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Wasmuht

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LOOKING AT PAINTING AS WATCHING SLOW VIDEO ART:

AN INTERMEDIAL EXPERIENCE OF
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WASMUHT

Critics and scholars of contemporary art tend to consider slowness in particular as a feature of video art, owing to the fact that video is the time-based artistic medium par excellence. Quite a few distinctive works of video art are characterized by slowly changing images that serve as a statement against the fast and fleeting images commonly found in mass

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media. Reciprocally, many video installations require patience and close attention from viewers due to their complex temporal constructions, in stark contrast to the easily digestible images in mainstream cinema.¹

The interest of these video artists in a slow-paced visual language fits into a more general pattern: the ongoing acceleration of information and production processes increasingly appears to have generated a longing

for slowness in various domains, as reflected in the “slow food” movement and the even more recent phenomenon of “slow travel.” Although slow video artworks may seek to resist the accelerations of global technocapitalism, they do so through strategic interfaces with new technologies themselves. Through the use of slowness, the presumed immediacy and transparency of the medium are disrupted, in order to switch attention to the interfering act of mediation in visual communication.

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These days, the slow, time-consuming process of creating a painting can also be understood as an effort to counteract the seemingly endless and uncontrollable flow of immaterial images in digital mass media, in this case by means of a traditional medium. The authors of the preface to the 2015 exhibition catalog *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age* even explicitly link the current “boom in painting” to the “explosion of new digital technologies and media.”² This exhibition focused in particular on the expressive and material nature of contemporary painting. The exhibition’s title made me rather think of examples of contemporary paintings that evoke experiences of slowness as a dialectical response to this “explosion.” For instance, when several years ago I observed the monumental and detailed figurative paintings by the German artist Corinne Wasmuht in the Kunstmuseum in Bonn, I was struck by the similarity between perceiving her paintings and slow-paced forms of video art. This experience made me curious of new ways of understanding that result from looking at a painting as if watching a slow video artwork. To find out, the paintings of Wasmuht seemed to be an interesting case study of “slow painting,” even though I could not find any indication of the artist’s particular interest in video art.

To pursue the notion of slow painting in more detail, I went back to some of the catalogs of Wasmuht’s exhibitions. The artist, who studied at the



Figure 1.

Corinne Wasmuht, Here Today, Gone Tomorrow (2007). Oil on panel (207 × 651.5 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf and currently lives in Berlin, has exhibited widely over the past two decades.³ I became particularly interested in her work entitled *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* (2007) (Fig. 1). This painting, much like Wasmuht's other paintings from the past two decades, represents the multiple places that people pass on their way to somewhere else. It consists of countless fragments of images representing roadways, waterways, and boulevards inhabited by pedestrians, or at least by human shapes, most of whom seem to be walking in various directions. Wasmuht borrowed these images from mass media and digitally manipulated them to serve as the basis of a monumental horizontal tableau.⁴ The final work is the outcome of a meticulous procedure of applying many translucent thin layers of oil paint onto a white primed wooden panel.⁵

Since 1986, Wasmuht has been collecting images from mass media as a source of inspiration for her paintings—a strategy used by numerous other artists of the past century, from Robert Rauschenberg to Gerhard Richter. Over the course of the 1990s, she started to use her computer for composing and manipulating the composition of her paintings on the basis of her archive of images, which she further expanded by adding her own photographs and images from the internet.⁶ The 2001 painting *Gewalt* (Fig. 2) is considered to be Wasmuht's first painting made with her new way of working. The fragmentary outlines of human bodies in the foreground of *Gewalt* look at first like an abstract structure of raw pixels. Yet, after one recognizes these shapes as the contours of human bodies, the poses of these people appear to be clearly related to scenes of fighting and shooting, which the artist has drawn from press photographs.⁷ The image



Figure 2. Corinne Wasmuht, *Gewalt [Violence]* (2001). Oil on panel (227 × 322 cm). Sammlung Schmeer, Aachen, Germany. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York.

in the background has been identified by Anke Hervol as a colorful still from a *Batman* film in which the Batmobile explodes.⁸ This means that the photo-realistic picture in the background presents imagery from the fictional world of film, whereas the violent fragments from reality appear as fictive drawings, but actually show real events (mediated as disturbed images from the internet). At no point in the painting do the two layers fuse or become integrated with each other. If collages can be considered as juxtaposed fragments of the world, in *Gewalt* one experiences two worlds on top of each other. As I will argue below, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, created six years later, is structured in an even more complex and intriguing way, which asks for a more time-consuming spectatorship, quite similar to the one needed for video artworks in which multiple screens, loops, or various forms of disturbances are applied.

The case study investigates a specific understanding of slow paintings, one that draws upon some of the technical and conceptual-political tendencies at work in slow video art. This implies the need to experience a contemporary painting as a time-based artwork, rather than as a static picture. This study considers the consequences of looking at a painting based on images from mass media as

if watching video artworks in which disruption, delay, looping, processuality, transformativity, and multiple channels are applied. Rather than demonstrating that the medium of painting is able to assimilate some of the medium-specific affordances of video art—or that contemporary artists would be searching for inspiration in video art—my case study broadens the conventional way of looking at a painting through discussing the insights provided by intermediality in the experience of paintings such as *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*.

Whereas a large painting will often encourage spectators to look at it at first from a distance, so as to get a general overview of the work, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* can instead be fully grasped only from up close, because from a distance one will merely see an abstract colorful and vibrant picture, and miss its indexicality. Once spectators subject her painting to close inspection, it offers them multiple routes for visually stepping into the painting to start a trajectory of their own in various directions of looking as well as interpretation. In this way, *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* not only discloses a meticulous painterly process but also demands a certain kind of slow spectatorship, opening up to what Lutz Koepnick has described as “extended structures of temporality” grounded in “strategies of hesitation, delay, and deceleration, in an effort to make us pause and experience a passing present in all its heterogeneity and difference.”⁹ Although this characterization is mainly based on Koepnick’s analysis of art film and photomontages, a close reading of Wasmuht’s painting may reveal that this characterization equally applies to her work. As I address below on the basis of views on video art, this painting forces the spectator into a kind of perception that could be characterized as deceleration, hesitation, and even “looping.” For instance, soon after the spectator has decided to pursue one path or another, it will appear that it is leading nowhere because it is blocked by another image. This impassable path urges us to choose another pathway through which to enter the painting. But which one?

No matter how a spectator will try to find a way into the picture, he or she will fail. In this essay, I argue that this disruption should be seen as one of the

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most important factors for the particular experience provoked by this painting. In general, viewers tend to become most aware of the medium they deal with when the communication of a particular content is deliberately undermined or disrupted, as in the case of noise on television. In particular, many video artists, rather than painters, adopted deliberate, intentionally constructed disturbance as a strategy to counteract the immersion of spectators in mainstream cinema. The applied disruption undermines the immediacy of looking, the more or less implied guidance by the artist, the progression of the images, and the viewer's visual understanding. How, then, do disruptions as applied in video art contribute to our insight into Wasmuht's *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*? These disruptions demonstrate how this painting slows down as well as activates the spectator.

This case study should be seen in the light of the not-taken-for-granted role of painting in contemporary art. The role of painting in the digital age has taken center stage in many debates about contemporary art. Over the past four decades, art critics have largely either embraced an assumed "death of painting"—following from the emergence of the new world of digital imagery—or they have welcomed contemporary painters' varied responses to the digital age, such as emphasizing the materiality of painting or appropriating images from the internet.¹⁰ In 2003, the magazine *Artforum* convened a roundtable entitled "The Mourning After" in order to analyze critically the so-called death of painting by reviewing two decades of debate. Contributors to the panel included prominent art historians, such as David Joselit, Thierry de Duve, Yve-Alain Bois, Isabelle Graw, and the artist David Reed. They seemed to agree on painting's greatest virtue, which they identified as its ability to absorb outside influences: having long cultivated relationships with various ideological systems, painters have increasingly begun to work with new technologies as well as other cultural fields.¹¹ One may think of using computer software for studies for paintings and interest in archiving and mass media, as in the case of Wasmuht's work. Twelve years after the roundtable discussion, in 2015, Achim Hochdörfer, in his contribution to *Painting 2.0*, argued even more explicitly that contemporary painting found itself in a dynamic "between the mimetic, corporeal, and contemplative analog on the one hand and the immaterial, dissipated, abstract digital on the other."¹² This characterization applies quite well to Wasmuht's work, which is figurative painting, meticulously elaborated, but which from a distance looks like abstract, disturbed figures on a digital screen.

Particularly interesting is another issue raised at *Artforum's* roundtable about the active role of spectatorship. As argued by Joselit, there was agreement on the notion that painting was not so much dead, but that the “death” of the genius of the painter gave way to the “birth” of spectatorship.¹³ In what follows, I consider the slowness of Wasmuht's painting as being positioned in between the painting and the spectator. This approach is in line with Arden Reed's claim that the slowness of art is actually realized in the very experience of looking at a particular artwork.¹⁴ I contend that slowness is related not so much to affective experience; rather, it is intermedial—the result of looking at a painting partly based on analog and digital images from mass media, and evoking associations with video art.

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Critics of Corinne Wasmuht's work have implicitly addressed the slowness demanded by her work by stressing the need to look at her art patiently and with great care in order to grasp its complexity.¹⁵ The issue of duration of time is more explicitly addressed in reflections on the time-consuming process of making, or in associations with literature as time-based medium. For example, when Veit Loers describes her paintings as offering an “impression of moving through a science-fiction scenario of narrative pictures,” he does so in order to read and understand their imaginary spaces as well as to demonstrate the influence of the imaginative literary work of Jorge Luis Borges.¹⁶ Likewise, Wulf Herzogenrath associates Wasmuht's paintings with storytelling, but he focuses mainly on literary reflections on cities from the 1920s. He mentions in passing that although she presents reality as static painting, perceptions of filmlike movements develop in the spectator during the process of looking.¹⁷

My approach goes much further in the latter direction through understanding the slowness of perceiving Wasmuht's work in terms of disruptions, in particular as applied in video art. I discuss four forms of disruption: disruptions that undermine 1) the immediacy of looking; 2) the more or less implied guidance by the artist; 3) the progression of the images; and 4) the viewer's visual understanding.

Any obstruction of the visibility of something will involve a disruption of the immediacy of looking. For example, a steamed-up window will block our view of the outside world, but we merely have to wipe it to regain transparency. In the same vein, “noise” on TV or “glitches” in digital images on the computer screen can be considered as disruptions of transparency. In the early video art of the 1970s, quite a few artists in fact exploited the low quality and errors of the new television and video technology so as to draw critical attention to how the medium of television manipulated viewers.¹⁸ Other early video artists applied the low quality of videotapes to stress the informal character of their recordings of street life and what was going on there.¹⁹ In the latter case, the strategy of disruption served to increase the experience of immediacy, in the sense of spontaneity or even truthfulness.²⁰ Whether this strategy will obstruct or increase the experience of immediacy, in both cases the awareness of the role of the medium is enhanced. *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* draws attention to visual mediation in both ways: at first sight, this painting looks like a spontaneous, low-quality recording of street life, while at the same time it appears to exploit critically the low quality of images on the internet.

Disrupted immediacy can be further developed by considering the relationship of this painting with visual disruption in digital media. In an announcement of her 2016 exhibition at the Savannah College of Art & Design, it was pointed out that the spatially enveloping scenes in Wasmuht’s paintings are reminiscent of digital glitches.²¹ Glitches can be defined as short-lived errors in systems, transient faults that should correct themselves.²² Video artists and scholars have increasingly become interested in this digital error.²³ Media scholar Eivind Røssaak, invoking Mark Nunes, argues that errors or glitches should be considered not as our enemy but as our friend: “error provides us with an important critical lens for understanding what it means to live within a network society. Error reveals not only a system’s failure, but also its operational logic.”²⁴ In this sense, error draws attention to its etymological roots: the Latin *errorem* means a wandering, straying, a going astray, but also doubt and uncertainty. As Røssaak goes on: “In its failure to communicate, error signals a path of escape from the predictable confines of informatic control.”²⁵ In line with this, glitches make us aware of the medium as interface, an intervening act, a manipulation without strictly being a manipulated image. This observation relates to the abovementioned use of disruption in early analog video art to increase the experience of immediacy in the sense of spontaneity or even truthfulness. Likewise, the

disruption of indexicality in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* may be understood in terms of increased experience of the medium, be it painting as interface. Being a painting based on images from mass media, it also draws attention to the intervening act of lens-based images.

Visual disturbance in video is not just a matter of incidental errors; it is also inherent to the technology. Debates about the medium specificity of video often stress the absence of frames in video (contrary to analog film): all is motion in video.²⁶ In this regard, Yvonne Spielmann suggests to discuss both analog and digital video in terms of processuality and transformativity.²⁷ Sociologist and philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato applies analog video's main characteristic of electromagnetic waves even as metaphor for disturbance in society. His insightful example is *Passing Drama* (1999), a videotape by Angela Melitopoulos, which deals with a tragic case of migration in Southeast Europe. The deliberately inserted technical disturbances in this work render the electronic flows clearly visible, turning them into an echo of the involuntary movement of the deterritorialized migrant proletariat. Based on this case study, Lazzarato concludes that "weaving, dissolving, and re-weaving flows . . . is radical constructivism in politics as well as in the video image."²⁸

The disruption of clarity or transparency in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* may also be identified in terms of processuality, transformativity, dissolving, re-weaving flows, glitches, and error. This makes it possible for us to experience the painting rather as a time-based artwork than as a static picture, emphasizing the suggestion of faltering movement and being part of a hesitant, tentative process of creation. Moreover, in the painting's overlapping zones—reminiscent of (un)intentional multiple exposure in lens-based media—the spectator may even get a sense of walking on different paths at the same time. If disruption can be irritating or frustrating to us, it may intrigue us even more, as is certainly true in this case.²⁹

Disruption in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* also relates to a lack of visual guidance through the picture by the artist. Interestingly, Wasmuht uses an approved method here in a reverse way. Passages have served as successful guiding tools for many image makers. For centuries, particularly from the Italian Renaissance to the late nineteenth century, painters (in the West) were taught how to be clear to spectators about where they have to enter a picture and pass through

it visually: by starting from a prominent figure or object in the foreground and moving from there, step by step, guided by preferably a path or river in linear perspective, toward the background. In novels and films, it was even easier to know where to start: on the first page or with the first scene, respectively. In Modernist abstract paintings, viewers became stimulated to glance over the surface of the painting, rather than enter it, resulting in another viewing behavior.³⁰

What is it, then, that makes contemporary paintings such as Wasmuht's (and, for example, the layered collage-like figurative paintings by the more famous artists David Salle, Neo Rauch, Julie Mehretu, and Laura Owens) so confusing, as well as activating? An obvious aspect is that they combine the offer to scrutinize and scan the surface of the painting with invitations to visually enter it at various places. Interestingly, this characterization of some contemporary paintings appears to be applicable as well to, for instance, the sixteenth-century paintings by Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Bruegel. In the case of Wasmuht's pathways (which actually prove to be different kinds of cul-de-sacs), "deviation" seems to be a suitable term, in particular in its etymological roots in the Latin words "de-," meaning from/away and "via," meaning way. In *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*, the spectator becomes aware of never being able to find the "right" way (in), which calls forth the recommended act of drift (*dérive*) by the social revolutionaries of the Situationist International in the late 1950s.³¹ A comparison with the genre of documentary films is illuminating here as well: such films commonly present the passive spectator with scenarios of traveling through time, but *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* makes spectators themselves create a kind of moving images, if jerkily so. They literally have to move back and forth all the time when looking at this painting, almost as if "dancing," the word Brice Marden once used to describe how visitors in museums behave before paintings in general.³²

Spectators of Wasmuht's paintings, however, are not just invited to dance; they are also likely to feel disoriented, which is reminiscent of a particular strategy in video art. Multichannel video installations especially challenge the viewer to become aware of the complicated and active process of looking. In the formative decades of video art, these installations consisted of multiple television sets (e.g., installations by Nam June Paik and David Hall); but after the introduction of beamers, multiple screens were spatially positioned in galleries (e.g., famous multiscreen installations by Gary Hill, Bill Viola, and Shirin Neshat).³³

Particularly Chantal Akerman's *D'est: Au bord de la fiction* (1995) is an interesting installation to study in comparison with Wasmuht's painting. It consists of twenty-four video monitors that display recordings of the artist's travel through Eastern Europe. Long tracking shots (alternated with static camera positions) present people on the move on footpaths and roads, or waiting. It is not clear where they are or going because there is no voice-over. The disoriented spectator of Akerman's work will walk up and down along the screens, much like the spectator of Wasmuht's painting. And much like in the case of video installations, it is up to the viewer to choose where to stand. One may try to search for the ideal standpoint, but this effort is likely to be frustrating because no position provides a view of the whole. This calls forth the dilemma that presents itself when two videos are shown opposite from each other, as if, in the words of film scholar Duncan White, "they are to be watched simultaneously."³⁴

Film and video deploy movement as a powerful tool to draw attention. In order to get viewers most immersed into the movement of their images, film directors and some video artists prefer displays in dark spaces. This is not possible in the case of paintings, which, after all, do not literally move and have to be viewed in a light environment. If cinema capitalizes on the passive spectator sitting in the dark, the spectator of Wasmuht's painting has to become active and has to move to find a starting point for entering the flow presented within the painting. Even though cinema includes a variety of styles, film theaters still expect the public to watch the presented film from the beginning. In contrast, video artworks that are presented in galleries do not have a clear beginning as a loop; a visitor will rarely enter exactly when the video starts. This means that video artists know that spectators may step into their work at any point. But from that random moment on, the maker is in charge again of how his or her work is perceived. This becomes particularly clear in the experience of Akerman's videos as an ongoing act of looking through the lens of her camera. In Wasmuht's painting, however, the viewer continues to be in charge of movement. The various kinds of movements of the eye of the embodied spectator may be compared to different movements of a camera, such as a panning shot, a traveling shot, a tracking-in shot, and a tracking-out shot. A panning shot involves glancing with the eye over the surface of a painting; a traveling shot involves walking toward or along the painting; a tracking-in shot refers to zooming in with the eye on a detail; and a tracking-out shot pertains to observing the painting in general. In this context, then, it is not the filmmaker or video artist who controls the speed,

duration, selection, and order of the moving images; instead, the empowered viewer is in control of “the own camera.”

Explicit attention among artists for activating perception goes back at least to remarks by Bauhaus artist Paul Klee in his notebooks from the 1920s. Philosopher Jean-François Lyotard refers to Klee in his investigation of the act of looking different from those theorists who tended to look at images as text:

The painting is not something to be read. . . . Rather, as Klee put it, it has to be *grazed*. . . . it makes visible that seeing is a dance. To look at a painting is to draw paths across it, or at least to collaboratively draw paths, since in executing it the painter laid down, imperiously (albeit tangentially), paths to follow, and his or her work is this trembling, . . . that an eye will remobilize, bring back to life.³⁵

Wasmuht reduced her guidance of the eye of observers through offering them multiple paths to choose from, even though she blocked obvious routes at the same time.

If it is true that movement is a preeminent strategy for attracting attention, how does the stillness of Wasmuht’s painting concur with this factor? Raymond Bellour’s concept of the “pensive spectator,” advocating the power of still images, is insightful here. According to Bellour, only when the flow of the film is halted, such as in the case of a freeze frame, does the spectator get the opportunity to start thinking and to “add meaning” to the image.³⁶ In the case of Wasmuht’s painting, it is the viewer who decides when the flowing image is halted in order to open up space for contemplation. Interestingly, most people depicted in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* are on the move, but the two most prominent figures, positioned just left of the center, are standing still in contemplation. They seem to act as pensive spectators within the image. This observation appears to underscore Dörte Zbikowski’s remark on the core motif in Wasmuht’s oeuvre, which she identifies as the effort to connect speed and standstill (*Geschwindigkeit und Stillstand*).³⁷ The interweaving of the two applies to the spectators of Wasmuht’s painting *and* the people depicted in it.

The invigorated agency of the spectator of *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* can only be understood in part in relation to the activated beholders of video art installations or freeze frames. Another useful angle is the scholarship on embodied

spectatorship, but also Jacques Rancière's concept of the "emancipated spectator." According to Rancière, images generate an emancipated spectator through changing the gaze and "the landscape of the possible" when they are not anticipated by their meaning and do not anticipate their effects. Artists should not wish to instruct, but stimulate spectators into making their own discoveries.³⁸ Wasmuht's painting offers spectators many options for doing so, through leaving out directive "eye catchers."

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The alternating dynamic of movement and obstruction—which applies to how the pedestrians are depicted in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* as well as to the movements of the embodied eye of the spectator—can also be considered as a disruption of progress. In a reflection on her work, Wasmuht has argued: “The image draws in the viewer, including me as the artist, and at the same time it is throwing me out over and over again. . . . it is really as if there were this invisible barrier. And the longer you stand in front of it, . . . the more it draws you in and repels you at the same time.”³⁹ The Western view of life is based on the experience of development toward the future, confirmed by calendars and clocks. In their support of progress in the industrial age, the Futurist artists of the early twentieth century aimed to represent movement in their paintings, inspired by the speed of roaring cars and the invention of film. From that time, progress became increasingly associated with more efficiency and perfection. Some studies of contemporary painting relate the current aversion of artists vis-à-vis this tendency with so-called post-Fordism. For instance, Raphael Rubinstein identified an emerging trend labeled “Provisional Painting” (called “The New Casualism” by Sharon Butler).⁴⁰ These canvases look casual, almost like utter failures or erased images. In Rubinstein's example of provisional paintings by Christopher Wool, Photoshop or similar software is integrated into the working process, such as through making pictures of details of his paintings, manipulating them digitally, and silk-screening them onto a new support.⁴¹ The abovementioned names for this trend (also referred as “Bad Painting” and “D.I.Y. painting”) indicate a casualness that is absent in Wasmuht's paintings. Still, at first sight her work may certainly appear to be full of failures or look like comprising erased images, and as such it fits in with the renewed interest in the nonefficient processes of crafts.⁴²

For Rubinstein, and several other scholars, the most representative contemporary mode of painting in response to the digitization of society seems to be abstract painting.⁴³ In *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World*—the catalog of an exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2014—Laura Hoptman characterizes the present world of internet as “atemporal,” which she relates to the eternal present of abstract paintings.⁴⁴ Quite differently, Wasmuht’s paintings can be identified neither as abstract nor as atemporal. Her figurative pictures include loops and hitches, which rather put them into the slow category.

Consequently, disruption of progress in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* seems to be related more to the tradition of video art, in which the disturbance of progress is most literally expressed through the use of loops and other forms of repetition. For instance, video artist Keren Cytter includes short loops within her video works, such as *Corrections* (2013). For the viewer it is confusing to experience that those “loops inserted in the loop” do not mean that the video begins again from the start. The title suggests that the loops should be understood as “corrections.” The experience one gets in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* is quite similar: if the repetition of lights in ceilings, pillars, balustrades, and structures of fences guides us on our way into the painting, the exact reproduction of some of the depicted people disturbs a developing narrative. The pedestrians in their frozen poses on the left-hand side are reproduced just left of the center of the painting. One might even call this loop an uncanny experience, in line with Sigmund Freud’s characterization of the uncanny (as a feeling associated with a highly unsettling experience, such as meeting one’s doppelgänger).⁴⁵

The suggestion of movement in Wasmuht’s painting is neither related to progress. All over the painting, one finds endless movements of waves of water and pedestrians who have no known destination. This repetitive rhythm is actually mirrored in the patterns of the slowly back-and-forth-walking spectator of Wasmuht’s painting.

Our hectic world has given rise to the emergence of a rat race as to who can draw our visual attention fastest. Disruption of such instant visual understanding forces us to return to a slow-paced process of understanding. The representation of people in Wasmuht’s paintings is a case in point. Disruption of visual understanding partly occurs here as a result of rendering the pedestrians as having no

individual features and cultural context, while their clothing (their coats and trousers) is equally clue-less, as it will be found on most streets worldwide (at moderate temperatures). Brenda Brown addresses the anonymity of the people in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* as “the aloneness of the individual figures as they walked with and past each other without actual social interaction.”⁴⁶ This depersonalization is linked by Christina Végh to political, economic, ecological, or even cultural actors in the present global world—a system in which individuals dissolve.⁴⁷ This observation does not explicitly address the role of disruption in Wasmuht’s picture, although the hardly recognizable passersby on the depicted pathways call forth associations with the poor images of video recordings by surveillance cameras on an increasing number of streets.

In this context, video artist Hito Steyerl has expressed a special interest in what she calls “poor images.” In her essay “In Defense of the Poor Image,” she defines them as copies in motion of bad quality, which further deteriorate in acceleration on the internet, becoming ghosts of themselves. These kinds of images are usually neglected, deemed unworthy of any attention. What mainly fascinates Steyerl is that these images reflect the conditions of their existence: appropriation, extensive circulation, and flexible temporalities.⁴⁸ Her video *How Not to Be Seen* (2013) has a computer voice as voice-over that instructs the viewers in an ironic tone how to become invisible in our society of expanded surveillance by means of learning from the biographies of poor images. When returning to *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* in order to look at it from Steyerl’s perspective on the circulation of poor images, it strikes one that the repetitive and fragmented images look quite “poor,” rendering the included people almost invisible. Some of the depersonalized faces are in fact reminiscent of the faces of people who were depersonalized after having been recorded by Google Street View.

Other critics relate the changed experiences of painting in the digital age in different ways. For example, Alex Bacon argues that if hanging a shallow object on a wall has become enough to suggest to a viewer both the conventional manifestation of a painting and that of an array of digital devices (tablets, smartphones, and flat-screen televisions: all interfaces housed in slender casings), then this means that painting as a medium does not exist in the same form as in the pre-digital age. As a result of this proximity to digital devices, our understanding of paintings has been influenced, consciously or not, by familiarity with interactivity and malleability. One of Bacon’s insightful examples is Simon Denny’s

Multimedia Double Canvases (2009), which consists of prints of various television screens onto pre-stretched canvases.⁴⁹ In the case of Wasmuht's paintings, specifically the invisibility of brushstrokes and intensity of colors—in particular in *Gewalt*—contributes to the echoing of the glow of the computer monitor.⁵⁰

Expectations of more clues through close reading keep the eye of the beholder of Wasmuht's paintings searching. In this respect, Végh uses the notion of *ewig Suchenden*, “endlessly searching spectators.” She concludes her essay by stating that the social life in and of pictures would mean in Wasmuht's case that the global-networked world is continuously moving, but that this movement is beyond our control—coinciding as it does with the pulsation of our capitalist society.⁵¹ My argument also stresses the continuous efforts of the beholder to switch pathways and go on walking and looking. However, different from a labyrinth in which a searcher is entirely at the designer's mercy to find the way out, the spectator of Wasmuht's paintings all the time remains in charge of when to stop searching and leave.

Searching applies not only to a visual understanding of the details in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*. What about the delay-causing disruption of the relationship between an image and its title? The role of a title in the indication of the meaning of an image—or the lack of it—has rather been a concern in painting than in video art. In particular, Dadaist and Surrealist artists became famous for applying cryptic titles. And some art historians and literary scholars (such as Ruth Yeazell) and psychologists have discussed the influence of titles in the perception of pictures.⁵² The beholder is challenged to relate the title *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* to what is presented in the picture. The title seems to be rather applicable to the mass media from which the fragmented images were appropriated. The final painting displays waterways and pathways that are here and will be there not only tomorrow, but much longer. Also, the pedestrians might walk the same route every day. It is perhaps frightening to realize that although each day passes and will never return, most lives will hardly change from one day to the next.

The paradox of moving and not changing calls forth associations with extreme slow motion. Tan Lin has demonstrated on the basis of an analysis of Andy Warhol's extremely slow films that the spectator loses a sense of grip on what is taking place, failing to see any sense of coherence.⁵³ From this perspective, Wasmuht's pictures can certainly be called extreme slow-motion paintings. Lin

claims that “Warhol’s films and novels mimic the endless staying the same that is existence and the endless continual change that is also and simultaneously existence.”⁵⁴ This observation may give us a clue when it comes to understanding the relationship between Wasmuht’s painting and its title (*Here Today, Gone Tomorrow*), without actually neutralizing the disruption of visual understanding and its resulting slowness. In this respect, Rancière’s above-discussed characterization of the emancipated spectator is relevant again here. He notes that spectators actually are actors in their own stories, while linking what they know with what they do not know yet. As active interpreters, they appropriate the presented story and develop their own translation.⁵⁵ Wasmuht’s “story” is hard to read, which delays the process of translation.

As I have proposed in this essay, reflections on the role of disruption in the perception of video art can provide insights into how Wasmuht’s painting *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* slows down, as well as activates, the experience of spectators. This painting was discussed in relation to disturbance applied in both more traditional video art (early protagonists and multiscreen installations) and contemporary works that address digitality. The latter particularly showed that the static, lasting nature of the painting in a way freezes or condenses the ephemerality of the flow of images to which we are used to in digital media.

Four aspects of disruption were discussed as applied in video artworks that slow down the perception and increase awareness of the interference of the medium in the visual understanding of images: disruptions that undermine the immediacy of looking, the more or less implied guidance by the artist, the progression of the images, and the viewer’s visual understanding. Some of these aspects are also implicitly included in debates about contemporary painting.

First, analysis of the disruption of immediacy of looking in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* showed relationships with meaningful applications of apparent failures and errors (like glitches) in video art as well as provisional painting. Terms applied in analyses of video art, such as processuality, transformativity, looping, dissolving, and re-weaving flows, can be applied to the experience of Wasmuht’s painting as a time-based artwork rather than as a static picture; and they emphasize the suggestion of faltering movement and being in a hesitating process of formation. Perception is also disturbed and slowed down by contradictory experiences of stillness versus motion, flatness versus depth,

and tradition versus topicality. Secondly, the disruption in guidance by the maker stimulates the emancipated spectator to understand *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* in ways not much different from experiencing multichannel video art installations, such as Akerman's: becoming disoriented, resigning oneself to fragmented understanding as a result of the impossibility of comprehensive perception, and needing to walk (or "dance") in order to be able to explore angles and perspectives as part of the act of looking. Moreover, by approaching the perception of the painting in terms of various kinds of movements of a camera—such as a panning shot, traveling shot, tracking-in shot, and tracking-out shot—it becomes possible to stress the extent to which the picture activates the eye of the embodied spectator. "Taking over the camera" by means of the eye also results in the ability to determine processes of speed, order, and duration. Thirdly, facilitated by repeated motifs, beholders of *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* can create for themselves different kinds of looping stories, a form of disrupted progression most evident in loops in video art. And finally, the disruptions in *Here Today, Gone Tomorrow* actually appear to increase the awareness of the interference of the medium of painting in the very act of looking at this painting, while also offering the option to remember the painting as if you have been watching a slow, exciting work of video art about finding one's way in the digital age.

/ **Notes** /

¹ See Lutz P. Koepnick, *On Slowness: Toward an Aesthetic of the Contemporary* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Helen Westgeest, *Video Art Theory: A Comparative Approach* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2016), chapters 1 and 3. I discuss examples later in the essay.

² Achim Hochdörfer, Karola Kraus, and Bernhard Maaz, preface to *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, ed. Manuela Ammer, Achim Hochdörfer, and David Joselit (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2015), 6.

³ See the biography of the artist on the website of Petzel Gallery, her gallery in New York. "Corinne Wasmuht," *Petzel*, <http://www.petzel.com/artists/corinne-wasmuht/biography>.

⁴ In a video statement, Wasmuht mentions that she has a collection of thousands of images of pathways, piers, trails, etc. that she uses as a basis for her paintings. See "Kunst nach 1945: Corinne Wasmuht," YouTube video, 4:12, posted by "Städel Museum," February 12, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTsO—SeVHw>.

⁵ See, for instance, Martin Engler, “Corinne Wasmuht—On Motifs and Spaces,” in *Corinne Wasmuht = CW*, ed. Stephan Berg and Martin Engler, Exhibition Catalog Kunstverein Hannover (Freiburg, Germany: Modo Verlag, 2006), 18.

⁶ Anette Hüsich, ed., *Corinne Wasmuht: Supraflux* (Bielefeld, Germany: Kerber Verlag, 2014), 23.

⁷ This observation is based on Susanne Titz’s analysis in Matthias Winzen, Jörg Katerndahl, and Susanne Titz, *Corinne Wasmuht: Malerei* (Ostfildern-Ruit, Germany: Hatje, 2003), 44. In an examination of Wasmuht’s working process, Jörg Katerndahl identifies the press photographs used as showing running protesters in Soweto and fighting Israelis and Palestinians. He also notes that the contours of the bodies are partly filled in with constellations of stars, as if the microcosm of violence on earth is a projection of the “violence” in interstellar systems in the macrocosm. Katerndahl, in Winzen, et al., *Corinne Wasmuht*, 74.

⁸ Anke Hervol, in *Corinne Wasmuht: Käthe-Kollwitz-Preis*, ed. Julia Bernhard (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 2014), 32.

⁹ Koepnick, *On Slowness*, 3.

¹⁰ See Anne Ring Petersen, introduction to *Contemporary Painting in Context*, ed. Anne Ring Petersen, Mikkel Bøgh, Hans Dam Christensen, and Peter Norgaard Larsen (2010; Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press/University of Copenhagen, 2013).

¹¹ “The Mourning After: A Roundtable,” *Artforum* 41, no. 7 (March 2003): 66–71.

¹² Ammer, et al., *Painting 2.0*, 24.

¹³ “The Mourning After,” 66–71.

¹⁴ Arden Reed, *Slow Art: The Experience of Looking, Sacred Images to James Turrell* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 19, 9, 15.

¹⁵ The most elaborate analyses of Wasmuht’s artistic approach can be found in exhibition catalogs of her work, which is absent from most of the recent published overviews of contemporary painting. In *Painting Now*, Suzanne Hudson briefly addresses Wasmuht’s art as an example of how contemporary painters use image archives, such as the internet, as basis for their multilayered artworks. Suzanne Hudson, *Painting Now* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 113.

¹⁶ Veit Loers, “Orbis Tertius—On the Pictorial Worlds of Corinne Wasmuht,” in Berg and Engler, *Corinne Wasmuht = CW*, 45.

¹⁷ Wulf Herzogenrath in Bernhard, *Corinne Wasmuht*, 7.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Joan Jonas’s *Vertical Roll* (1972), in which disturbances had to draw attention to the stereotypes of women presented on television. Westgeest, *Video Art Theory*, 24–25.

¹⁹ This comment is perhaps again applicable today with respect to the low quality of visual reports recorded by citizen journalists on their mobile phones as eyewitnesses.

²⁰ The perfection of videotape made possible the presentation of desirable “errors” as marks of spontaneity, which became as equivocal in their implications, according to

David Antin, as the blots of the Abstract Expressionist painters. David Antin, "Video: The Distinctive Features of the Medium," in *Video Art: An Anthology*, ed. Ira Schneider and Beryl Korot (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovitch, 1976), 177.

²¹ "Corinne Wasmuht Exhibition: 'Selected Works,'" *Savannah College of Art & Design*, 2016, <http://www.scad.edu/event/2016-02-09-corinne-wasmuht-exhibition-selected-works-painting>.

²² See Eivind Røssaak, "Who Generates the Image Error? From Hitchcock to Glitch," in *The Photofilmic: Entangled Images in Contemporary Art and Visual Culture*, ed. Brianne Cohen and Alexander Streitberger (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2016), 218.

²³ Analog failures in video art of the 1960s (e.g., Nam June Paik's) actually anticipated "glitch art," of which the video *Digital TV Dinner* (1979) by Jamie Fenton is one of the early examples. The abstract patterns actually turn the video into a kind of moving geometric abstract painting.

²⁴ Mark Nunes, quoted in Røssaak, "Who Generates," 229. See Mark Nunes, "Introduction: Error, Noise, and Potential: The Outside of Purpose," in *Error: Glitch, Noise, and Jam in New Media Cultures*, ed. Mark Nunes (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 3.

²⁵ Røssaak, "Who Generates," 229.

²⁶ See, for example, Stan Douglas and Christopher Eamon, eds., *Art of Projection* (Ostfildern, Germany: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009), 7–8; Yvonne Spielmann, *Video: The Reflexive Medium*, trans. Anja Welle and Stan Jones (2005; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 1.

²⁷ Spielmann, *Video*, 5.

²⁸ Maurizio Lazzarato, "Video, Flows and Real Time," in *Art and the Moving Image: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tanya Leighton (London: Tate/Afterall, 2008), 283, 285.

²⁹ This does not mean that the role of disruption is left unnoticed in visual analyses of paintings. For instance, the discussed complexity of contemporary figurative paintings such as Daniel Richter's work discussed by David Hughes, includes obstructed perception, but it would be interesting to approach these works as well from the perspective of visual disruption in video art. See David Hughes, "Daniel Richter and the Problem of Political Painting Today," *New German Critique* 36, no. 3 (Fall 2009): 133–60.

³⁰ In "In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective," Hito Steyerl describes the experience of linear perspective as that in which the viewer is mirrored in the vanishing point, and thus constructed by it. After linear perspective had been abandoned in Cubism, collages, and different types of abstraction, contemporary multiscreen projections create a dispersing perspective. Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* (Berlin: Stenberg Press, 2012), 19, 22, 27.

³¹ See Guy Debord, "Theory of the Dérive" (1956), trans. Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Online*, <https://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/theory.html>.

³² Quoted in Tony Godfrey, *Painting Today* (2009; London: Phaidon, 2014), 355.

³³ See Westgeest, *Video Art Theory*, chapter 2, for theoretical reflections on video art installations.

³⁴ Duncan White, "Expanded Cinema Up to and Including Its Limits: Perception, Participation and Technology," in *Expanded Cinema: Art, Performance, Film*, ed. A. L. Rees, et al. (London: Tate, 2011), 231.

³⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure*, trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon (1971; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 9; original emphasis.

³⁶ Raymond Bellour, "The Pensive Spectator," trans. Lynne Kirby, in *The Cinematic*, ed. David Company (1984; London: Whitechapel; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 119–23.

³⁷ Dörte Zbikowski, in Hüsich, *Corinne Wasmuht: Supraflux*, 68.

³⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (2008; London: Verso, 2011), 11, 14, 105.

³⁹ The artist reflecting on her work in a video recording. See "Kunst nach 1945."

⁴⁰ See Sharon L. Butler, "Abstract Painting: The New Casualists," *Brooklyn Rail*, June 2011, <https://brooklynrail.org/2011/06/artseen/abstract-painting-the-new-casualists>.

⁴¹ See Raphael Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting," *Art in America*, May 1, 2009, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/provisional-painting-raphael-rubinstein>. Lane Relyea, though, is quite critical about this tendency of what he prefers to call "D.I.Y. painting" that would engage too much into the D.I.Y. neoliberal world. Lane Relyea, "D.I.Y. Abstraction," *WOW HUH*, October 8, 2012, [wowhuh.com/posts/036.html](http://www.wowhuh.com/posts/036.html).

⁴² Wasmuht explained in a statement about her work that she indeed partly wipes away and peels off layers of paint from her canvas as part of her working process. See "Corinne Wasmuht," YouTube video, 3:25, posted by König Galerie, February 1, 2018, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoC5vj0Ue4>.

⁴³ See, for instance, Vittorio Colaizzi, "On Formal Noodling: Invention and Determination in Recent Abstract Painting," *ASAP/Journal* 3, no. 1 (2018): 67–96.

⁴⁴ Laura J. Hoptman, *The Forever Now: Contemporary Painting in an Atemporal World* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 16.

⁴⁵ See Sigmund Freud, "Das Unheimliche" (1919), *Joachim Schmid*, <http://www.joachim Schmid.ch/docs/PAzFreudSigUnheimli.pdf>.

⁴⁶ Brenda Brown, "Corinne Wasmuht," *Portfolio of Brenda Christian Brown*, March 20, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190302141046/http://www.brendachristianbrown.com/art-exhibits/corinne-wasmuht/>.

⁴⁷ Christina Végh, in *Kubus. Sparda-Kunstpreis*, ed. Ulrike Groos (Stuttgart, Germany: Kunstmuseum Stuttgart, 2017), 11.

⁴⁸ Steyerl, *Wretched*, 32, 44.

⁴⁹ Nevertheless, Bacon concludes, paintings still function differently from electronic devices due to their relative stasis and fixity. Alex Bacon, “Surface, Image, Reception: Painting in a Digital Age,” *Rhizome*, May 24, 2016, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2016/may/24/surface-image-reception-painting-in-a-digital-age>.

⁵⁰ Hudson, *Painting Now*, regarding another painting by Wasmuht.

⁵¹ Véggh, in Groos, *Kubus*, 12, 15.

⁵² See Ruth Bernard Yeazell, *Picture Titles: How and Why Western Paintings Acquired Their Names* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁵³ See Tan Lin, “Warhol’s Aura and the Language of Writing,” in “Animals,” spec. issue, *Cabinet* 4 (Fall 2001), <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/4/lin.php>.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator*, 17, 22.