by Peer Bode, Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen 1998
courtesy Kjell Bjorgeengen
TRUE BLANKING

Kjell Bjorgeengen is an important artist in the history of video and contemporary art. His unique abilities and sensitivities have allowed him to produce a body of work of exceptional sculptural value. With an interest and background in philosophy, music and photography, Kjell has worked with an ever evolving technological medium, that is expanded electronic media, to create significant explorations into new visual languaging and receiving forms. "True Blanking" is his recent achievement.

Kjell Bjorgeengen is working with various dynamic inscription systems: video camera image gatherings, free improvisational music compositions, sound and image signal interfaces, real-time digital video processing systems, various recording systems, computer controlled laser disk players and multiple channel video projections. It is from the interaction of these inscription systems as well as experiential tuning values and theoretical constructs that "True Blanking" makes its contribution to today's contemporary art discourses.

"True Blanking" is based around the notion of dynamic extending inscriptions. These extending inscriptions are the result of a process involving an external text controlling the activity and readability of a second earlier text. "True Blanking" begins with an initial visual recording of a Jewish cemetery in Warsaw, Poland and abandoned buildings in the South Bronx in New York City, USA. Both sites are filled thick with memories of loss and decay. Added to these images are ones of a bathroom in London. These are images of light and space, a different sort of memory. Here are images with implications of a heavy historical weight, filled with meaning, overshadowing all other readings. And there are also images of another sort, that of a system of attractions, of states of mind, of visual effects, of space and light. This range of images is then put through processes of detail loss, memory loss, cut reference, an overshadowing by subtraction. Using the classic electronic image processing technique of contour analysis mixed with noise generation, we are left with partial and yet significant traces. These images and inscriptions are then extended by an external text, an interface in this case to free improvisation guitar music by the American guitarist and composer, Marc Ribot. His real-time compositions traveling from a non-structured noise to the point that is on the verge of melody, that place of the beginning or ending of blanking, the hint of going to melody, being almost melody and then again traveling to noise, to the non-structured. By means of a sound to video signal interface his real-time composed guitar music is able in real-time to control a process of digital memory storing and letting go, a process of memory activated or extinguished based on an external text, based on an external subject position and agency. As Kjell Bjorgeengen says about this memory and loss, "the digital buffer remembers the recent past, puts it into memory, mixes it with the present (video) and remembers that combination. This is then mixed with a new present and so on, building more and more layers. These layers are wiped out by the music, and the opposite, they are built by the music."

Kjell Bjorgeengen's "True Blanking" is a mapping of the memory "other" using interfaces and electronic logics to embody the gap and rub across inscriptions. Image and sound are linked. We see and hear what happens. With the image and sound breaking down and building up in varying directions, this work maps inbetween spaces. A radical moment is achieved with these multiple traces, the accumulation and recirculations that one hears and views. With the seeming everything there, at one moment, temporarily one looses one's prejudices. History and memory and experience partially fill and empty, and partially fill and empty, and so on. Is this an anarchy of history, of memory, of consciousness or a place of contemporary understanding of cultural process? This is a site, a place of power exchanges, a place of cultural construction, a place of discourses and inscriptions placed and recirculating within communities of subjects.

As one enters the installation "True Blanking", the piece moves in and through one's body. Stereo sound across one ear and out the other, sounds move, directing attention, stimulation systems are at work, struggles, letting the viewers share the risks, calms, being enveloped in a sea of pixels. There are the demands of the eye, ear and body to orient one's self in the architectural space of the installation, reflections on the floor, you are on the stage, surrounded by images, sounds outside and then in, the screens floating off the wall, floating in an undefined space. The actual rooms have been painted black, they have been painted away. The borders and the edges of the rooms have been removed. The screens now define the new rooms. What is present and active are the spectators and the screens. The images, light and sound become "other", gravestones, buildings, architectural interiors, acoustic environments, life and death, electronic atmospheric effects, open spaces, double spaces, breaking out into space, an image of consciousness.

What does the blanking technically refer to? Blanking refers to that aspect of the video signal when the picture information is shut down so that the image scan beam can retrace, can invisibly travel to next line or field, to once again begin to trace anew. Kjell Bjorgeengen states, "All my processing work happens during the blanking period". Blanking is an interval, a silence as well as a synchronizing signal, electronic sprockets to anchor the image and mark its time base, also a time that the image is not traced, the dark period, the end of the image as a signal construct. Metaphorically it is a duration, a silence, a period of repose, of shut down, of stopping, of stalling, crashing, recovering, of reflection and response. There is both the physical and corporeal and the metaphorical. There is the technological code, the signal, the electronic body, the culturally repressed electronic physicality; and then it is the metaphorical response space, the space and time when response, that is agency, takes place.

A few thoughts on that uncomfortable cultural reality, the signal. the abstract and concrete code that carries the moving image and sound information. This is a culturally hidden and suppressed. The signal is the domain of experts, scientists and hackers. It is used by the unknowing public, by the computer shoppers. To out the signal, out of the closet so to speak, is to reveal and critique that which has been repressed. It is among other things to critique the narrowness and limits of media production systems and that of mass marked driven electronic tool development. A significant thread throughout the

history of electronic art work has been the history of various personal electronic tool and studio production systems. "The History of the Pioneers of Electronic Art" by Woody and Steina Vasulka catalogs numerous inventors of personal electronic tools and studios, including their video documentations and works. These inventors are often artists and electronic designers developing hand built expanded electronic tools and instruments. The digital video buffer used in the installation "True Blanking" was built by electronic tool designer David Jones. It is not an industry tool. It is a personal artist's tool both in conception, development and use. The distinction between industrial and personal tools and studios is significant. This is an area of discourse cultural studies is slow to articulate. After the theoretical trickle down of psychoanalysis, feminism, film theory, semiotics, structuralism, post structuralism, reception theory and cultural studies, the culture's conceptual tool kit is primed to take on various media production models, electronic spaces, experimentation, subjectivities, power exchanges and pleasures. The technologies of image and sound are producers of culture and together with media power, political power and cultural power build cultural practices and spaces we must inhabit.

In the installation "True Blanking" there is the photographic illusionistic effect, crossing into memory, images grabbed and released, smooth blurred surfaces and then pixelated memory forms. Vision and memory meet the cybernetic, the automata, the cyborg. These images provide only floating reads and graspable and ungraspable identifications. The interface between force fields, layers, memory, intervals of time, sound triggering the memory or memory release, free improvisation, the non-separation between composition and performance, the non-separation between listening and sounding, interactive, present, active agents. This is the creation of vibrational fields with moving sound and images. This involves the courage and intelligence to relocate music in the space of free improvisation. These are networks, reconstructions, gaps, silences, intervals, blankings. Ribot's composition performance begins its recorded life in the several different forms, mapping different spaces. Marc Ribot's guitar playing is recorded onto multiple tracks via various spatial relations; a ceiling microphone, the Marshal amp overdrive in the room next door, the guitar direct and the processed guitar. The dynamic is captured multiple and then variously interfaced to the video memory process. The dialectic of positive and negative buffer states generate two options: music triggering the picture to build up layers of memory or in the opposite, silence causing the image to build up memory traces and music to wash the picture clean. In some image sequences the guitar directly controls the brightness intensity of the images. This is an aesthetic of the human and technological interface, the signal, the signal, the body in a sound and image projection space, issues of velocity and scale, sound and the projection of light, body, landscape and memory intersected. The electronic mediation and delivery of the image and music interface is mural sized. These are architectural images.

There is a hermetic nature to this work. There is a strategy of resistance against the dominance of consumption, a blanking. The conditions of spectacle within the practice of the video and the electronic and the cinematic are a known fact. This takes place in the world culture of the spectacle. Yet there can be a practice that remains in tension to the media world spectacle, in dialogue with contemporary visual culture, constructing notions of varied subject positions and agency in electronic spaces. There are many

abstract machines functioning here, two conceptual automata arise, that of the signal interface and that of the process of interpretation and meaning. There is also the tension between the "other spaces" of Michael Foucaults's, those spaces creating a clear perception of the social order of linking space to power and the spaces described by Henri Lefebre and Michel de Certeaus of "everyday life" with its struggles with disciplinary technology together with ways to resist and to explore freedoms, joys and diversities.

Where is the space of "True Blanking"? Where is the blanking? And where does it reside in the choice of architectural and temporal sites? Museums? Music clubs? What spaces and institutions deliver the individuals, the public and the communities to living in the interface and potentials of "True Blanking"? Traditional alternative spaces of artistic activity: the café, the cabaret, the disco and others are spaces for emersion with various distances for reflection. To locate spaces is to find and construct communities for and of subjects. Active subjects use disciplinary technologies for information delivery, for various cultural emblematic messages. They reuse technologies of surveillance and control for temporary pleasure, anarchy and freedom.

I am reminded of Max Ernst's frottages as a technical means to increase the hallucinatory abilities of the mind, the automaticness of visions. The rub, the haptic touch of the borders between the physical and the imaginary, the dream and existence. Early in this century issues of mastery and issues of chance reactions to external factors, issues of experimentation, of alchemy, art and science were debated. Now they return again in relation to new electronic technologies and a new set of critical attitudes.

Is this "True Blanking" a new typology of cultural formations? Yes. The modus operandi is affirmation, the open field, the interface across sound and image. This is the space of transformations, movements, interactions and responses, dialoging with systems, multiple subject positionings, a place of power exchanges, electronic interfaces, translations, variabilities. These are electronic spaces as sites of memory and consciousness.

Memory Traces, I am reminded of Hollis Frampton's visual spaces of language, "Zorn's Lemma" and "Magellan; Paul Sharit's color film field systems and multiple channel film projections; Peter Kubelka's metric film montages; Tony Conrad's "the Flicker", programmed white and black frames based on Boolean algebra sequences; Larry Gottheim's "Horizons," structured and ecstatic four seasons landscape film; Nancy Graves' "Isy Boukour," framing and looking with in a space of camel activity; Ken Jacobs' re-animating film's history in his "Nervous System" performances; Valie Export's combining the body and architecture and landscape: Ralph Hocking's sine wave automata transformations; Sara Hornbacher's electronic Americana simulations; Lorna Simpson's staging tableaus for the activating of the gaze and surveillance; Bill Viola's video space and transcendence; Gary Hill's expanded electronic display of body and language intersections; Stan Douglas' culture of the viewer and film and television; Diana Thater's artificial projection pieces; Nam June Paik's global artists television network; Shigeko Kubota's "River" installation of video, nature and place; Woody Vasulka's new epistemic post cinematic performance spaces, "The Brotherhood";

Steina's "Violin Power" and my own electronic performance mappings, "Electro Memory Notes".

If this exhibit were wired beyond its projection systems to the world wide web, these and an archive of other work would present itself as contemporary context, the electronic museum in the new epistemic electronic space contexting, remembering, constructing: not merely storing valued real estate but archiving and unleashing contemporary consciousness and subject making. The web with its ever enlarging world of linked images, text and sound lies silently beneath the installation "True Blanking". As this piece is powerfully focused it also interfaces with the world of visual and aural culture.

A local observation, living in the United States one is aware of the loss of public spaces. One is also aware of a shocked and colonized American culture resulting from the advanced media carpet bombing that sells the religion of the market system as entertainment. In the book <u>Breaking Up America, Advertisers and the New Media World</u> by Joseph Turow, he maps the effect of modern advertising culture as a system of targeting and increasing social differences. Add to this the deterioration of American leisure time as documented by Juliet B. Schor in her book <u>Overworked American</u> and one sees a picture of contemporary American time and spaces under attack from within. Beyond America, the various world's spaces and times are also in transformation.

The times and spaces we inhabit, with agency, are significant issues of art and issues of living. Kjell Bjorgeengen's "True Blanking", with its notion of dynamic extended inscriptions, is a significant work. It gives us many things, including a way of being in the world that is timely, sensuous, critical and active.

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Peer Bode is a nationally and internationally exhibiting artist with media works in museum collections world wide. He is also an active educator and studio advocate and facilitator of independent electronic media. He is associated with the renowned American Alfred and Owego schools of new media imaging. He is Professor of Video Arts at the School of Art and Design and Co-Founder and Co-Director of the Institute for Electronic Arts (IEA), NYSCC at Alfred University in Alfred, NY. His work is produced at the IEA, Alfred NY; the Experimental Television Center, Owego, NY and Pep Studios, Hornell and Rochester, NY.

Peer Bode's work is included in "a Survey of American Video Art - The First Decade", a project of Chicago's Video Data Bank, curated by Chris Hill. Peer Bode has collaborated on numerous electronic tool building projects with video systems designer David Jones and artist Ralph Hocking. Bode is a member of the "Carrier Band" with Pauline Oliveros and Andrew Deutsch. Their CDs are available on the Deep Listening label.