Tris Vonna-Michell, Postscript I (Berlin)

By Christophe Gallois

Tris Vonna-Michell was one of the artists to be invited for the exhibition 'Image Papillon' curated by Christophe Gallois at MUDAM in Luxemburg. The artist showed here a first version of the work Postscript I (Berlin). *A second iteration will now be presented in Brussels. On this work Gallois wrote the following text wich will soon be published in the catalogue of the exhibition.*

LUXEMBURG, OCT. 15 – One of the first images that one gets to see in *Postscript I* (*Berlin*) (2013) illustrates the way in which Tris Vonna-Michell builds his narratives. What we see is a large amount of photo- graphic prints placed on a table to construct a spatial montage. Images of different kinds are juxtaposed, overlapped or overlayed to end up forming a 'constellation of narratives'. This montage is designed to serve as a sort of 'visual script'1 to some of the vocal recordings made by the artist as part of a series of works entitled *hahn/huhn*, which was begun in 2003 and in which *Postscript I* (*Berlin*) belongs. The work illustrates the way in which the artist's narratives are built on a series of fragments of information as well as heterogeneous elements collected according to the principle of 'objective chance', of coincidence, and leaves a large amount of space to accidents, unintended events or other forms of sideway motions that crop up as it unfolds. This is reminiscent of the technique which German author W. G. Sebald used to write his narratives on the basis of documents, notes, and stories gathered up haphazardly. And so, Sebald said, *"you then have a small amount of material, and you accumulate things, and it grows; one thing takes you to another, and you make something of these haphazardly assembled materials."* 2

Made up of two slide projections and a recorded narrative by the artist, *Postscript I* (*Berlin*) looks back – or at least, that is what the title suggests – on a story that was begun ten years before,when TrisVonna-Michell was a student at the Glasgow School of Arts. As often in his works, the starting point of this narrative was the conjunction point of several anecdotes connected to his immediate surroundings. In this case, it is set in the city of Berlin, and it brings together memories of the artist's mother, who was born in Berlin in 1945 while the Russian troops were overrunning the city, and a story he heard from his father about a man he called Reinhold Hahn.3 The man, whose real name was Reinhold Huhn, was an East- German soldier who was killed in 1962, at the height of the Cold War, while he was on duty on a surveillance post near the Anhalter Bahnhof. Tris Vonna-Michell's narration goes back and forth in time between the two stories, their connecting point in 2003 when the artist tried to find their traces during a visit in Berlin, and the remnants of this research as they stand today.

In parallel with this narration, the care- fully crafted score of the two slide projections connects two sets of images that refer more or less directly to the different sides of the stories. Pictures taken by Tris Vonna-Michell in the Berlin public space are com- bined with a few vintage photographs, for instance black and white pictures of the old Anhalter Bahnhof, of which only the front porch remains today, as well as with images referring to the collecting of documents – archive boxes, photographic proof strips, etc. – and also with more incongruous pictures that reveal the artist's specific attention for details that may, at first sight, seem insignificant : tire tracks in the snow, a hand holding a piece of bread with cheese, a kitchen timer in the shape of a chicken... The slide of a close-up of shreds of paper pulled from a wall is a good illustration of the way in which *Postscript I* (*Berlin*) leaves a lot of room to fragments, traces and rem- nants. Together, they function as a reminder of a larger story that seems forever out of reach, or at least may not be apprehended except through shards and cast-offs.

But while these image-fragments refer back to the bits of information included in the narration, the relation that connects the slides and the spoken soundtrack is not one of illustration, commentary or explanation. Images and narration unfold alongside each other in an autonomous way, leaving the audience confronted with a sort of suspension of meaning. As the artist puts it, *"I explore the flexibility of meaning that exists between the image and the spoken word ".4* This simultaneous development of images and narration is something that Marguerite Duras, referring to her own films, described as 'the voice film' and 'the image film'. *"Both films are there, in complete autonomy",she writes. And then,about the voices: "they are not like traditional voice-over tracks, they do not help with the unfolding of the film, but on the contrary, they hinder and upset it." 5*

In Tris Vonna-Michell's works, this 'hindering' is amplified by the difference in the rhythms of the flow of the narration and the images, the speed of the voice and its often hurried delivery creates a stark contrast with the slow, nearly contemplative flow of the slides. In a 2009 interview, Tris Vonna-Michell expounded on this aspect of his work: *"I have always felt that my speech delivery and my editorial process of images each have their own natural rhythm. I keep them independent, but also allow them to be harmonious at the level of interpretation. I always speak fast, which might create a certain frustration for the viewer, but there is a slower and more delicate pace for the images. I think the combination of these different rhythms creates a space for the viewer." 6*

Creating a space for the viewer, keeping the work open-ended – in the end, this could be the utopian place outlined by the detours and repetitions, but also the hesitations, the errors in interpretation and the moments of confusion that define Tris Vonna-Michell's works. As he states at the end of

Postscript I (*Berlin*) *"For me, all seems to make sense in a sort of circular way"*. Each instance of his narratives could be taken as an attempt to expand on this very movement.

Translated by Boris Belay

Footnotes

1 Tris Vonna-Michell, written conversa- tion with the author, October 2013. 2 Lynne Sharon Schwartz (ed.), *The Emer- gence of Memory. Conversations with W. G. Sebald*, Seven Stories, New York, London, Melbourne, Toronto, 2010.

3 See also Tris Vonna-Michell, JRP/ Ringier, Zürich, 2010, p.12. *"Like a minstrel arriving at night, during the depleted hours of my concentration, my father summoned his regular rites, and continued his epic tale. Dancing within the rigid doorframe, until a recurring name broke my immersion in dis- tant thoughts. You keep talking about him, but I keep forgetting who he is. I still don't know who the hell he is. I could sense that he enjoyed the outburst. The continual repletion of a figure who ceased to become any more available or comprehensive over time. Ten- sion broken by laughter, he thumped his thighs, and swung the door in all directions, hailing, who is Reinhold Haahn... Haha... Who is Reinhold Haaahn ... ?"*

4 Christophe Gallois, « A Constellation of Narratives – Interview with Tris Vonna-Michell»,in *The Space of Words*, Mudam, Luxembourg, 2009, p. 284.

5 *« Les deux films sont là, d'une totale autonomie [...] [Les voix] ne sont plus des voix-off dans l'acceptation habituelle du mot : elles ne facilitent pas le déroulement du film, au contraire, elle l'entravent, le trou- blent. »* Marguerite Duras, *La Femme du Gange*, Gallimard,1973, p.103.

6 Christophe Gallois, « A Constellation of Narratives – Interview with Tris Vonna- Michell », *op. cit.* , p. 284.