

Too Much of a Bad Thing Terrorism and Other Catastrophes from a Safe Distance

There's no such thing as too much of a bad thing for Christoph Draeger, the Swiss artist (*1965) now living in New York. *Stammheim* and *Black September*, among his most recent works, stem from Draeger's examination of international terrorism from its inception to its current zenith on September 11, 2001. The debate on terrorism has been vigorously renewed since 9/11, making Draeger's art highly relevant. Is the artist jumping on the bandwagon? No. For approximately a decade now Draeger has determinedly and exclusively focused on all manner of disasters, natural and environmental catastrophes, horrendous accidents, criminal violence and even terrorism. Still, Draeger obviously reacts to current world events, as evidenced by his present focus on terrorism. It is almost inevitable that when the media pounces on a disaster, sooner or later Draeger will step onto the scene. The implication of "safe distance" in the title of the book and exhibition (*Memories of terror from a safe distance*) is elapsed time—sometimes Draeger delves into long past events or revisits the "disaster area" only years afterward, as in his photographic series *Voyages apocalyptiques* (since 1994). The distance, however, is primarily a function of Draeger's being less interested in the catastrophe per se than in the media-packaged form. How are horror and terror processed and presented by the media? By employing various strategies in his work, Draeger succeeds in reflecting on and questioning the mechanisms of sensationalism.

Since the 60s and the infancy of video art, there has been a critical debate going on within the art world on the medium of television. Even then artists alternated between awe and criticism in the face of the unbelievable power that television wielded over the masses. The new medium of video offered the technical possibilities to perfectly simulate the television aesthetic; at the same time, it could be altered to frustrate the public's viewing habits. However, the utopian idea of video art reaching the masses through television failed. Though the young generation of artists doesn't possess that kind of idealism, critical analysis of the media's reality and its effect on our society is more relevant than ever. The flood of images

from TV, films, print media and the Internet that defines our existence seems to grow daily. Like many contemporary artists Draeger uses not only that raw visual material but also the structure and aesthetic of the mass media. In severing images from their context and exposing the media machinery, the commercial and political abuse of imagery becomes evident, permitting Draeger to establish a critical distance to the overpowering media presence in our age.

Ironic distance as Strategy

In the video *The Last News* (DVD, 13', 2002, in cooperation with the American director Reynold Reynolds and the animation artist Gary Breslin) some of Draeger's strategies become apparent. The video playing on TV imitates the structure and aesthetic of the American news so convincingly that its ironic-fictional character is not at first evident. The newscaster Guy Smith delivers the best "infotainment" for "MSNBC 24 Disaster and Survival News Channel". A fusion of the terms "information" and "entertainment", "infotainment" refers to the growing trend in TV news to package complex and serious issues in the most entertaining fashion. Knowing that bad news is good for the media, Draeger consistently fabricates a pure catastrophe show for MSNBC.

The basic structure and elements of the news program are present here: the newscaster introduces a topic in front of a background image, followed by a film report with voiceover and a live connection with a correspondent on the site. Back in the studio the newscaster or an expert closes with a summarizing analysis. As Götz Grossklau explains in his informative essay "Bild und Katastrophe," this repetitive ritual fosters a sense of security in the viewer: "In the news rituals of television we experience the daily return of the 'provider'; in the person of the newscaster and in the rational language of the communiqué we accept a promise of safety founded in the arguments of the experts. [...] In contrast to the visual message that shockingly presents one catastrophic event after the other, the verbal message of the newscaster or commentator serves to reestablish the sense of existential. [...] The reliability of the system (the technical, medical, military, legal, political...), the mastery of the catastrophe are guaranteed by the experts. The media is the platform for their pronouncements: it is the real

site of reduction from complexity."¹

Draeger's perfect imitation of the typical components of a newscast and Guy Smith's overdrawn lust for sensation alone make *The Last News* a striking parody of American reporting. And yet the artist doesn't leave it at that: the events Smith enthusiastically documents attain ever greater extremes. So while Smith's reporter on the scene is being bombed on air, all the links to correspondents and to other stations in other countries break down one by one, until the entire world beyond Smith's TV studio sinks into fire and ash as a result of global terror. In light of the total devastation which finally reaches even his studio, Smith is no longer able to maintain his professional demeanor and with that cannot deliver the prescribed security Grossklau wrote of. And thus the media-dominated world finally collapses. The pathetic figure of Guy Smith provokes our laughter, and yet his sudden helplessness reflects our very own apocalyptic visions. Faced with the last newscaster, for a moment we can imagine being the last viewer.

Genuine or Fake Images

While these personal moments of panic destroy the ironic distance in *The Last News*, the work offers additional opportunities for reflection. The fact that all the catastrophe scenarios shown are drawn from science fiction and disaster movies is a nod to the similarities between genuine and invented images. How many people faced with the televised images of September 11, 2001 thought that they had chanced upon a bad science fiction movie? Some reporters even considered it necessary to explicitly emphasize the reality of the pictures. Those images were as genuine as Draeger's news video is fake. Here too we watch the WTC towers burning, but quickly identify it as a clip from a movie. Still, this is hardly comforting knowing the real events as we do. Once again we lose the distance irony provides.

Prior to 9/11, *The Last News* would have been simply a clever parody. Post event—the video is a clear reaction to 9/11—it raises further questions. It should be remembered that the terrorist attacks of September 11 were carried out without claims of responsibility or demands. Consequently, as the Islamicist Navid Kermani² and others have determined, there arises a feeling of a diffuse, omnipresent threat from a faceless enemy, one who can strike anywhere and at any time, and one who

is not bound to one specific person (even not Bin Laden). George W. Bush's use of term "evil" might be politically awkward, but it does thoroughly grasp this particular feeling. The terrorist attacks in Draeger's pseudo-news report mirror this concept of an undefinable evil. The attacks occur without warning, inexplicable and everywhere at once, and yet not one reporter is interested in the least in the source or the root cause. "It" just happens. As Draeger plainly demonstrates with the uncritical sensationalism of *The Last News*, reporting absent subtlety automatically leads to a Hollywood-style division of the world into good and evil.

Media and Terror

This work illustrates the fatal connection between the Media and terrorism, as well. Here fictional media imagery plays the role Lydia Hausteiner asserts in her book about video art: "The insight that memory might be a function of the current view of the present is simply a further step to the awareness of the potential for manipulation and oppression that lies in the torrent of images of a media-saturated society. How many science fiction, action and horror films, computer games and video clips of recent years haven't anticipated scenes of terror? Although reality far surpasses imagination, even in its heightened state it bears a horrible resemblance to the 'theatrical' catastrophe aesthetic. The burning towers of Manhattan turned into epitome of destruction and violence in front of our eyes in 'real time'—but also to a parable of the incomprehensible potential of media imagery."³ Indeed, terrorists find themselves confronted with a similar pressure for the spectacular event as the media. Today terrorist attacks are consciously planned with an eye to their dissemination in the media, in the certainty that the media in their daily struggle for readership and viewers practically lunge at them. This manipulation of the media can be traced back to the beginning of international terrorism at the end of the '60s.

In the video installations *Black September* (2 DVD, 13', 2002) and *Stammheim* (3 DVD, 18', 2003) Draeger reflects on seminal terrorist acts of the '70s. The first attack by the PFLP (Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine) in Europe in 1972 during the Munich Olympics under the name of "Black September" led to the hostage-taking and murder of 11 Israeli athletes. In *Stammheim* Draeger illuminates the events of

the "Deutsche Herbst" in 1977, in which Hanns-Martin Schleyer, the President of the Association of German Employers, was kidnapped to force the release of 11 members of the Red Army Faction (RAF) (among others, Andreas Baader, Gudrun Ensslin, Jan-Carl Raspe, Irmgard Möller) being held in the Stuttgart-Stammheim prison. To reinforce their demands, a Palestinian commando hijacked a Lufthansa plane to Mogadishu. When the attempt went awry, Baader, Ensslin and Raspe committed suicide in their cells. One day later Schleyer was found murdered. Möller survived her injuries and to this day has disputed the official version of collective suicide. In **Black September** and **Stammheim** Draeger examines the inception and the culmination of the history of terror. "Black September" counts among the beginnings of international terrorism—"international" in the complex interconnection of terrorist groups from different nations. (For example, the PFLP trained members of such disparate groups as the RAF, IRA, and ETA.) While the RAF was only officially dissolved in 1998, in 1977, with the deaths of its founders, it was already in decline.

Using the currency of the terrorism debate as a point of departure, Draeger relates in **Black September** and **Stammheim** the first terrorist acts that he himself can distantly remember. The starting point was historical TV footage into which he cut imagined scenes. In **Black September** Draeger cuts between documentary clips and his own sequences supplying interior views that were then unavailable to the reporters' cameras. In the viewer's mind the staged and the documentary coalesce to a unified whole, although Draeger consciously underscores the fictional character of his amateur film sequences. Through this process the artist makes plain not only how indiscriminately viewers consume images, but also how indistinguishable TV images can be once the context (TV movie or evening news?) is stripped away. Exactly this juxtaposition of reality and fiction permitted many to initially take the shots of the collapsing Twin Towers for science fiction.

Forming an Image

In the video installation **Stammheim** Draeger draws the dividing line between the imaginary and the genuine images even more pointedly than in **Black September**. In this piece the viewer is led into a living room where

footage from documentary films on "Deutscher Herbst" plays on the television. Beyond the room lies a drab prison hallway with three inaccessible cells in which Draeger's own version of Baader's, Ensslin's and Raspe's suicides are projected. Through a peephole the viewer can see what a guard should have seen during a cell check. Today it's widely assumed that the authorities not only knew the prisoners were following the developments outside their walls over the radio but also that they could contact one another over a "homemade" secret communications system. Nevertheless, the RAF members were not guarded more heavily after the announcement that the hijacking in Mogadishu had failed and, with it, their hopes for release. The absence of witnesses and pictures prompts speculation even today. In presenting his hypotheses, Draeger emphasizes the deficiencies and, in so doing, the fact that basically no image and no report can show more than a partial truth. To have "seen something on TV" has not been a guarantee for absolute truth for a long time.

In Draeger's examination of **Stammheim** these qualms regarding media supplied images lead him to "make up" his own mind—to decide and to create—in both a figurative and a literal sense. Draeger writes, directs, cuts, edits and renders his videos more artificial. By contrasting the material he produces against "real" footage, he questions their manufacture, context and meaning. The conjunction of invented images and genuine ones is an element that runs throughout Draeger's body of work. Although he employs a blurred tape loop to emphasize the dream-like, imaginary quality of the scenes, these scenes remain anchored in reality because the photographs are historical documents of the dead terrorists. Some of these pictures are the same ones that Gerhard Richter used for his 1988 cycle **18. Oktober 1977**. Draeger isn't afraid to depend on the famous painter; in fact the soft focus of his videos is a direct reference to Richter's painting style. Richter stated in connection to his cycle that greater clarity or more detail in the representation wouldn't have helped him understand any better the events leading up to it.

Draeger cites Richter even more directly by hanging a reproduction of a Richter painting over the sofa in his '70s living room (first realized in 1999, titled **Black & White Room—Memories of terror from a**

safe distance). The painting is of the record player in Baader's cell in which the terrorist kept a revolver hidden. So, Draeger uses not only media images for his purpose but also those of other artists. One of the objectives of **Stammheim** is a form of collage technique to unite personal and foreign memories with personal and foreign images into a complex entity. Furthermore, in Draeger's modest living room Richter's painting—a ordinary record player which concealed a deadly weapon—illustrates the helplessness of the West German population in face of the terrorist threat that was daily forcing itself into their parlors through the television. Visitors to the exhibition can now watch the same reports in a historically authentic setting. That they stand on a carpet on which an aerial photo of the Stammheim prison is reproduced might well be an ironic comment on the distance and overview that was so obviously lacking back then.

Dramatizing Terror

Neither the state police nor the populace knew how to deal with the rapid development of the left extremist Baader-Meinhof gang into the terrorist group RAF. The muddled propaganda of the RAF, their utter dedication to acts, the discrepancy between their idealistic ideology and their terrorist attempts must have seemed like a horrific farce to many. Henrik Pedersen wrote an informative essay on the "Inszenierung und Selbstinszenierung der deutschen Terroristen" ["Dramatization and self-dramatization of the German Terrorists"] which focused on the proximity of reality and fiction in relation to terrorism: "It is interesting to observe how very much RAF has profited from the unreality of their plans. The two levels of human cognition, fiction and nonfiction (film or bomb?), were cleverly manipulated. That a small group of revolutionaries could simply declare war on the West German state would appear to most people completely implausible. That is how they were able to obtain the bomb-making materials for their first wave of terror—as props for a film. The title of the film was to be 'Revolutions-Fiction'. Location: South America. ["Revolution Fiction"].⁴ Pedersen's commentary "Film or Bomb" refers as well to Rainer Werner Fassbinder's statement: "I don't throw bombs. I make films."⁵ The tendency to the dramatic remained with the leading figures of the RAF to the end: Even their collective suicide in

Stammheim resembled a production, shocking and scandalous.

With his description of the history of the RAF as a political happening that spun out of control, Pedersen makes an interesting connection between art and terrorism. The Happening is indeed often on the edge between artistic expression and illegal activity. The performer plays not only a role but uses his body—as does the terrorist—directly and occasionally mercilessly for his artistic ends. Action Art took on greater importance particularly after the '60s. In line with the idealistic-democratic desire to bring art out of the elite institutions and into "real" life, art moved to the street, to the out-of-doors in the form of happenings or actions. Joseph Beuys extended the notion of art even more radically in that he declared every active human being a work of art. Precisely because of figures like Beuys, who staged a sit-in with his students in the offices of the Düsseldorf Art Academy, for which he was fired, the artistic avant-garde mingled with the political. That was made all the more clear with Beuys's famous signs at the Documenta 1972. Emblazoned on two yellow demonstration signs "Dürer, I am personally taking Baader+Meinhof through Documenta V J. Beuys." Simultaneously a provocation and a statement of solidarity, it is also an attempt to yank reality (even an awful one) into the elite sphere of the art world. In Christoph Draeger's exhibition, similar signs declare "Beuys, I am personally taking Osama - Bin Laden through Documenta XII C. Draeger." Though the sensational art citation is immediately recognizable, Draeger still manages to reproduce to a certain degree the same provocation. Today it is the name Osama Bin Laden that instills as much fear and loathing as Baader and Meinhof did 30 years ago.

Science Fiction and Terrorism

One has to wonder why Christoph Draeger in his examination of terrorism has also introduced a piece on science fiction (based on Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey). Naturally the term "science fiction" has been used abundantly since 9/11 to describe the disbelief regarding the horrific images. The Twin Towers and other similar landmarks have been fictionally attacked countless times (in films like **Independence Day** or **Mars Attacks**); Haustein and others have discussed the possible impact of such imagery on terrorism. Especially interesting in connection to

9/11 are the correlations to very specific patterns within the science fiction genre; in particular, an attack by an unknown power whose goal is the total destruction or complete subjugation of the Earth. Humans are powerless against the secret weapons of the aliens. After 9/11 we see the same pattern in the very real threat of terrorism. The enemy, an elusive, abstract presence, is therefore referred to vaguely as "evil" and has at its disposal a secret weapon in the suicide bombers against whom humanity is helpless.

A further parallel between science fiction and terrorism exists in the attempt at total surveillance. In reaction to terror attacks, many countries turn to practices of a police state. Draeger traces the comparable reactions in West Germany in the '70s and in the US after 9/11 to the fact that the "omnipresent myth of terrorism" pervades all levels of civil society and paralyzes their democratic way of life. For example: Profiling has returned and in the US new laws have been enacted giving the authorities broad rights to investigate or detain individuals based on suspicion of terrorism.⁶ Current research in brain scans to identify suspected terrorists show that even the most fantastic surveillance visions are no longer the stuff of science fiction.⁷ Indeed, fictional scenarios of global catastrophes always contain an interpretation of the world, if not even a model for world/societal change. It is, therefore, not astonishing that in times of upheaval (as followed the student uprisings in 1968) the science fiction genre experienced a rejuvenation. Rebellion against antiquated forms, against the dominant level of society or governmental power can as easily lead to radicalization as to channeling expression in art or film. Fassbinder's decision "Film or bomb" is finally an expression of the philosophical proximity of many intellectuals to a left-leaning radical utopia. Although the increase in science fiction in the late '80s and '70s can be explained to a large degree by the great hope in science and space exploration, it is also finally an expression of the idealist wish to alter humanity and move it forward.

The societal and political changes that resulted from the student uprisings brought with them the beginnings of international terrorism. Draeger is interested in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* because, among other reasons, the film was made in the tumultuous year of 1968. The vision of peace-

ful—though temperamental—technical achievements in space travel that the director (who died in 1999) conceived for the year 2001 did not come about. However, with the collapse of the Twin Towers another kind of science fiction scenario was realized that in 1968 would have been equally as fantastic. In his piece *Odyssey Space A: 2001-Back to the Future* (3 DVD, 11', 2003) Draeger travels back to the year 2001, in Kubrick's future, drawing on the famous, psychedelic light tunnel sequence in which the lights and colors accelerating past us eliminate all sense of time. The astronaut exits aged, finally to die an embryo floating in space. Draeger intensifies the shuttling between the future and the present by running this journey through time in reverse on a 2-channel video projection. Here he once again raises the question—after the year 2001 and the striking similarities between the collapse of the Twin Towers with fictional projections—of just how much the future is founded on fabricated visions of the future.

Fiction and reality

Finally, with an eye to the irrevocable destruction of the Twin Towers, Draeger creates the *Modell für ein rekonstruierbares Gebäude* [Model for a reconstructable building] (Puzzle, Cardboard, ca. 4x1x2 m, 2003)—a tower whose destruction is implicit, comprised as it is purely of puzzle pieces. The puzzle has already appeared in early Draeger works: his giant jigsaw puzzles of famous disasters which he sold as "the most beautiful do-it-yourself disasters." However, the white puzzle pieces of the new tower model make it possible to practice reconstruction as well as the implied destruction. Practicing catastrophes is a metaphor for Draeger for the dangerous proximity of imagination and reality: "Simulation and destruction are dangerously interrelated. We simulate destruction to prevent it taking place, and we destroy reality by simulating it."⁸

Involvement with images both recreated and genuine is a line that runs through Draeger's media-critical work, permitting him revisit, again and again, the theory that an isolated image can have no one single meaning, just as one piece of a puzzle makes little sense out of context. In the tower model Draeger exaggerates the irony in the analogy by leaving all the pieces pure white. Putting together a puzzle is also a metaphor for Draeger's artistic approach: through the com-

bination of his own images and those of others, through real and fictional images Draeger creates a finished one. Naturally, this completed piece makes no claim to be the absolute truth: it is a subjective image, in which Draeger's own memories are reflected. So—just like a memory game—existing pictures are supplemented by those we summon from memory and this is reflected in the title of this book *Memories of terror from a safe distance*.

Katharine Ammann Zuviel des Bösen Terrorismus und andere Katastrophen aus sicherer Distanz



Joseph Beuys, Aktionsrelikt d5 (1972)
Sammlung Speck, Köln

¹ Götz Grossklaus, *Bild und Katastrophe. Zu Nachrichtenstexten des Fernsehens*, in "Bilder der Welten: Unüberschaubarkeiten zwischen Bilderflut und Anschauungsverlust", ed. Gerda Breuer, Thomas Schleper (Verlag / publisher: Stroemfeld Verlag Frankfurt, 2000, S./p.60-61)

² Navid Kermani, *Der Amoktäter ist ein moderner Mensch. Der Applaus hat andere Gründe*, (in "Du", no.736/5/2003, S./p.62-3)

³ Lydia Hausteim, "Videokunst" (Verlag / Publisher C.H. Beck, Munich, 2003, S./p.171-172)

⁴ Henrik Pedersen, *RAF auf der Bühne. Inszenierung und Selbstinszenierung der deutschen Terroristen*, (in "TRANS Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissen-schaften", 17 July 2002, www.inst.at/trans)

⁵ Fassbinder gehörte damals zum Kreis von Horst Söhnlein, der 1968 zusammen mit Baader, Ensslin und Proll für die Kaufhaus-Brandanschläge in Frankfurt zu drei Jahren Gefängnis verurteilt wurde. / At that time Fassbinder was a member of the circle around Horst Söhnlein who, along with Baader, Ensslin and Proll, was sentenced to three years in prison for setting fires to department stores in Frankfurt.

⁶ Mehr zum / More on USA Patriot Act bei / by Martin Kilian, *Der äussere Feind und sein innerer Schatten. Wie ein amerikanischer Justizminister mit den Bürgerrechten umgeht*, (in "Du", no.736/5/2003, S./p.69-70)

⁷ Florian Rötzer, *Gehirnscans mit dem fMRI zur Terroristenerkennung*, (in "Telepolis. Magazin der Netzkultur", 19 August 2002, www.heise.de/tp)

⁸ "Christoph Draeger, Toutou, tueur né / Apocalypse Place", *Ausstellungskatalog / exhibition catalogue* (Ibos-Tarbes, Le Parvis Centre d'art contemporain; Lüneburg, Halle für Kunst; Frankfurt: Revolver-Archiv für moderne Kunst, 2001)