

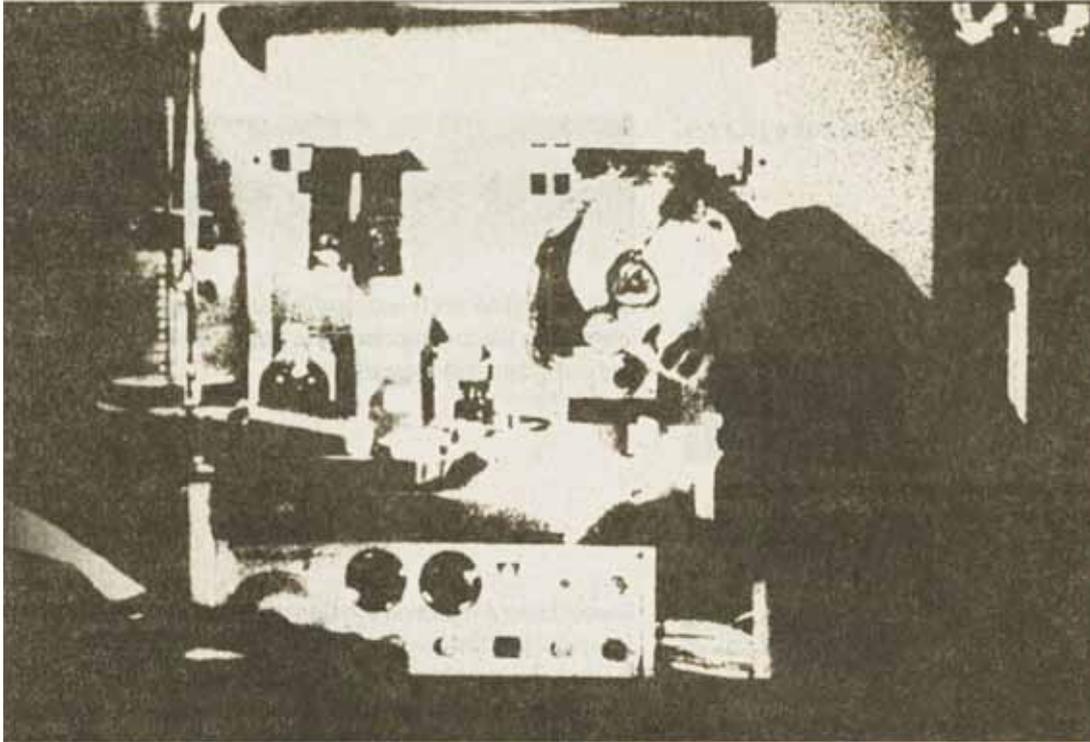
Projected Images

On the Work of James Coleman

The German-speaking world is only now beginning to take note of the oeuvre of James Coleman, who was born in Ireland in 1941. The first step, an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Lucerne in 1995, is followed this year by two exhibitions, a retrospective in Munich and an exhibition in Hanover, the latter in conjunction with the Kurt Schwitters Prize 2002 awarded by the Niedersächsische Sparkassenstiftung. The following essay is based on the address delivered on October 6.

In 1973 James Coleman showed his 'Slide Piece' at Studio Marconi in Milan. A transparency was projected, wall-sized, in a darkened room. It showed a street scene with cars in the foreground, a few isolated trees on barren urban terrain, a gas station and a row of buildings in the background. No people appear in the unspectacular scene, which could have been photographed in any European city. A neutral voice, over loudspeakers, began to describe the picture. Then the room went dark for a second until the next slide appeared. It was identical to the preceding picture and again a voice was heard describing it, but differently this time. This procedure – same picture, different description – continued in an endless loop. Since the sequence did not present a narrative but rather a cycle with no beginning or end, it made no difference at what point one entered the room.

The descriptions began with the picture's details, relating them to each other and proposing formal or narrative connections without coming to a definite conclusion. What initially seemed to be a literary exercise went beyond the question of translating a picture into words, which is restricted to investigating the two poles of imagery and language. Coleman was interested in a third position brought into play by the gallery installation, namely that of the viewer. Once inside the room, viewers inevitably try to read the photographic image in a process of perception that is essentially an implicit act of self-confirmation. On hearing the picture described by an invisible third person, however, they find that the speaker's words are superimposed on their own observations. It becomes increasingly difficult to prevent the accumulating descriptions from



James Coleman: film still from «Untitled (Philippe Vacher)», 1990.
(Image Sprengel-Museum Hannover)

displacing one's own perceptions. When the viewers' immediate grasp of the image is thus thwarted, a conflict ensues with the spoken commentaries because the consciousness of the self – judgement and knowledge – no longer rests on the picture itself but rather on the spoken commentary of an invisible third party, who is simultaneously heard and rejected. The viewers' impressions and interpretations are no longer self-contained; they are part of a triadic structure: picture, personal perception and commentary.

As indicated in this detailed description, James Coleman began by investigating the physical and temporal conditions of perception and gradually moved on to complex metaphors over the years. 'Slide Piece' may suggest a behaviourist experiment and one might at first glance see a resemblance to the film and video works conceived at about the same time by the American artist Dan Graham at Nova Scotia College in Halifax. But the comparison stops there, for Graham did indeed base his work on a positivist tradition and empirical procedures while Coleman's roots go back to the performing arts, primarily theatre or, in other words, a poetic tradition that does not take an experimental approach but instead engages the speculative staging of pictures. Moreover, Graham, and other American artists of that period, devised experimental situations to be used as models for the study and testing of intersubjective perception while Coleman did not introduce any authority external to his work. To him there was nothing beyond language and picture, because everything that we do when we look and speak and think remains within the medium, whether we start with supposedly immediate perception or whether we extend the framework to the cultural connotations that might apply to figures, costumes and objects. By reminding viewers that they are governed by this condition as looking and thinking, sensual and sentient beings, he invests the work of art with an extraordinary symbolic significance. This alone makes manifest our conditionality and Coleman thereby refers to an artistic practice that does not rest on formalist autonomy but rather on radical self-reflection in the vein of such predecessors as Mallarmé, Yeats, Joyce and Beckett.

In other words, literary models. Coleman studied at the Brera Academy in Milan, taking a degree in painting in 1970 but thereafter working primarily in theatre and film. While painting and sculpture of the 1960s were reduced to elementary experience in order to analyse their functional modes and reconfigure them,

Coleman devoted himself to the performative aspects of visual representation. In contrast to painting, theatre and film heighten the impact of images by uniting language and music with visuals to produce an overwhelming presentation; they also give the artist the opportunity to make the incongruence of the means painfully palpable. When image and language appear in tandem as in 'Slide Piece', we want to perceive them as a mutually linked unit. This is not only a convention, it is compellingly suggested by the transparency projected on the wall and the authority of the disembodied voice. By repeating the picture, the artist frustrates viewers' expectations inasmuch as picture, language and the viewers' own presence are dissociated. Repetition produces an experience of time because a sequence of constantly changing pictures creates the impression that time is standing still. The immediate grasp of the picture, that is, the supposedly timeless congruence between object and designation proves to be an illusion, and, according to Coleman, experience is generated by shifting comprehension to a temporal sequence: "Causal relationships are involved in time perception. The perception of events, subjected to prolonged duration and repetition, provokes new psychological associations."¹

Coleman chose to use the medium of slide projection for his work at the beginning of the 1970s. At that time, slide projections were used by various artists such as Robert Barry and Marcel Broodthaers. Projecting the pictures made it possible to avoid the presentation of photographs as objects, while the mechanical sound of the projector and the darkness between the images served to underscore their provisional, intangible reality. Projected images are different from theatre, film and video because, regardless of whether they are projected consecutively or superimposed, they remain static and stubbornly oppose the illusion of movement. This choice of technique is all the more remarkable inasmuch as Coleman produced elaborate scenarios in the 1980s using décor and costumes that not only resembled movie sets but also evoked the composition of figures for a painting. Despite excessive illusionist preparations, the performances never really manage to take off; Coleman's superimposed projections present scenes that change in noticeable steps; the single image is not subject to conventional sequencing in which the difference between frames is blurred through the speed of projection. Coleman actually emphasises the differences between single pictures. As he notes in 1977, "When we think of an object we think of its history ... its temporal succession of stages. These stages

1 'James Coleman', ex. cat. Milano: Studio Marconi, 1975, n.p.

don't always link up with each other easily, we need some kind of relationship between them. What interests me about this question is what these relationships are and how time influences them."²

There is another difference between the text spoken off-screen and our impression of the actors on-screen. Our spontaneous attempt to relate the two is doomed to failure because the character of the voice does not match the actors nor is its expression appropriate to the content of what is being said. The voice of a child spells the word "initials" in the work of the same name, which Coleman presented at the last Documenta. The sounds that accompany speech are part of the process of spelling – a sigh or inarticulate sounds, in other words, sounds that are undefined but still belong to speech. These beginnings of speech, which refer retroactively to the letters and sounds of language, are structurally related to the isolated, projected pictures whose connections emerges only later. Joining letters to form words is comparable to trying to imagine a plot for the projected figures. They appear in pairs or in groups and are so arranged as to insinuate relationships between them. At the same time the room in which they move is open to the viewer like a stage; we are confronted with a scene and not with real action. Makeup and wardrobe enhance that impression, which is exemplified by the musicians rehearsing in 'Lapsus Exposure', an actor being made up in 'I.N.I.T.I.A.L.S.' or the staging of a children's performance in 'Photograph'. The fact that Coleman also made films would seem to be a contradiction in terms. But even his short film 'Pump of 1972, projected as an endless loop, emphasises the meaning of the single image. The film shows a bucket that is empty when the film starts; water flows from a faucet into the bucket until it is full to the brim; the surface of the water gradually stops rippling. Once the water is completely still, the full bucket looks almost the same as the empty one did. Viewers distinguish between the first and last image of the film only because they know what happened in between. This simple film demonstrates the modification of perception through time: what our senses perceive acquires significance only when we come back to those perceptions after a certain length of time; what we experience does not follow a linear path but rather takes the shape of a loop. In Coleman's words: "My work is not about true or false realities, it's about consciousness of shifting realities."³

2 James Coleman, "Interview", 'Domus', No. 570 (1977), p. 52.

3 Richard Kearney, "Interview with James Coleman", 'The Crane Bag', Vol. 6, No. 2 (1982), p. 128.

'Untitled (Philippe Vacher)' of 1990 is also a film. Although it only lasts a few seconds, it has all the properties of a conventional feature film: it is 35mm which lends it great impact, the setting is carefully chosen, and it stars a professional actor who usually portrays a doctor in French movies. The few seconds of film are prolonged to 17 1/2 minutes by repeating the frames, which brings about a decisive change of paradigm: we see a progression of static images rather than a sequence. The stop-action delay of the projected pictures undermines their powerful illusion and makes their constructedness obvious.

A static camera films a doctor stumbling over a cart with medical equipment. He knocks over several containers; we see him trying to rescue a large red bottle. He straightens up again, turns toward the camera and, by looking into it, directs his gaze at a hypothetical viewer before focusing on an object off-screen. The brusque movement, actually an accident, is arrested and is therefore experienced as being unbearably prolonged. But unbearable prolongation means that the purely informative function of the film's images" has been negated and that material duration has become psychological and is now congruent with the viewer's preoccupation with the work. During the screening, a second movement is in progress that also affects the film: the colours fade gradually so that the pictures look increasingly washed out until the last picture is reduced to graphic black-and-white contrasts. The naturalistic representation at the beginning has given way to a symbolic image, whose impact is even greater because the actor's gaze now dominates the scene. At the beginning we viewers are alone with our gaze, which is like an instrument examining the extremely decelerated on-screen event, but toward the end the actor appears to confirm that he has been seen by returning the gaze. To believe that we are seeing and being seen and to understand that our own gaze has come back to us after detouring through someone else is as disturbing as the loss of our own perception in the voice of the other. Yet we will never be able to see what the actor appears to be seeing. The short scene ends in an enigma that is not resolved because the viewer cannot escape the movement of the gaze once it has begun and remains caught up in it until the end of the film when all that remains is the dark body of the screen. Once again we experience the impossibility of positioning ourselves outside the triadic structure of picture, actor and ourselves. This is indicative of the poetic power that emanates from Coleman's work, in which a metaphor is invented rather than knowledge applied.

Some of the methods Coleman has introduced have since been adopted by other artists, demonstrating the influence of his work even before it entered the artistic mainstream. An impressive achievement, indeed, considering he placed the hurdles very high: he refused to permit the reproduction of his pictures and texts since he felt their presence was inseparable from the rooms especially created to house them. Given the widespread and increasingly self-evident exploitation of mechanical, medial pictures in art, it is now more than ever absolutely essential to acknowledge an oeuvre that has never cut its ties with the composed, painted picture and yet analyses our relationship to the picture as an open-ended process. Before blindly putting our faith in the new media, therefore, we should take a look at James Coleman's dogged projected images, for they give us a chance to pause for a moment and force us not to forget ourselves.

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[Translation: Catherine Schelbert]