep the movies in the original form but manipulates and rearranges them to create a new and genuine aesthetic object and experience. Rather, we are dealing with a sort of *detournement* rewriting the narratives of the sci-fi movies. However, the premise of this *detournement* seems to be radically different from the Situationist one, not taking part in a class struggle or counter-culture movement but instead creating a situation to reflect upon, and not just reject the displayed narratives and representations anew. The *Science Fiction* series by Lislegaard serve to illustrate the artist-as-consumer, who utilises the material and technical possibilities at hand in order to create an *artistic* response to contemporary life.

In one sense the remaking of sci-fi movies stands as an act of embracing everyday culture and bridging the gap between high and low culture. And in this way the artist does not differ from the contemporary consumer who is really a *prosumer*, shuffling, appropriating and remaking the fictions and images that circulate on the Internet.

In another sense however, Lislegaard never really leaves the field of art. For although she (as many other contemporary artists) makes use of culturally inscribed material and explores different exhibition contexts, also making installations in public spaces, it never seems to be in an attempt to renounce herself as an artist or to create "anti-art".

In the country of lost images

If we assume that the main focus of the *Science Fiction* works is to investigate those narratives and experiences that the movies in question present, it should be interesting to look at what changes they undergo in the process of postproduction.

In Lislegaard's *Science Fiction* series, formal tilts have been exercised in order to probe those well-known narratives and imageries of landmark science fiction movies. Apart from manipulating the original plots by cutting up and rearranging the movies' narratives, the *Science Fiction* installations seem most effectively to create an impression of *strangeness* and *defamiliarization* through the total omission of visuals. In this way the representation of the original sci-fi movies promised in the title, (*after 2001: A Space Odyssey*), (*after Close Encounter of the Third Kind*), is turned into a minimal, merely auditory reference. Perhaps it is in order to counter the cultural affinity for visual

representations of the results of scientific innovations and futuristic environments, that Lislegaard takes this interesting step. However, the visual appeal of the imagined futuristic scenarios, which science fiction movies serve to embody, is replaced by what sound art pioneer Pierre Schaeffer called the effect of the *acousmatic*.⁹

In the analysis of another sound installation by Ann Lislegaard, *Short Cut* (1998), Erik Granly refers to Schaeffer's notion of the acousmatic. The soundscape was installed in a passageway in the city of Århus. Here the audience walking through the passage would be exposed simultaneously to a recorded soundscape from the actual site, where the soundscape was installed, and the "real" acoustic surrounding at the time of their passage through the space. According to Granly the acousmatic effect is created when listening to sounds which are "not referring to anything visual", thus producing the uncanny feeling of "being in an authentic time and space that [...] would turn out to be partly manipulated and illusionary".⁷

In the case of *Science Fiction_3114* there is no direct relation between the installation space and the soundscapes of the movies. And yet the parallel presence of the different spaces creates a similar effect of a sort of coexistence of parallel worlds. In this sense the work deals with the very essence of science fiction, but instead of placing the concerns of science fiction narratives to somewhere outside the world we inhabit, the issues of scientific progress, time travel and artificial life forms taking control over human existence is placed within our everyday setting (everyday also meaning a visit to the gallery).

Utopian imagination

The general feeling or atmosphere of this new distilled science fiction created by Lislegaard reminds a lot of Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972) that in its pace and aesthetics is more like an environmental description than plotted entertainment. In this movie, dialogue is scarce and low in volume, and the protagonist seems to move around in a deserted world that leaves space and time for reflection.

What is remarkable about *Solaris* is that it gives a poetic image of a character trying to understand and coming to terms with the changed and deranged circumstances of his world, as opposed to the action character, who fights alien or artificial creatures. From a generic perspective this movie in interesting ways negotiates central traits of (in particular American) sci-fi movies: the emphasis on dramatic action, spectacular special effects and fantastic embodiments of futuristic scenarios or alien life forms.¹⁰ Although this film too revolves around scientific experiments and developments within biophysics and computer-technology, these innovations do not seem to be at the centre for their visual appeal or action-packed effectfulness. In *Solaris* there are actually a lot of futuristic design, from the clothes of the characters, to the driverless cars, protagonist psychologist Chris

Kelvin's spaceship and the interior of the space station made of the futuristic material, steel and plastic. But still the main vehicles of the narrative seem not to be necessitated by the extra-worldly gadgets but to be of a more psychological nature. The most central occurrence is the sudden appearance of Kelvin's late wife, Hari, explained as the planet Solaris' reaction to the radiation, which the crew of scientists in the space station has exposed the planet to. But more importantly her reappearance as an embodiment of Kelvin's idea and vision of her, is central to the story, which to a great extent unfolds as ruminations on Kelvin's emotional development and attempt at coming to terms with what he has loved.

Thus what on one hand is described as tragic consequences of scientific research and intergalactic controversies could also be understood as functions in the human psyche, which is also explicitly hinted at in the library scene, wherein Snaut says, "We don't need other worlds. We need mirrors".¹¹ This corresponds with Frederic Jameson's idea of sci-fi narratives' main function as reflections on our own presence more than manifestations of "real" future societies.¹²

This seems also to be the hidden message in Lislegaard's *Science Fiction* works. Somehow the future is now and we ourselves are the unknown aliens that need to be further examined.

Besides the multi layered soundtrack already mentioned, *Science Fiction_3114* additionally consists of a couple of installational elements. If it is dark in the exhibition space, you will see a faint light seeping out on both sides of a small partition wall built in one side of the space. This light comes from a neon sign, which is hidden unless one gets close and peeps behind. The *hidden* sign writes "science fiction", which once again underlines the interest not in the exact representations of the future, but in this act of imagining and representing in itself.



(Ann Lislegaard *Science Fiction_3114*, 2009 in courtesy of The Henry Seattle, Washington)

The gesture of Marcel Duchamp, placing an industrially produced urinal in the museum has had an unquestionably big influence on the comprehension of the trilogy: artist, artwork and art space. Through the eyes of Peter Bürger, the avant-garde movements of the 1920s were expressions of a self-critique within the *Institution Kunst* that served to make a separation between patrons, establishment and the arts. In the line of Bürger, the avant-garde achievement is mainly a redefinition of the art's function in society and the social status of the artist distilled in the attempt to cross the boundaries of art and life (*Lebenspraxis*). But it lies in the concept as well, that the avant-garde work of art puts *new* experiences to display, or at least gives these experiences and emotions radically *new* expressions. The question is how to reinstall the notion of *difference* and inspire to actually reflect upon the well-known in whatever shape it may come. This calls for an exploration of space: Public space, mediatised space and exhibition spaces. Using Ann Lislegaard as an example one might assume that the art space: the museum, the biennale, the gallery too works as a place to reflect upon everyday life; the films we watch, the stories we tell, and the cities we walk through: that the museum of today also might be a site of utopia.¹³

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1 Groys, Boris: 2003 p. 50.

2 The movies referred to are: *Solaris* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1972), *Stalker* (Andrei Tarkovsky, 1979), *Alphaville* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1965), *Fahrenheit 451* (Francois Truffaut, 1966), *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997).

3 <http://www.lislegaard.com/works.php>

4 For further information see: <http://www.uturn-copenhagen.dk/UK/25558.12.46/LislegaardAnn%20%28DK%29>

5 A number of texts on Ann Lislegaard's other works dealing with science fiction narratives has already been published, e.g. Larsen, Lars Bang: "In Visions. Extra-Cultural Surprise and the Status of Utopia in Ann Lislegaard's Work", in Andriess, Paul (ed.): *Ann Lislegaard Science Fiction*. Amsterdam 2008. On her work *Crystal World (after J.G. Ballard)* see article, interview and photos on <http://www.ballardian.com/ann-lislegaard-crystal-world-after-jg-ballard>.

6 Lislegaard, Ann on her work *Crystal World*, from a headphone introduction, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, 2006.

7 Bourriaud, Nicolas *Postproduction*, 2002 (Boris Groys touches upon the same when he talks about the artist as consumer: Der Künstler als Konsument).

8 Ibid. p. 17.

9 I here refer to the concept as it is used by Erik Granly in his article "Acousmatic Space" from 2007.

7 Granly, Erik "Acousmatic Space" 2007 p. 3.

10 Sobchack, Vivian: 2008 p. 261.

11 Tarkovsky, Andrei 1999 p. 172.

12 Jameson, Fredric 2005 p. 288.

13 This thought is inspired in part by Groys' reflections on the new role of the art museum representing a minority in contemporary media culture instead of an elitist majority with actual discursive power.