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thierry kuntzel

projects

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Thierry Kuntzel is a person of ideas. He was internationally known as a film theorist before beginning to create his own art. Kuntzel's interest is in the way simple patterns of light and shadow can correspond to things intensely preverbal, producing a deep, emotional impact on a viewer's mind. He is preoccupied with time and memory, and with what happens beneath the surface of representation, beyond a narrative story line. An inveterate writer and a voracious reader, Kuntzel's starting points often come from literature, and have included the texts of Guillaume Apollinaire, Henri Michaux, and Hugo von Hofmannsthal. His archetypes are in Western mystical writing, the Greek classics, and even children's fairy tales (for example Charles Perrault's fable about Peau d'Ane, who asks her father for a dress the color of time).

Kuntzel earned his undergraduate degree in philosophy at the Sorbonne in 1968. In the early seventies, he studied linguistics and semiotics with Christian Metz, and went on to do doctoral work in film with Roland Barthes. This was an exhilarating moment in Paris. The student riots of the late sixties generated a ferocious upheaval. The hierarchical barriers of academia were being broken down, and such isolated disciplines as linguistics and psychoanalysis were allowed to cross-fertilize for the first time.

Throughout the seventies, Kuntzel was associated with American film theorists. He taught film theory at the Center of American Film Studies in Paris, at the University of Milwaukee, and at the State University of New York, Buffalo. He wrote regularly for such American journals as *Camera Obscura* and *Film Quarterly Journal*, and explored the strong subliminal hold of films like *M* by Fritz Lang. He understood the advantages of adding Freudian theories to film analysis, especially for discerning how rapidly moving, sequential images infiltrate the viewer's psychological systems. Kuntzel became totally absorbed in the work of such experimental filmmakers as Michael Snow, Paul Sharits, and Peter Foldes, whose brazen investigations of the psyche and careful manipulation of powerful, reductive images fascinated him. He spent weeks at an editing table scrutinizing their every camera move and edit.



Thierry Kuntzel, *Winter (The Death of Robert Walser)*. 1990. Photo G.L. Pipa

He meticulously analyzed six pivotal frames of Chris Marker's landmark *La Jetée* (1963) to understand what happens when a viewer is continually brought back to the same, highly charged visual images, with the same forceful effect repeated in the sounds. With *La Jetée* Kuntzel explored film as a model for the "mystic writing pad" (*Wunderblock*), which Freud regarded as an almost exact representation of the psychical apparatus. This simple device, consisting of a blank, waxy page on which marks written were inscribed on pages underneath, reproduced the way in which our mental apparatus performs its functions of perception. It provided a continuously available, receptive blank surface, while keeping permanent records of fragments that the subconscious left behind. But the simultaneous inscription and deletion process of the "mystic writing pad" could not keep up with the quick pace of the mind, and the deposited images were merely an approximation of the thought process. Kuntzel theorized that film and video, with their rapidly changing, sequential frames, would have been better paradigms for Freud. This obsessive kind of analysis led directly to Kuntzel's own work in video, and for a long time "Wunderblock" was the working title of his first videotape, *Nostos I*.

In 1972, while employed as a senior researcher at the Institut National d'Audiovisuel (INA) in Paris, he started to experiment with video at home, putting his theoretical ideas into practice. With equipment lent by friends (initially he was denied access to all studio equipment at INA, and was relegated to writing mundane reports), he began by shooting the changing patterns of light in his apartment. He used a black-and-white Paluche camera, which is able to record in very low light. The Paluche lens fits discreetly in the palm of the hand, and the small viewfinder is worn around the neck. It is no bigger than a microphone and affords the same potential for free exploration as a paintbrush or a pencil. Kuntzel spent months working alone in his apartment with this tiny camera. The result was *Nostos I: Perceptions, Passages* (1979),<sup>1</sup> a videotape which depicts a subtle migration in color from white to blue to gray to blue to white. In this transformation of light, which completely changes a space,





patterns are discernable and then dissolve. "Everything is always in the process of being traced, erased, redrawn, erased again." Kuntzel's goal is to give the passage of time a sense of materiality, and in the process to show how moving images become enmeshed in memory.

**A** provocative analyst as well as a sensual minimalist, Kuntzel is drawn to such reductive artwork as the late paper cut-outs of Henri Matisse. His videotape *Time Smoking a Picture* (1979) depicts the reframed image of a fireplace within a room where large windows cast enormous shadows. There are many superimpositions and barely perceptible changes, so that viewers cannot be certain whether they have already seen a particular arrangement or figure in the space. The title is taken from a William Hogarth print in which "time/death" sits on a neo-classical torso, simultaneously studying and penetrating a gilt-framed landscape painting. Kuntzel wrote in a recent catalogue: "Unfolding as memory traces and dream images, figures and objects appear and disappear, decompose and recompose, disjointed fragments evolve in continuous transformations and manipulations of light and time. So reduced, these become studies in light, shifting between abstraction and materiality, the real and the imaginary. . . ." Viewers must "tiptoe around the edges of analogy, illusion, under and between images." The essence of his vision is conveyed at the end of the video by an excerpt from Raymond Roussel's poem *La Vue*:

*My eyes plunge into a corner of azure; my mind  
Dreams, absent, lost, indecisive and forced  
To travel back to the past; for it's the exhaling  
Of feelings, experienced for an entire season  
Which for me leaps powerfully from vision,  
Thanks to an intensity built up, subtly.  
From the vivacious and latent memory of a summer  
Already dead, and far away from me, swiftly carried away.*

Following this early, silent series of videotapes based on light, form, and simple gestures, Kuntzel worked on *La peinture cubiste* (1981), his first project for French televi-

sion, which took him in a new direction. Co-produced with Philippe Grandrieux at INA for a television series about painting and analysis, the program draws from Jean Paulhan's *Petit Aventure Nocturne*. In this essay Paulhan describes the moment when he "walked through a Cubist painting." It was when he entered his living room and temporarily was so blinded by bright sunlight that he had to struggle to find the space he knew so well. Shot in both film and video, the work is an aggressive dialogue between the sharply defined space of cinema, and the indistinct, almost fluid realm of video. By describing something specific to painting, both Paulhan's essay and the videotape provide an insight into the artistic definitions of their own forms.

**K**untzel's writing and his video work are closely linked, and he always uses the medium that is most appropriate to his purpose. After making *Nostos I*, he planned a multi-screen installation that became *Nostos II: Persistence, Fluids* (1984). The project was produced at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. Kuntzel first recorded the material, then wrote a very complicated "story board" with which to edit the multichannel presentation. The videotapes were shown on nine identical screens that formed a rectangle with the same height-width ratio as the individual images. "From a readable montage, shapes begin to waver, to float, to be liquefied from one screen to the other, faster and faster until the concept of the frame is lost for the sake of an 'image in action,' perpetually in the process of being inscribed, being lost, lacunary, never fixed into a picture." Kuntzel's concentration on repetition, the feeling of the already seen, and the always already forgotten, is amplified by a few borrowed fragments of sound from the film *Letter from an Unknown Woman* by Max Ophuls. The same concept was expressed by Henri Michaux:

*The little piles of color that come apart in minute particles, these movements and not the final moment, the picture, that's what I love. In short, what I appreciate most in painting is cinema.*



William Hogarth, *Time Smoking A Picture*. 1751. Engraving.  
Photo Robert D. Rubic, courtesy The New York Public Library



In 1989 Kuntzel began working on a new installation series, *Quatre saisons moins une* (*Four Seasons Less One*),<sup>2</sup> which includes *Winter* (*The Death of Robert Walser*). Starting with *Été* (*Double vue*) (*Summer [Double View]*), he uses two opposing video images and starkly contrasts French classical symmetry with the closely scrutinized, lunar-landscapelike detail of a male model's skin. Playing with scale and carefully controlling our experience, this elusive work flows like a memorable dream, recalling expectations as well as longings and regrets. It was influenced by an excerpt from Thomas Bernhard's *Maîtres anciens*:

*In winter, I tell myself that spring will save me, in spring I tell myself that summer will save me, in summer I say autumn and in autumn I say winter. It's always the same with me: I hope from season to season. But this is of course an unfortunate quality, this quality that is innate in me. I don't say how great it is, winter, winter is just made for me, nor do I say the spring is just made for me, nor the autumn, nor the summer. I always defer my misfortune to the season in which I must live. This is misfortune.*

**K**untzel's latest work, *Winter* (*The Death of Robert Walser*), is a large electronic triptych projected directly onto the gallery wall, where the images dissolve into its surface. It is an attempt to capture something both sublime and unrepresentable. Somewhere between Matisse and Michael Snow, the installation has the sensuality of the painting *La Danse* and the same disorienting camera moves of Snow's *La Région Centrale*. The central projection of *Winter* consists of a solitary, motionless, male figure lying with his back to the floor. As if in a living tomb, the body displays the silent anguish of an encounter between life and death. The recording was made with a studio camera following a carefully calculated, computer-controlled path in the shape of an infinity symbol over the supine body. Slowly and continuously repeating the pattern four times, the camera moves incongruously both toward and away from the figure. Covered at first with thin fabric, which at times takes on the texture of crystalline snow, the features of the body gradually emerge. This central panel occupies a position between two rectangular fields of color, whose evanescent cobalt blue dissipates, fades to gray and disappears, only to reappear again. As they do in *Nostos I*, these monochromes provide a counterpoint to the figurative abstraction in the center. As we watch we begin to "feel intuitively both the strangeness of natural things and the naturalness of strange things." We sense that something unpleasant has already occurred. We stand awkwardly in front of Kuntzel's work, unable to determine whether there is an ideal vantage point.

The work is a complex visual experience. Even its title makes reference to multiple layers of meaning. Most important is the connection to the Swiss author Robert Walser, who, in his early writings, foretold his slow, quiet death in the snow. The idea of a season connects the work to the cyclical aspect

of nature and continuous renewal. There is also an oblique allusion to Nicolas Poussin's depiction of arrested motion and conflict in his paintings of the four seasons.



Chris Marker, *La Jetée* (film still). 1963.

**D**irect and meticulous, with a distinctly wild side, Kuntzel is totally absorbed with memory and time, and with the way the present collapses both the past and the future. Intrigued by the cool detachment of parody and its interpretation of everyday reality, he is drawn to the dark, mysterious side of the soul. He spends agonizing months alone in his very private struggle to unravel existential condundrums. Kuntzel is now writing prodigiously and has already begun shooting *Autumn*, the third in his series of seasons installations. His work, so tied to his environment, is bound to show some extraordinary changes in the near future, as he is preparing to leave his Paris apartment — the place whose brilliant light and dramatic shadows influenced so much of his work over the past twelve years.

Barbara London

1. "Nostos" is a Greek word that means return. Kuntzel has given his videotapes foreign titles to distance them from French culture, and at the same time to make enigmatic suggestions.

2. This is a play on words. "Moins une" can be translated as "close call," so in addition to its literal translation the title can be read as "four seasons and being close to death."

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# biography

Born Bergerac, France, in 1948  
Lives and works in Paris

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