

SOMEBODY,  
NOBODY, ANYONE

Christoph Girardet  
& Matthias Müller



Hey little boy with the bike on the vase in  
bloom ploom ploom

hi chair by the table

hi bread on the table

FROM MARC GREET'S THE THINGS IN THE MORNING, 1925, PAUL VAN OSTAIJEN)



## BETWEEN

The French word 'personne' means both somebody and nobody.

I love words that state their opposite. They give away their meaning due to their context. They exist between other words. They are something and nothing and everything at the same time.

This also holds true for most film images. They can be found between other images and sometimes they are something and sometimes they are something else.

It is not about the question how somebody can be nobody and the other way round. Or how somebody and nobody can be the same person at the same time. It's about the words between which somebody can disappear into nobody. And the other way round. As if there are fracture lines between the words.

But also as if language is a sea, and the words are also a sea, although we sometimes call them a stream and now and then a wave, and also although they sometimes collide with the land in what we call a breaking.

The same goes for film. The first films consisted of one shot. A stream of images. Like for instance that train that entered the station of La Ciotat in 1895, in that famous little film made by the Lumière brothers with which we like to start film history. More will follow about that little film and that train. The key issue now is that the camera, that first cinematograph, was placed somewhere, turned on, and then focused its eye on the world. Come to me, it seemed to say. And the train moved in the direction of the camera, and the people from the train walked to the camera, and the camera absorbed our look. Some of the people could not resist looking secretly into the lens, with the result that they are looking at us now, more than 110 years later. Straight through time and space.

All this changed at the moment when montage was invented. First by switching off the camera, and by quickly adjusting the setting or moving the camera. Later by sticking various pieces of film together. At that moment, it became obvious that the film history is not only a history of what was told, but also of what was not told, not only of what was visible, but also of what was not visible. Maybe even more of what was not visible. Of the images that disappeared in the ravines between those fracture lines. At that moment, film history became a history of something that was also nothing, at the same time. Of somebody and nobody.

From that moment, film began to fall apart.

Personne is also the title of one of the works of the German film artists Christoph Girardet (1966) and Matthias Müller (1961) from 2016. We often call them filmmakers, but actually they are film un-makers. This has more to do with what film actually is, than with their way of working. The major part of their works is classified as so-called found footage-films; films that consist of shots and scenes from other films. Images that are shown out of their original context – new arrangements, new classifications, topological explorations, an inventory of mixed-up index cards of an ancient archive – and thus obtain new meanings, and enter into discussion with film history. And in dialogue with each other. Mirror each other, sometimes literally such as in *Mirror* (2003) and *Kristall* (2006) or more conceptually such as in the exploration of sight and blindness in *Contre-jour* (2009) and *Maybe Siam* (2010), where the first film is built up from self-shot images and the second of appropriated material. Films that turn from nobody into somebody and then maybe into everybody.

Maybe we could call found footage the art of un-making. As you need to have the shreds before you can make a collage. However, most found footage artists make work that deals with the moment of re-creation: the new work of art that comes into being. In the case of Girardet and Müller, of course, something new comes into being from this assembling, and often also something that is delightfully beautiful, mysterious, intangibly poetic, and uncannily terrifying. But what they also show in their works of art, time and again, is how wide and wild this area between the images actually is. They put a crowbar between the shots by stripping them of logic and narrative conventions, and keep on levering until all things are on edge. For them, cooperating is also exploring, a way of finding this 'between': between two people, two artists, two art practices (Müller from the experimental film, Girardet from the video art), two pairs of eyes.

We call film the art of moving images. But actually, film is the art of the un-moving of movement in unmoving images.

Let me explain that. Let me tell this as a story. It sounds much better as a story.

One of the reasons why film came into being, is because in the second half of the nineteenth century, people like Étienne-Jules Marey and Eadweard Muybridge were experimenting with the new medium of photography, to see if they would be able to figure out what movement exactly was, and

whether it would be possible to make 'moving images' and thus create an even more realistic reproduction of the world than that the arts had been trying to do until that moment. Of course, the ideas behind that are as old as the shadows in Plato's cave. And as the first known 'animations', which were created in China in the second century of our era: a cylinder of coloured drawings, which was placed above a lamp and put into motion due to the warmth of the rising air.

Inventions such as these made it clear, already at a very early stage, that movement is above all the illusion of movement. Of that something and nothing that's between the two images. Of which we know that it's there, but which we cannot see. Because our eye cheats us. Or because our eyes help our brain to see something. The pictures are the context. The before and after. We should actually invent a new word for that something and that nothing, a word that would mean present and absent at the same time, just like this 'personne'. Who is present and absent at the same time. Because this something-nothing is also the essence – 'at the still point of the turning world' as T.S. Elliot wrote – of the work of Girardet and Müller. I realized that out when I was watching at *Personne*. Girardet and Müller invite us, challenge us to find that word. And, for as long as we have not been able to find it, to disappear between those fractures and rise from them at the same time.

Girardet and Müller go beyond the observation that somebody and nobody derive meaning from their context. They observe what happens when you take away that context. That is a strategy that known from most found footage or collage films. When you unlink a shot or a scene from its narrative, and thus from its cultural and ideological structures and references, alternative (hi)stories arise. But in their films the montage is not dialectical, as described in the theories of the Russian filmmakers Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein at the beginning of the twentieth century, who stated that film images can only become meaningful due to their context. Kuleshov exemplified this in a famous experiment by editing the 'neutral' face of an actor between images of a plate of soup, a child in a coffin, a diva on a divan, and thus generating meaning. Hunger. Grief. Lust.

For Girardet and Müller it is not only about the interaction between images, but also about the interaction between the image and the observer. Thus it can be said that their montage strategies are both dialectal and interactive. No matter how analytical and precise their work may be, you also





have to acknowledge that it has an intuitive layer. Another form of intelligence, a more direct form of observation than by using the roundabout of (visual) language and style.

That is why another poem came to mind when watching *Personne*: 'Marc greets the things in the morning' (1925) of the Dadaist Flemish poet Paul van Ostaïen, apparently an enumeration of the things that the little boy Marc observes each morning. Every day, the same things again. A chair and a table, a loaf and a bicycle, a fisherman with a cap, and a fish. Because of the way in which Van Ostaïen describes them, because of his use of language in which he invents words that burst their banks, he creates a liquid form of continuity montage in which all these loose images become part of the same viewing movement: *hi fisher-of-fish with the pipe / and / hi fisher-of-fish with the cap / cap and pipe / of the fisher-of-fish / good day*. An affirmative text about how things come into being by naming them. How things become meaningful by giving them words. But also things that are threaded together, words that become osmotic, only through and by the eye of the poet.

*Personne* could be described like this: *hi broken bottle, typewriter without a ribbon, Telephone without a dial. Hi Jean-Louis Trintignant. Face of Jean-Louis Trintignant, back of the head of the French film hero, face without a face. Star without aura. Expressionless. When observing, you tend to enumerate all the images, to make a new inventory. This is a film about action and reaction from which cause and effect have been removed There is no face. And no plate of soup. There are things that are acting up, standing still, that are idle, impotent. Film images like butterflies, pinned down on a plate, that die with trembling wings. Movement as a reflex. Is film a reflex?*

*Personne* is a detective story without a plot. Not a whodunit, but a whodid-whattobeginwith. The works of Girardet and Müller always have that philosophical, that reflexive layer – and because of that a self-reflexive layer for both creator and observer. It's always about the question what film actually is, with its montage, its light and darkness, its juxtapositions and its movement. The way in which film transfers image and sound, and meaning, from one image to the other. And then, to come to the conclusion that the secret of film is to be found in the images.

In 1999, Christoph Girardet and Matthias Müller made *Phoenix Tapes*, their first joint film, for the Alfred Hitchcock exhibition *Notorious: Alfred Hitchcock and Contemporary Art* in the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. After that, they kept on creating works, both together and individually. *Phoenix*

*Tapes* consists of a de/reconstruction of fragments from 40 Hitchcock films, which are arranged in six parts. It is a homage, as well as a forensic and psychoanalytic investigation into the optical unconscious of Hitchcock's work; a work that shows how necrophiliac film-loving can be, but also that there is a desperate Dr. Frankenstein hiding in each cinephile, who keeps on trying to breathe new life into the cinema. What do these films tell us – about film, about Hitchcock, about their own stories, about the time in which they are made – about what they don't know themselves? Hence they expose the underlying structures and patterns – vulnerable in all their nakedness. But also frightening because of the way in which this dominant Hollywood narrative makes us fall in love with dead stars, and conditions us in our thinking about family relations, role patterns for men and women, gender and genre, the family as a mini society, power and manipulation, the exclusion of the other.

By isolating the images, they become new, miraculous and 'strange' again, and we are able, as it were, to really see the unknown again. Something that also happened in Müller's *Home Stories* (1990), in which he unravelled the role of women in classical Hollywood melodramas: until there was nothing left but neurotic repetitions of household routines. This also occurred in the video installation *Locomotive* (2008) – inspired by that first film of the Lumières: *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* – a compilation, projected on three screens, of all trains that are moving through the history of films, an endless repetition of departure and arrival and being in transit, to find that one first moment again. In this mission, we can of course hear the echo of the German cultural and film critic Siegfried Kracauer, who questioned the film and popular culture during the Weimar period in a comparable way, and in doing so analyzed the optical unconscious of the cinema.

In *Meteor* (2011), we hear the voice of the English filmmaker John Smith, who reads the fairy tales of Grimm and Andersen. Hypnotizing bedtime stories. While the film images from educational American films, Russian popular science documentaries, and science fiction films from the thirties until the sixties, appear from under the bed like shadows, we see boys who huddle under the blankets. Their faces are focused, full of awe, on the dreams about spaceships, star storms, showers of meteorites, red planets and the far, far away. It is a film that links fantasy and science, decodes our cinematic memories, and that wonders to what extent the cinematography has always been a boys' dream.

You could say that all their films, one by one, analyse both the process of film-making and the question what film actually is, from that fracture line of the non-image. *Cut* (2013), as the title already explains, is about montage. About the cut, the stab, the snip, the incision. The film shows how violent this way of film-making – by sticking images together – actually is, by presenting the assembly of brief moments from dozens of horror and medical films, that demonstrate the vulnerability of the human body.

Can a film also bleed? When does the light sensitive, chemical emulsion on the film image lose its elasticity, and does it flake off and fall apart like a dehydrated skin? When a film is like a skin, then what is its body? These are questions that obtain a new meaning due to the transition from analogue, material cinema to digital, virtual cinema. Once the 'cut' was a concrete, irreversible action in the physical world. What is the immaterial equivalent of that? The undo key? Copy/paste?

Found footage film-making is almost always a meta-cinematic praxis of grave robbers and wreckers, which makes comments on the formal aspects, the history, and the materiality of film-making itself. Sometimes it is a rescue operation for film images that are in danger of being forgotten. And sometimes it is a practice that is engaged with questions about memory and archive: where do these images come from, where did the found footage filmmakers find them, where did they steal them from, gather them; where did they comb the beach for images drifted ashore? Do questions such as copyright and intellectual property play a part in this? And how do archives and rightful claimants give access to this image reservoir of the past? These are extremely relevant and urgent questions in a time when, on the one hand, the whole film and media history seems to be accessible for everyone, and, on the other hand, that this flow of images for various reasons – profusion, archive matters, canon formation, financial interests – increasingly compellingly has to conform to a prescribed model.

Moreover, in this digital and internet era the practice of the found footage filmmaker has expanded with new terms and shapes: besides collage and compilation, the mash-up and super-cut have also been added now, which are obviously other forms of reuse and recycling. In these forms, the appropriation of images has less to do with creation or intervention, and more to do with an almost economically efficient recirculation of existing material. The tension between the idea that film is eternal and inviolable, and the fact that even celluloid, which was deemed to be immortal, proves to be subject to decline. And the question about how this is changing in

the digital era. Are the zeros and ones of the bits and bytes any different to endless decay chains?

In 2013, for the Found Footage exhibition in the Amsterdam EYE Film Museum, Girardet created a solo work with snippets and fragments of the outtakes of an industrial film about the use of viscose in clothing, made by the Algemene Kunstzijde Unie (General Union for Artificial Silk), which was produced by Paul Schuitema in 1949. *Fabric* consists of loose takes of poses, both of the model and the cutter, who, obviously staged, observes his model. Shots of classical statues and busts create a mirror in which the model can recognize herself (the classical pose), but also the cutter, the sculptor working with artificial silk, the thinker. The folds in the marble and the folds in the fabric flow over in the wrinkles on the forehead of the cutter, deep in thought, and on the wrinkles on the head of the observer, deep in concentration. Often, there are repetitions, minimalistic variations on a theme, as specified by the clapperboard that is visible on the screen. The compositional character of the work is roughly interrupted by a bleep that indicates where the missing image should have been positioned.

Absence and disappearing also play a principal part in Müller's solo work *Air* (2016). We peek into empty rooms. These are lo-res webcam images from kitchens, bedrooms, studies, from which the 'maker' has disappeared for a moment. It's not only a study on emptiness, but again a study on the emptiness between the images, now extremely tangible, as saturated air. Because, who has switched on the camera, left it on, where is he, why has he gone – he is 'on air', and at the same time he is not. The time-honoured tension between presence and absence forces itself between the images. These amateur web images are a new form of film material, to which the found footage filmmaker has to relate. They unfold in real time on the internet. They are like the camera of the Lumières, waiting for the passengers to come walking towards it and share their secrets with the lens. But due to the ease with which the digital image absorbs everything, they are also indifferent. The camera can be left on endlessly. Even when nothing is happening. When nothing is ever happening. The final image of the expired world will be the red light on the camera. We are on air. Until the battery slowly extinguishes. The image falls asleep. Whether it passes away we will never know for sure, as we will no longer be there to observe that.

This publication appears on the occasion of the exhibitions:

SOMEBODY, NOBODY, ANYONE

Christoph Girardet & Matthias Müller

11.03.2017 – 14.05.2017

Location: Huis Huguëtan, Lange Voorhout 34, Den Haag

YOU ARE HERE

Manuel Boden, Bruce Conner, FORT, Douglas Gordon, Graham Gussin, Peter Piller,  
Susan Philipsz, Volker Schreiner, John Smith, Christoph Girardet, Matthias Müller

11.03.2017 – 14.05.2017

Location: West, Groenewegje 136, Den Haag

Text: Dana Linssen

Dana Linssen is a poet, philosopher and film critic. Since the late nineties, her reviews have been published weekly in *NRC Handelsblad* (Dutch newspaper), in addition she is editor in chief of the independent film magazine *the Filmkrant* (film newspaper) and teacher of film history at the School of Acting Arnhem. Since 2015, she has been taking care, as a freelance curator, of the film programmes for the International Film Festival Rotterdam (*The Return of the Critics' Choice* and *Whose Cinema*, where video essays are presented on the big screen) and the Netherlands Film Festival (*Forum of the Directors*). In 2007, she took the initiative to set up the *Slow Criticism Project*, a casual collection of publications, debates and interventions as a compensation for the commodification and liberalizing of the film critics. In 2015, she wrote the libretto for *Creator/Destroyer – 17 Ways to Spell Boson*, a cantata about the discovery of the Higgs particle by composer Maarten OrNSTEIN. Her work has been awarded with the Festival trophy of the International Film Festival Assen – Women & Film and the Louis Hartlooper Prize for film critics.

Printer: Oranje van Loon, Den Haag

Thanks: Ministry of Education, Culture and Science and Gemeente Den Haag

Publication: West

Edition: 1000

ISBN: 978-90-79917-68-6

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