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Abstract:

In this paper I will relate *24 times* by British based artist Jason Dee to the late writings of Rosalind Krauss on medium specificity. I will try to determine whether this work, generally considered as an installation, falls under what Krauss calls 'the post-medium condition' or whether it resists this tendency to dissolve the medium. An analysis of the work will show that Dee uses certain conventions, some of them obsolete, as technical support in order to 'invent a new medium'. This will lead me to the conclusion that, rather than abandoning the medium altogether, Dee finds a non-reductive way of 'pointing-to-it', which would make him a 'knight of the medium'.

Knighting Jason Dee: 24 times through the writing of the late Rosalind Krauss

24 monitors are positioned in a circle in the middle of a dark room. They continuously play short clips taken from famous movies, each showing one or more photographers taking a picture with a flash. However, instead of playing at the same time, there is a one frame delay between each monitor. The result is a rapid circular movement of exploding light, every time a flash goes off. The light is projected all around the room and casts the visitor's shadow on the white walls as moving silhouettes. All this is accompanied by the rattling sound of the shutters going off in rapid succession.

At first glance, *24 times*¹ by English Artist Jason Dee is hard to categorize under a specific medium. The multiple screens and different media players suggest the label of multimedia installation. As such, it could be related to what Rosalind Krauss calls our 'post-medium condition', which is driven by an attempt to dismiss the medium, as a reaction against modernist, medium specific art.² Rather than trying to express the essence of their medium,

¹ The work can be seen in this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_4XlCB_BHw

² Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea", 32.

artworks, from the 1970's onwards, were to question the conditions of art in general. 'Pointing-to-itself' was replaced by 'pointing-to-art'. This paradigm shift was critiqued by Krauss in *Voyage to the North Sea*, where she condemns it as a "system of pure equivalency" governed by the "homogenizing principle of commodification".³

However, in this paper I will demonstrate that *24 times* by Jason Dee cannot simply be reduced to a multimedia installation that is completely levelling the difference between media. I will show that there is a 'pointing-to-itself' to be revealed in Jason Dee's work, without it becoming a reductive, formalist search for self-definition. In my argumentation I will mostly draw on Krauss' later writings that evolve around the idea of 'reinventing the medium'.

Krauss' account of the post-medium condition is embedded in post-structuralist thought. Post-structuralism dismissed the idea of self-identity and thereby destroyed the very foundation on which Greenberg's idea of medium-specific art was built. By deconstructing unicity and replacing it by difference and multiplicity, writers at the beginning of the 1970's like Derrida and Foucault deconstructed modernist art and opened the door to the paradigm of the post-medium condition, where medium specificity is dissolved.⁴

However, according to Krauss, there were certain artists who resisted this tendency. Artists like Ed Ruscha, William Kentridge and James Coleman would refuse to completely abandon the idea of a medium. This does not mean that their art is a kind of nostalgic attempt to re-establish exhausted modernist media like painting and sculpture. Rather than reducing their art to its material support, they were interested in how these artworks produced meaning. They resorted to obsolete techniques and conventions, which they used for their expressive potential. James Coleman, for example, would employ the technique of the slide-show as the basis for his work, while William Kentridge opted for stop-motion as a way of conveying meaning. Krauss calls these techniques the artwork's 'technological support'. Much like Benjamin, Krauss believes in the redemptive potential of obsolete techniques. By reusing these techniques as technological support these artists reinvented them as a medium.⁵⁶ In what

³ Krauss, "A Voyage on the North Sea", 15.

⁴ Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 24.

⁵ Krauss, "Reinventing The Medium" 304.

⁶ These ideas are partly indebted to Stanley Cavell, who coined the term 'automatism' in his search for a non-reductive medium-specificity. The concept of 'automatism' would shift the focus from the artworks physical support to a set of conventions that would operate as rules within which the artist could freely improvise and create. Costello, Diarmuid. Automatism, automatic, automatism : Rosalind Krauss and Stanley Cavell on photography and the photographically dependent arts. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol.38 (No.4). (2011) 819-854.

follows I will try to determine whether Jason Dee could be counted among those artists receiving by Krauss the title of ‘knights of the medium’.

The title of Jason Dee’s work, *24 times*, is already a first indication that he cannot simply be classified as an installation artist who has completely abandoned the idea of medium-specificity. It refers to the number of screens that are used in the installation, but more importantly, to the frames per second on a filmstrip. This rate was standardized in 1926 by electric engineer Stanley Watkins together with the Warner Theatre. The reason they decided to implement a standard framerate was that the projection of film had to be motorized in order to be able to synchronize it with sound. The rate of 24 fps was a fairly random choice on the basis of the framerate most projectionists were using.⁷ Jason Dee took this technique of 24 images succeeding each other within the timeframe of one second and appropriated it as his *technological support*. He considered it as a rule that he could use to improvise and create. He uses this convention in an unconventional way, for example, by showing moving images instead of still images. This generates a new experience that is nevertheless informed by established conventions. Unlike certain structural filmmakers, Dee is not so much interested in the material support of film, the film strip or the screen for example, but rather in the effect that is produced by this particular technique established in 1926, and how it generates meaning. His central question: what is the effect of 24 images per second on the spectator and how can I use this in a new way to communicate something?

Another aspect that forms the work’s *technological support* is the positioning of the screens. The circular form is clearly a reference to the zoetrope, a device developed during the 19th century to animate still images and create the illusion of movement. Dee appropriates this obsolete way of communicating and uses it again as a rule or *technological support*. The zoetrope implies a very specific way of experiencing the relation between still and moving images. This is what interests Dee, rather than the physical necessity of it. The Zoetrope allowed the spectator to walk around the device and most importantly, he or she could see the mechanism behind the illusion. The transition from still to moving images is clearly visible. The individual still images were visible all at once, which is something that has become unimaginable during the course of the 20th century. Dee uses this particular mode of display to communicate something that has nothing to do with what was originally shown in zoetrope’s, which are clips from famous movies. This generates an entirely new experience for the

⁷ Stump, *Digital Cinematography*, 128.

spectator, who has probably never watched these kind of images by way of this obsolete technique.

The reappropriation of conventions like the film-strip and the zoetrope draws on a certain way of experiencing moving images that has been long forgotten by the contemporary spectator. However, Dee is not trying to project the spectator back in time, giving him the same experience as a viewer from the 19th century would have had. Rather, by reinventing an obsolete technique as a new medium, he informs our modern day experience. Like Kentridge and Coleman, Dee helps us remember and uses this recollection to communicate a completely new meaning.⁸ Rather than abandoning the concept of medium altogether, he develops a non-reductive way of “pointing to ‘who-you-are’”, as Krauss would put it.⁹ In this sense, he could be called a *knight of the medium*, saving the medium from being dissolved by the homogenization of the post-medium condition. Krauss would even go as far as to say that Jason Dee is saving art: “If such artists are ‘inventing’ their medium, they are resisting contemporary art’s forgetting of how the medium undergirds the very possibilities of art.”¹⁰

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⁸ The binary opposition between forgetting and remembering as giving rise to the medium is the central theme of *Under Blue Cup*

⁹ Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 25.

¹⁰ Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 19.