THE ABSTRACTED REAL: SPECULATIONS ON EXPERIMENTAL ANIMATED DOCUMENTARY

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Abstract

This paper proposes a debate around the documentary character of experimental animation by looking at examples of my personal animation practice which probe the use of real-world source materials in the construction of audio-visual experiences across abstract and concrete. By employing the aesthetics of abstraction in particular ways, these 'abstracted' animation works underline ambivalence and ambiguity in creating open-ended narratives which aim to question, undermine, or transcend their everyday sources. Through a discussion of theoretical positions around notions of realism, materiality, embodiment, indexicality, actuality and process, what becomes apparent is an intrinsic relation between 'reality' and 'animation,' whereby the viewer actively participates in meaning-making processes in the reception of the work. The claim of the paper is to identify abstracted animation in its capacity to create 'thinking spaces' which instead of representing reality, establish what can be called the Abstracted Real.

Keywords: experimental animated documentary, abstracted animation, real-world abstractions, animation as a thinking space, indexicality, meaning making, the abstracted real.

The Abstracted Real: Speculations on Experimental Animated Documentary

This paper discusses a number of my animation films which sit at the nexus of abstraction and figuration and use real-world source materials in the construction of audio-visual experiences that are, to varying degrees, both abstract and concrete. By drawing on both, the formal approaches associated with abstract animation, and the indexicality and associated meanings of more representational forms, such works can transform and comment on their chosen subject matter, while allowing for more fluid readings on the part of the viewer. Through an exploration of those films, which are normally classified as abstract or experimental animation, we consider a range of theoretical perspectives to examine the ways in which these works interact with their source materials and their viewers, and how such films might be understood to constitute forms of animated documentary. With the help of film theorist André Bazin and Marcel Duchamp's readymades, we bring forth issues of cinematic realism and the reappropriation of objects in abstracted stop-motion animation. We look at what Laura Marks refers to as haptic visuality, and how such visuality prompts a linking of the materiality of a film's source materials to the viewer's subjective, embodied reception. In discussing photography-based animation and its relation to painting, we engage with Thomas Lamarre's framing of animation as 'temporal painting,' through which indexicality can highlight the processual, with implications on 'objecthood' in animation and the structural comprehension between the real world and its sublimation into abstraction. Using Dan Torre, we unfold animation's potential to investigate actuality, further drawing attention to questions of process and the complex indexicality of real-world sources. And through Lilly Husbands, we pinpoint the significance of materially transformative processes in experimental animation works rooted in actuality, and the viewer's extended investment in the explication of such a film's meaning. The notion of abstractedness plays a pivotal role in this undertaking, as it encapsulates not pure abstraction, or non-objectiveness, but a state of being *abstracted from* a form of 'realism' which had its genesis in actuality, in source material derived from the real world.

Realisms and Readymades in Abstracted Stop-Motion Worlds

In stop-motion animation, movement is created through the incremental manipulation of physical objects between photographed frames. As such, it engages in real, physical space by default, and even 'abstract' stop-motion works carry the materiality and possible meanings of their real-world ingredients. To explicate this, we will discuss four of my stop-motion animation films which all play with abstraction and abstractedness in different ways. The first two works, companion pieces *Model Starship* (2012, fig. 1) and *Unclear Proof* (2013, fig. 2), were both initiated by external invitations: The former by a fashion blog with an open brief to create a film with a bag of makeup products, the latter by a film festival in the Prosecco-producing Veneto region of Italy, who had invited me to make a film using objects found in a winery. Animated on a mirror surface, both films are variations on a flying saucer theme, in which real-world objects are abstracted and transformed into the shape-shifting protagonists of an alternate reality. This allows the audience to reflect on the objects' previous functions – and on the wider cultural and symbolic function of objects as a whole – through their recontextualization into new, otherworldly roles. KiYoung Park (2012), who as a guest judge selected *Model Starship* for DOTMOV Festival 2012, sees the film's reappropriation of everyday objects in the spirit of Duchamp's readymades:

> Turning the familiar products into something new and creating a scene that you could see in a sci-fi movie by filming using their shapes and materials, with images reflected from mirrors, was sensational. The artist was able to produce images that are vague and abstract but clear and concise at the same time as he went through the process of observing the products, imaging, and recognizing their patterns [...] Bringing

his imagination into action, he recreated […] ready-made products into an eye-catching art film. It gave me a refreshing jolt of the same kind as when Fontaine of Marcel Duchamp shocked the contemporary art world.

This examination may be an overstatement, but it does draw out a significant connection to the aesthetic-conceptual appropriation of found objects. Steven Goldsmith (1983, p. 198) reminds us that "(t)he found object is art because an artist of special sensibility felt he could convey an important aesthetic idea through it. As a carrier of meaning, the readymade stands apart from what Arthur Danto calls 'mere real things.'" The readymade creates new meanings and new readings by distorting and alienating the auratic world of the initial object, while retaining traces of its original meaning. By reappropriating objects in the manner of Duchamp, there is an implicit critique of the ways in which these objects operate in their specific context – including a criticism of that context or domineering discourse – which means that through the readymade, dynamics of consumption and power relations can be highlighted.[1] A film like *Model Starship* with its drifting signifiers can comment on the function of 'objects' and draw on their associated meanings, while simultaneously questioning their role, transcending or re-activating them into new configurations. The method of replacement animation of real-world objects adds another layer to this reading process. Rather than dealing with a singular readymade, a static object, replacement animation sequences series of objects into movement, whereby one object in one frame is replaced by another, usually similarly shaped object in the next frame, and so on. This allows for the creation of chains of meaning – reinforcements, juxtapositions, contradictions – between a whole range of objects. And as with Duchamp's readymade such as the urinal, "the strangeness of [an object's] form […] suddenly becomes apparent." (Goldsmith 1983, p. 199)

Fig. 1 *Model Starship*, Max Hattler, 2012.

Fig. 2 *Unclear Proof*, Max Hattler, 2013.

Duchamp uses text in connection with his ready-mades, whereby the object's meaning is 'dislocated' through such 'inscription.' (Reed, 1985, p. 222) This points to the importance of verbal-textual cues which inform the viewer's meaning making beyond the visual-representational. The titles of my films similarly help to 'dislocate' the meaning of the objects portrayed in them and provide further context for their reading. The titles of both *Model Starship* and *Unclear Proof* play with the multiple meanings of the words that they contain. *Model Starship* can be read as 'exemplar spaceship' or 'toy spacecraft,' or as the struggle for a 'fashion model's celebrity' through makeup products. *Unclear Proof*, linking intoxication with hallucination, hints at the possible connections

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1   For an extended Chinese-language reading of the transformation of everyday objects in my film AANAATT, with notes on media, power discourse, and consumption see Chunning Guo (2017).

Fig. 3 *AANAATT*, Max Hattler, 2008.

of levels of proof in alcohol and clarity of proof for the exis-tence of aliens. These wordplays set the scene for the films' audiovisual juxtapositions. Whether, to what extent, or how precisely the audience decodes the film put in front of them is another story. Vivian Sobchack argues that "(t)he attitude of our consciousness toward the cinematic object simulta-neously positions us as existential subjects in relation to the screen and posits the existential status of what we see there in relation to what we have experienced and know of the life-world we inhabit." (Sobchack, 1999, p. 234) The reading of a film hence depends on, and differs depending on, the knowl-edge and experience of each viewer: a forever-modulating, open-ended and accumulative dynamic of sense-making, or nonsense, that is. I would argue that the abstractedness of the objects in *Model Starship* and *Unclear Proof* – in terms of the objects' shapes and colors, and their motion and tempo-ral sequencing through replacement animation – lends itself

more directly or fluidly to (re)interpretation than the cinematic realism discussed by Sobchack, or indeed the Duchampian readymade.

My stop-motion film *AANAATT* (2008, fig. 3) makes use of a similar mirror animation technique to *Model Starship* and *Un-clear Proof*. Instead of narrative progression, *AANAATT*'s inter-est lies in the continuous transformation of objects and light, and the perpetual abstraction and reconfiguration of space. It is inspired by the geometric abstraction of Constructivism and the Bauhaus, specifically the work of painter and pho-tographer Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, whose interest in the move-ment of objects and light through space led him to construct the Light-Space Modulator, a kinetic sculpture. This mecha-nized, rotating, sculptural construction of metal plates with circular perforations, wire, and glass became the basis for the film *A Lightplay: Black White Gray*, Moholy-Nagy's only abstract

film, completed in 1930. *A Lightplay* in turn became an inspiration for *AANAATT*. While clearly located within a real, physical space with interactions of sunlight, clouds and rain, *AANAATT* has a distinctly abstract visual quality. The film shifts between three-dimensional objects and two-dimensional surfaces, as it folds the illusion of space through the use of mirrors to give way to the abstract logic of tubes, discs, cylinders and other shapes as they scale, rotate and transform. By using a fixed viewpoint with no discernible cuts or changes of camera angle, *AANAATT* is closer to a painting than a film, a painting which at the same time keeps changing shape. Drawing on film theorist André Bazin, for whom the question of an aesthetics of realism was fundamental to cinema, we could argue that one of *AANAATT*'s principal conditions is one where the work stays 'real' through the use of a single camera angle and a large depth of field. Bazin (1971, p. 28), in his discussion of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, notes how conventional film editing through an ordering of shots "introduces an obviously abstract element into reality." An uninterrupted, continuous shot on the other hand does not break the reality continuum. Similarly, a large depth of field allows the viewer to discover every element of the scene, as opposed to the experience of a camera focus which prescribes where to look.

> Whereas the camera lens, classically, had focused successively on different parts of the scene, the camera of Orson Welles takes in with equal sharpness the whole field of vision contained simultaneously within the dramatic field. It is no longer the editing that selects what we see, thus giving it an a priori significance, it is the mind of the spectator which is forced to discern, as in a sort of parallelepiped of reality with the screen as its cross-section, the dramatic spectrum proper to the scene. (Bazin, 1971, p. 28)

Following this logic, we can say that *AANAATT* also gives us a scene of various possibilities to read, see, and subsequently experience 'our reality.' The "fundamental quality of reality – its continuity" (ibid) is preserved in *AANAATT* through its wide focus and single, unchanging camera angle. The film's geometric abstractedness is thereby anchored more firmly in reality. Looking at Moholy-Nagy from this vantage point, we can say that his film is not a mere documentation of his kinetic sculpture. More abstract, less reality-based in its multishot editing through different camera angles, narrow focus, and overlay effects, *A Lightplay: Black White Gray* doesn't document the Light-Space Modulator, it transcends it into abstraction. *AANAATT* on the other hand, while partially abstracted in the visual field, remains 'real' through its unbroken continuity, and thereby becomes more like an animated documentation (if not an animated documentary) of the folding and reconfiguring illusory 'reality' it portrays: an animated kinetic sculpture in action. The uninterrupted shot in *AANAATT* is of course an illusion itself, as the photographic capturing of time in stop-motion animation is anything but continuous.

While the films discussed so far feature abstracted scenes in real, more or less discernible environments, the aim with my film *Shift* (2012, fig. 4) was to increase the distancing effect produced by non-objectivism to achieve a further removal from the everyday, while still keeping a connection to the real by animating physical objects. *Shift* additionally also relies on the 'reality' described by Bazin, contained within the use of a wide focus and continuous shot. *Shift* is once again inspired by the reduced geometric aesthetics of early 20th century modernism: El Lissitzky, Man Ray, and films such as Ralph Steiner's tribute to the machine age, *Mechanical Principles* (1930) and Fernand Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* (1924) which combines the dynamic abstraction of Constructivism with the absurd qualities of Dada, all fed into the work. While the aesthetics of that period channel a belief in progress and technology which from our contemporary vantage point might seem simplistic and naïve, it is the utopian impulse embedded within them that can create a reflective distance to the present. *Shift* is further inspired by the notion of a 'dimensional shift' – a shift from our four-dimensional reality into the fifth dimension, proclaimed by some

New Age beliefs to take place in the year 2012.[2] This proposition, and the science fiction theme more broadly which runs through several my works, fulfills a similar function, connected to the genre's core premise: Science fiction presents us with a different version of the world, an alternative mode through which to contemplate and reflect on actual lived experience. As such, it too offers a distancing from reality, which can be combined with the distancing effect produced by abstraction. On this basis, my aim was to probe the idea of an other-dimensional, quasi non-objective world, with its own logic, aesthetics and rules, which conversely consists of real-world objects and materials (see fig. 5): On a black ground, as if floating in deep space, the materials – including metal tubing, fixtures, pop rivets and ball bearings – present a self-governing mechanism that continually reshapes itself into new kinetic sculptural configurations, conjuring up abstract otherworldly automatons, pinball machines and cyborgian monstrosities. These transformations create anthropomorphic and mechanomorphic associations, which set a framework for the audience's imagination to explore. However, through the increased removal from the everyday, more room for interpretation is opened up, and the employed strategies of abstraction "ultimately shift the viewer's attention away from the original context and identity of a single form and towards a purely abstract viewing experience." (Torre, 2017, p. 68) As such, it could be said that with the 'abstracted real,' the more abstract a film is, the more open-ended its readings become, or the less meaning becomes important. Dan Torre (2017, p. 68) contends that in *Shift*,

> the images (even though identifiable as real stop-motion objects) continually change appearance and shape. This kind of developmental movement shifts the emphasis away from particular forms or recognizable characters and instead highlights the dynamic and visually compelling movement of abstract imagery.
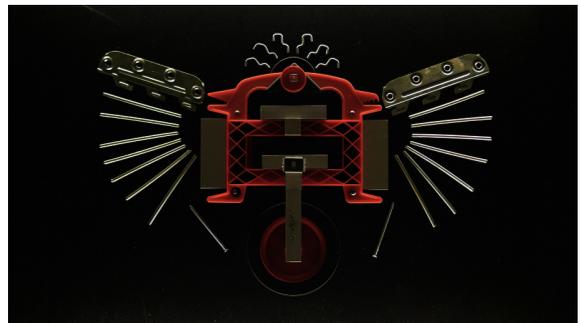

Fig. 4 *Shift*, Max Hattler, 2012.

Fig. 5 Making of *Shift*. Photo by Heiko Mozer, 2012.

Embodied Materiality in Drift

My short film *Drift* (2007, fig. 6) considers the human body as an alien landscape through an exploration of close-up images of skin. Real photography is brought into motion in extreme close-ups, creating a foreign yet familiar world that is removed from reality, yet sometimes almost too close for comfort. As the film unfolds, we follow a virtual camera scanning across alien terrains created from high-resolution photographs of skin, from which digitally animated hair starts to grow, sway, and eventually take flight to leave the bodily landscape as

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2   Shift was commissioned by Animate Projects in the UK for Channel 4's Random Acts short film strand, with the thematic limitation '2012 Apocalypse.'

Fig. 6 *Drift*, Max Hattler, 2007.

barren and strange as it was at the outset. The realization that we're looking at human skin doesn't set in immediately, but only some way into the film's progression, when we have already accepted its inherent alienness. Once we recognize that what we identify with on screen is a mirror of our own strange physicality, we implicitly become estranged from ourselves. The alienation effect works, I would argue, precisely because the film is rooted in, and then *abstracted* from *realism*, real photographic source material.

Close-ups, and the delicate detailed surfaces that come with them, establish an extensive consideration of cinematic materiality which is necessarily tied to a haptic quality at the very core of live action film.[3] But arguably this haptic quality, as it is linked to a bodily consciousness and sensuality, often stands in contrast

to the materiality of experimental and especially abstract animation, where visual materials might be seen as disconnected from the 'real world' through their relative non-objectiveness. However, if we consider not just the visual expression on screen but also the source of the visual material, where it came from and what sort of traces of meaning are carried and 'documented' by it, a straightforward 'materiality' cannot as easily be identified. By framing 'abstract' animation where real-world sources are a constitutive part of the image material and its modes of narration as 'abstract*ed*' animation we point towards documentary aspects coming forth through abstraction, and reinforce questions around the material qualities of real-world sources. To investigate the specific affective quality of abstracted animation, one must consider models of embodied vision that go beyond a simple duality of realism versus abstraction. Laura Marks' writing on

3   On cinematic materiality, embodiment and haptic visuality see for example Vivian Sobchack (2004), Jennifer Barker (2009), Miriam Ross (2015), and Susanne Sæther (2020).

embodied vision in *The Skin of the Film* (2000), and particularly the way in which she approaches the relation between the film's perceiver and object, are useful in tackling the 'bodily' quality of abstracted animation. Marks claims that the very basis of 'film' rests on the unresolved relationship between representing and sensually perceiving, and that the way in which "the film signifies through its materiality" inevitably involves "a contact between perceiver and object represented." (Marks, 2016, p. 258) There is a haptic visuality at play, in the sense of vision being tactile per se, when the film is *virtually* touched by the eyes of the viewer. Marks argues that "a series of material connections maintain between the original pro-filmic entity and the means that captured it, through the media that reproduce, transform, and transmit it, and finally to the embodied receiver." (2016, p. 258) The material connections at work here, linking the materiality of the film's source materials to subjective, embodied reception through haptic visuality, can help us understand 'abstracted' animation as a particular re-producing, transforming and transmitting medium which carries the materiality of its sources to the viewer.

With *Drift*'s alienation effect we hence face the conflicts of two conceptual approaches, linked to the above-mentioned unresolved relation between representing and sensually perceiving: One which is grounded in the *material*, in the differentiation and separation between live action film material and animation, whereby the question of a documentary by means of film is associated with live action film material only, as any real-world depiction is *visually* preserved and replicated, imprinted in the film form.[4] And another, which emerges from subjective processes of reality-making *perceptually*, where we perceive 'realism' in moving image material that has gone through transformative processes of animation but nevertheless stays 'true' to a real-world source. And here we encounter the qualitative nature of how animated imagery depicts

photographic source material in unique ways. In this manner, to think about the documentary nature of abstracted animation is to read what we sensually perceive as a dual medium or practice, grounded in its dynamics of material-subjective visuality. Whoever experiences *Drift* will process their own explicit and subjective 'realism' conditioned by their embodied vision. It is the abstracted corporeal quality of *Drift* through which traces of meaning of the original real-world source are carried, and an embodied receiver emerges.

All Rot's Epistemic Aestheticism

To further invest abstracted animation as a document conditioned by its particular materiality and the real, let us take a look at *All Rot* (2015, fig. 7), a split-screen animation devised during an artist residency at ArToll Kunstlabor in Bedburg-Hau, Germany. While also rooted in photographic realism, *All Rot* more strongly eschews clear representation in favor of an abstract expression. During the residency I experimented with engaging the immediate surroundings of the ArToll building, which is set within parkland inhabited by mental health institutions, most of them high security prisons. Using photography as the basis, the aim was to reintroduce tactile qualities of grit, organic textures and physical marks into my work, in opposition to the completely virtual, digitally originated works I had been making at the time,[5] but without resorting to object animation. The abandoned crazy golf course outside the residency building became the film's source material, as it seemed strangely appropriate to the location (fig. 8). The state of decay of the minigolf course not only mirrored my impression of its surroundings, but also offered rich textures, marks and colors of peeling and scratched paints, which were photographed and digitally animated by creating movement through the sequencing of visual similarities within or between photographs.

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4   For a discussion of documentary film and its relation to factuality and reality see Ian Aitken (Ed.) (2012) and Siegfried Kracauer (1960, pp. 193–214).

5   For examples of some of my computer-originated abstract works, see Heaven and Hell (2010), Sync (2010), RE:AX (2011) or A Very Large Increase in the Size, Amount, or Importance of Something Over a Very Short Period of Time (2013)

At times, the surrounding background would become visible, breaking the abstract universe of the film, and reintroducing a sense of place. But as the work developed, all direct references to the place were eradicated in favor of a completely abstract approach, led by the compositional and aesthetic qualities of Harry Smith's early abstractions and the paintings of abstract expressionist Barnett Newman. I felt that this focus on the uninterrupted abstraction of physical marks and textures would create a more visceral experience for the viewer, while giving *All Rot* both filmic and painterly qualities, bringing it closer to Smith and Newman's work.

In this egalitarian approach to photography, painting and film, apparent in the photographs experientially becoming a moving painting, what first appears as flickering painted marks and moving color fields is always also a photographic document. And with this understanding around the realisms in a moving painting, a kind of 'temporal painting' comes forth. Stimulating in this respect is a link to Japanese film theorist Taihei Imamura and his characterization of (cartoon) animation as 'temporal painting' (*jikan teki na kaiga*), which led Thomas Lamarre (2014. pp. 230–231) to propose photography as "another kind of drawing or painting."[6] (2014, p. 231) Lamarre points to the relationship between photography and painting encapsulated in Imamura's use of the Japanese word *shashin*[7], which means photography but connects to an older pre-photographic "lineage of materialist depiction that he associates with oil painting." (2014, p. 231). Lamarre quotes Maki Fukuoka on Imamura translator Yanagawa Shunsan's characterization of photography as shashin: "Yanagawa's characterization stemmed from his concern for the *process* and his attention to the space between image and object, the level of fidelity maintained within this space, rather than the impression gathered from the photographs in and of themselves." (Maki Fukuoka, quoted in Lamarre, ibid, p. 230, emphasis added) This fidelity has to do with indexicality. However, rather than denoting a punctual or momentary contact with the object, in Imamura's discussion indexicality instead suggests a "multipoint durational capture that is supposed to capture the temporal depth of movement rather than merely combining discrete instants." (Lamarre, ibid, p. 231) In *All Rot*, a preference for matters of indexicality focusing on such temporal depth of movement underlines the strangeness or discomfort a viewer may encounter with the 'objecthood' of what appears on screen in a single 'shot.' There is no straightforward photographic object from the real world in *All Rot.* Instead, there are shapes and forms in a fluid, perpetual state of becoming. This kind of indexicality highlights the film's aesthetic and conceptual coherence based on the processual, and a structural comprehension between the ordinary environment of a decaying crazy golf course and its sublimation into an *extra*-ordinary experience of synesthetic cinema. Is such animation based on real-world sources then a particular form that is comparable to or inherently different from documentary forms? Lamarre's reading of Imamura gives a partial answer: Both are 'forms of realism.' For Imamura, animation and documentary were

> two faces of cinema, interrelated and inseparable. Moreover, he did not relegate animation in advance to the realm of fantasy in contrast to the reality of live-action cinema, nor conversely did he see documentary in terms of objectivity in contrast to the subjectivity

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6   "Photography might even be characterized as another kind of drawing or painting, as indicated in Imamura's characterization of cartoons as "temporal painting" (jikan teki na kaiga). Moreover, Imamura subsequently situates photography in a lineage of materialist depiction that he associates with oil painting. In sum, there are two orientations implicit in Imamura's use of shashin. Shashin feels closer to filming or cinematography than to photography insofar as it implies a cinematic decomposition and recomposition of movement or action. But shashin implies a practical sense of photography as a process of sustaining and guaranteeing fidelity between image and object." (Lamarre, 2014, p. 231)

7   "The Japanese word shashin conveys different meanings than the English word photography. While the term shashin existed prior to the introduction of photography in Japan, only in the 1870s did it become a stable reference to the technology. Indeed, in the discourse on Japan's photographic history, shashin is a cumbersome term that does not yield valuable discussion. And yet shashin casts an unmistakable and enduring symbolic shadow on the field and is a distinct part of its history." (Fukuoka, quoted by Lamarre, 2014, p. 230)
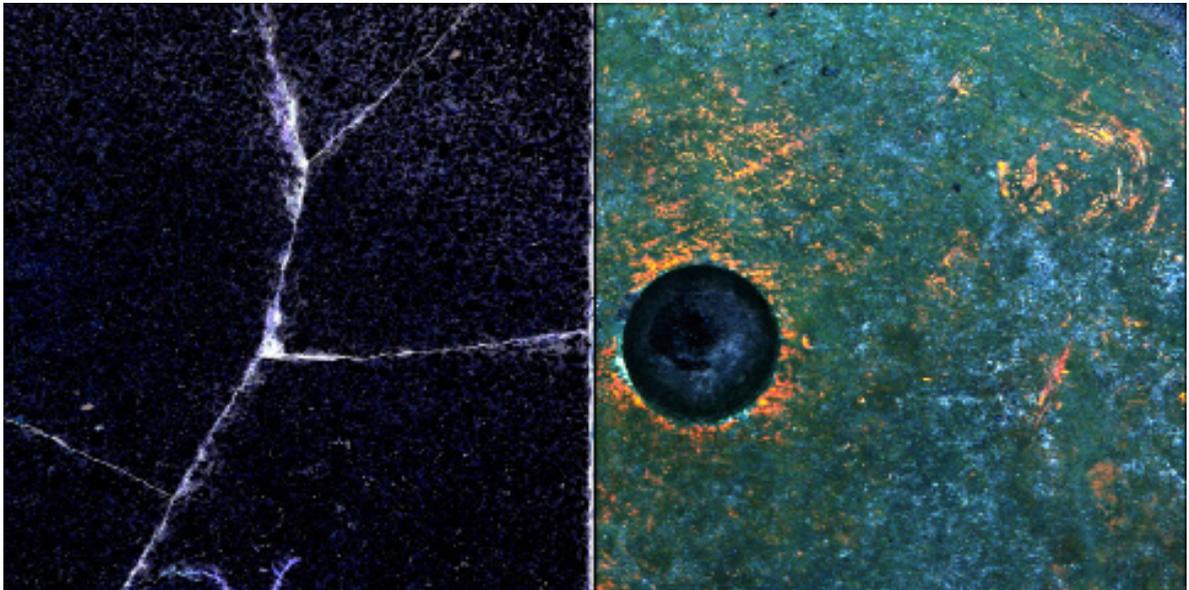
Fig. 7 *All Rot*, Max Hattler, 2015.

of fiction. His film theory was ultimately able to work across animation and documentary because it centered on an unusual conceptualization of photography, which led to his distinctive approach to cartoons as a form of realism. (Lamarre, 2014, p. 221)

Read in this way, abstracted animation can also be considered a form of realism, that of an open-ended thinking space which prompts the audience's readings of its 'abstract' imagery in motion. As mentioned, during the production process of *All Rot*, this imagery went through a progression from partly representational to increasingly abstract, foregrounding formal qualities of shape, color, and movement. Having tried revealing some of the surrounding site in experiments, I found that this lessens the effect of the abstraction and makes the work *about* a juxtaposition with the real. My interest in this case, however, was in the transcendence of the

site, through non-objectivism. While the work remains 'physical' through the marks and textures it also becomes 'metaphysical' through unbroken abstraction. Barnett Newman (in Gershman, 2014) famously remarked that "(t)he problem of a painting is physical and metaphysical, the same as I think life is physical and metaphysical," and that "(i)t is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way not his way." Yet, while visual references to the surrounding site were removed, a reference to the place remains in the title: *All Rot* is an anagram of ArToll, the locus of the residency. It is also an allusion to decay: to the decaying abandoned minigolf course, and to mental decay and the inevitability of death one is confronted with at ArToll on a daily basis: *we all rot*, eventually. On another level though, when understood in German, *All Rot* connects to the film's non-objective qualities of abstract shape and color, as the German words conjure up associations of planetary movements, hinting at a transcendence of

Fig. 8 minigolf course outside ArToll Kunstlabor,
Bedburg-Hau, Germany.

the earthly plane: the direct translation of the German *All Rot* into English is *Outer Space Red*.[8]

Lilly Husbands' (2014, p. 122) argues that certain forms of experimental animation which focus on actuality can be understood as animated documentary, when read through the lens of 'epistemic aestheticism.' According to Husbands, such experimental animations can be seen as nonfiction moving image works of sorts when "part of what distinguishes them from other animated documentaries is that formal experimentation is a primary factor in both their epistemic and aesthetic projects." (Husbands, 2014, p. 122) Like forms of fact-based poetry – poetry conditioned by facts rather than fiction – such experimental animated documentaries interrogate

their real-world sources through formal experimentation and material transformation. Significant is the way in which there are fundamental materially transformative processes immanent in those works, from the transformation of raw real-world matter to the creation of new realisms, grounded in the particular source material of the animation. Husbands (2014, pp. 122-123) notes that:

(t)hese experimental animations are perceptually and conceptually challenging, and they exhibit little of the straightforwardly educational or informative tendencies spectators usually expect from documentaries. (…) This is not to suggest that they are not invested in conveying knowledge about their subjects, only that

8   In a strangely coincidental way the title All Rot, when understood as All Rotate, also links to my Royal College of Art student film Everything Turns from 2004 – a semi-figurative drawn animation inspired by Durs Grünbein's poem Vertigo – which emblematizes the futility and brevity of human life, while hinting, when presented as a loop, at the possibility of rebirth.

this knowledge is presented in such a way that spectators are required to actively participate in the extrication and interpretation of meaning.

All Rot may fulfill the criteria of an experimental animated documentary in the way Husbands suggests. The film presents the viewer with a poetic rendition of its source materials, which have gone through several dedicated materially transformative processes. In transcending the decaying golf course and environment of mental hospitals through abstraction, viewers may experience that site – and by extension the world – from an angle they have not yet encountered before, prompting their active engagement in processing and making meaning. *All Rot* claims the viewer's extended experiential and sensual investment, in the sense that what one sees on screen needs mediation to become legible. To think of this form as epistemic aestheticism is to affirm the agency of *All Rot* as a thinking space, when it operates as a visual tool for knowledge production and its underlying processes of valuation. On the other hand, of course, the film can equally be enjoyed as an entirely 'abstract' experience, as a self-referential piece of visual music.

Forensics and Actuality in Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych

To further elaborate on animation's potential to interrogate actuality, Dan Torre's (2017, p. 14) discussion of 'investigative animation' is insightful, as he looks at "the representation of actuality from a perspective of process" in animated documentary:

> An essential consideration of the animated documentary lies within the process of the real world *becoming* animation – and not just standard matters of representation. This is an important distinction because the 'animated object' of most fictional animations

does not derive from any prior existence, whereas animated representation of actuality must personify a prior condition: they begin as actuality, and through a transformative process *become* animation. Ultimately, it is through this process of 'becoming animation' that one can utilize it to gain a better understanding of the actual world.

My recent work, *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych* (2019/2021, fig. 9), can be understood in this way. Here, the technique of photographic re-animation, and methodology of re-contextualizing the locus of its inquiry borrow from *All Rot*, but the specific photographic source material of street surfaces and road markings open up somewhat different readings. *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych* shows the street as a moving canvas with its jittering, boiling animated road and paint mark textures synchronized across three large monitors. The work takes inspiration from my 30-second film *Striper v0.1* (2006), where photographs of London's road markings are sequenced into an abstract moving canvas, but extends the engagement both temporally into a 4-minute loop and spatially across three synchronized screens. Technically, *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych* is a digital re-animation of photographs of Hong Kong's street surfaces,[9] with the camera pointing down directly at the street to achieve a flat, canvas-like perspective, and with movement created by sequencing similarities within or between photographs. As opposed to *All Rot*, where the golf course source material is not directly discernible, *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych* is immediately recognizable with its 'street realism.' However, through its focus on the stringent compositional exploration of textures, colors, and movement, especially across the three screens, formal qualities are highlighted, which allow for an *abstracted* engagement, despite of, or precisely because of its 'realism.' In that sense, *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych* is as concrete as it is abstract and invites viewers to bring their own readings to the work. Any reading, however, is by necessity a reading of

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9   Some street surfaces from other cities were included to expand the scope of available colors and shapes.

Fig. 9 *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych*, Max Hattler, 2019/2021.

a more actualized reality, based on the work's boiling street surfaces, where its documentary quality of abstracted animation can be found. Hereby the question of indexicality which lies at the heart of representation in abstracted animation plays a crucial role, yet again. Torre points to a forensics of animation, where "rather than merely representing actuality, animation can be thought of as a tool to effectively interrogate actuality." (2017, p. 15) He highlights that animation can for example be adapted methodically, for revealing a motionless thing's potential energy of motion within it, thus emphasizing the processual nature of animation when it articulates those sequential states of difference into animated movement.[10] Understood in this way, there is the previously static street in *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych*, which expresses its potential internal energetic motion as the film unfolds over time, which can be read as a purely formal exploration of movement, or as an abstract re-creation of the very flow of the city itself, its people and movements, or as a representation of the perpetual shifts and reconfigurations in how a city is organized with ongoing roadworks and re-mappings of the city's network of streets. In this sense, there is a comprehension of 'real-world source' not through a material lens, but rather through giving the *becoming present* – the passing of time culminating in the very moment – a distinctive sensory-perceptual and conceptual significance. And as a specific model of abstracted animation, one can suggest that what is actual or actualized through animated abstraction exceeds the differentiation between the indexicality of its real-world sources and what is possibly other than real-world source material, when read through the lens of perception and affect. It is precisely the representation of actuality in animated documentary which suggests that one must consider the form as a matter of *processuality* rather than, or as well as, indexicality at large. And the 'world' thereby indeed becomes animation.

Interesting is the forensics dimension, because then we have abstracted animation as a truly knowledge-forming entity[11] by way of interrogating actuality. Seen in this way, can abstracted animation be considered and function as a historical document, as a means of documenting history? Noteworthy in this regard is also the genealogy of the term forensics, which in its current usage primarily as a science in the service of the law

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10   And on a practical level, which sounds very familiar to me from an animation practitioner's point of view, "it is also, more broadly, an effective reading of how we sometimes go about animating – carefully deducing how a form should move and how it might have previously moved." (Torre, 2017, p. 15)

11   In considering the mechanics of animation as a knowledge-forming tool, Torre (2017, p. 183) further points to animation's potential for visualizing "abstract or theoretical ideas or those generally discussed occurrences that cannot be specifically filmed," and here he specifies that "the animated documentary is [. . .] able to reify the abstract, making it more concrete, but at the same time remaining non-specific." Drawing attention to matters of actuality, representation, photography, and indexicality, he asserts that "the documentary film may feature generalized ideas, but it is best serviced by the generalized image of animation to directly reference these concepts. Thus, in a reversal of the photograph's sole claim to represent the visual index of specific actualities, it might be appropriate to consider the visual indexical referent of generalities as existing only within the animated form." (ibid, 183). This just to bear in mind when critically embracing documentary animation and its complex visual apparatus featuring both abstract and concrete image materials.

has "become increasingly central to the modes by which states police and govern their subjects." (Forensic Architecture, 2014) This stands in contrast to the original meaning of the Latin word 'forensis,' which means 'pertaining to the forum,' and points to the potential of forensics as a political practice.[12] This tension implicit in the term forensics is mirrored in *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych*: While the first version of the work, completed in a rush during the 2019 summer of anti-government protests to meet the deadline of my September 2019 solo exhibition at Goethe-Institut Hong Kong, showed a purely formal engagement with the painted signage and textures of Hong Kong's street surfaces, the revised 2021 version pays homage to the actuality of Hong Kong's socio-political situation of 2019. During the height of the protests, which lasted from June 2019 until the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in January 2020, the city was plastered with protest-related graffiti, not just on walls but also directly on the streets. Glimpses of these street-based graffiti now appear intermittently in *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych*, not as the film's primary focus, but as an anchor and gentle reminder which clearly locates the work within a specific place and moment in time. As such, *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych* does become a historical document, and an animated documentary which actualizes as it abstracts, not just urban, but also socio-cultural and political space. Revisited this way, *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych* can be read as a meditation on urbanity, a celebration of color, texture, shape, and movement, or as the marking of a significant historical and political moment and the people's conflicting engagement with it. The final reading, as always, eventually remains with the viewer.

Conclusion

As we have seen, abstracted animation constitutes a complex re-producing, transforming and transmitting medium which can carry the materiality and meanings of its sources to its viewer. Using my animation works as examples, we have discussed a range of perspectives around the 'abstracted real.'

The four stop-motion works we examined have taken us into abstracted worlds comprised of everyday objects and products. Through *Model Starship* and *Unclear Proof* we discussed the aesthetic-conceptual appropriation of found objects in the spirit of Duchamp's readymades, where viewers are invited to reflect on the function of objects through their recontextualization via spatio-temporal sequencing, juxtaposition and textual 'inscription' into new roles. *AANAATT* presented us with an environment of geometric shapes and forms configured and re-configured in actual, physical space. While the film engages visual abstraction in what it depicts, an essential quality of reality, namely its continuity, is maintained through the cohesion of a fixed viewpoint and a seemingly uninterrupted shot without discernible cuts. This 'less abstract' mode of editing anchors the work in the 'real' and supports the film's illusory quality of an abstract moving sculpture. The aim with *Shift* was to take the viewer further from 'realism,' while conversely still preserving a link to the everyday by animating real objects. With *Drift*, we have explored the material connections at work, towards a claim for subjective, embodied reception through haptic visuality in animation where a work's abstracted corporeal quality links to the original meaning of its real-world sources. The photography-based *All Rot* and *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych* lead to questions of actuality and animated documentary, as they engage with specific real-world sites and historical situations. Of pivotal importance here are transformative processes through which actuality *becomes* animation, and through which animation can effectively interrogate actuality. Formal epistemic and aesthetic experimentation are key distinguishing features of such experimental animated documentaries, which require subsequent active interpretation on the part of the viewer. While *All Rot* presents the audience with an abstract synesthetic experience which carries oblique traces of its site-specific investigation, ready to be interpreted, *Concrete Abstraction: Road Triptych* engages more directly and 'forensically' with its materials rooted in actuality: The work is both a formal investigation of abstract properties of street

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12   For a discussion of forensics as praxis, see Forensic Architecture (Ed.) (2014).

surfaces, and a document of, or documentary about, a specific place and moment in time. Abstraction, through its relative removal from the everyday, can open up alternative spaces in which shapes, textures and movements suggest meanings that activate viewers to bring their own interpretations to the work. Abstracted animation, work that is nonetheless based in photographic realism, has the ability to draw on, and to comment back on its sources. Animation, employing the aesthetics of abstraction in this sense, exploits ambivalence and ambiguity in the construction of more open-ended narratives that engage the viewer in a different way. Not non-objectivism as a complete negation, but abstraction of real-world materials as a way of undermining, injecting irony, questioning, or transcending the perceived realities of human existence. In an environment oversaturated with the same media images, representing things in a more abstract sense, while giving hints of meaning that is rooted in the real, which feed the viewer's imagination, may be more engaging, at least for some people, by offering up alternative views. A reframing of such work as experimental animated documentary provides us with new tools to conceptualize it, and places renewed and necessary importance on its core constituent materials, the real-world origins from which it emerged.

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