Inland Archiv
FOOTNOTES to everyday pageantry
by Donald Mak

1

This is the anonymous eye of the video camera. Eliminating traditional filters of director, actor, writer, this is the curious eye, the successor to Muybridge in its steady dissection of the quotidian. There is no protagonist, neither hero nor victim, and hence none of the cheap spectacle of reality television, or banality of commercial video. It is not journalism or documentary; there is no lesson to be learned, thoughts to think. The tone is not pedantic, "follow me, watch this". Nor is it innocent. This is a provocation to connect, an instigation to look beyond what you see. The Archive does not succumb to romantic postcard stereotypes of Switzerland. Presented instead are prototypes of human behaviour. Through a direct approach, the camera captures and reveals the abstract and universal. Stereotypes reinforce surface superficial readings. Prototypes can reveal the essential nature of something.

2

These are moments in time that seem to be stretched out, slowed down (but in real time) focused on an event. This is an eye caught between photography and cinema. The stillness of the photographic moment, extended into four dimensions, showing us the before and after of the moment. The voyeuristic distance of the camera disengages the viewer's participation. Sometimes this gives comical drollness to certain scenes, but is also perfect at casting a neutral gaze on the situation. All we can do is watch. Rarely is the viewer so conscious of the camera's anonymous presence. Perhaps not unconsciously, the camera is often low, at child height, like William Eggleston's disproportionate view on the world. A hint of Ozu films, in its still interrogation of the moving scene. And of course, the strong tinge of National Geographic, exploring the human species with an anthropological eye.

3

The rituals of public life show that the individual has an influence on matters of public concern. They represent the power of the collective over a centralized authority. The roots of the country are medieval, the language is still rooted in that time. And the social structures still exist, most apparent in the pageantry of events that has extended beyond the traditional carnival times. If carnival allowed people to break out of their everyday selves to play other roles, that same type of thinking has extended to many activities and its associated rituals and costumes.. In a federation, power is marked by presenting yourself as an individual in the public realm.

4

The slow even pace of each scene is contrasted with the staccato jump cut. No transition, no threshold, replaced with the tension of 'what next?'. The hyperlink quality of this structure forces us to make connections where sometimes they don't necessarily exist. The brain always insists on making relationships, on thinking laterally, and creating a whole out of disparate parts. This is also an apt metaphor for the particular swiss social structure of individual consensus, the union of independents. The same tense paradox that exists in the contrast of recorded scenes exists in the social life of Switzerland where the strive to maintain independence results in a society burdened with maintaining social norms, standards of behaviour, careful conduct. Is the latter a prerequisite for the former?

5

I am Chinese where location, not age, determines historical significance. Places have memory, historical associations, a genius loci. In Switzerland, rituals seem to take on the role of memory carrier. Ceremonial behaviour continues the spirit of the people. In ways, this reminds me of the main tenet of Chinese calligraphic painting: do not try to draw a tree, but the idea of a tree. Do these everyday scenes serve as icons, symbols of a life rather than an illustration? For me, unaware of the cultural significance or references in most of these clips, I can still engage with them as abstract, universal allegories.

6

For the outsider, the strive for a high level of technical perfection in Switzerland is attractive but a little disturbing, like visiting a theme park, or the recreated wilderness depicted in the Archive. The illusion of perfection that permeates the country can become a mental prison, where risk is minimized and expectations remain low. Hardwork and preparation is a defense mechanism, and insurance, against failure. Perhaps it is paranoid, or puritanical, but persistence protects against the unknown.

7

Authorship comes not from the originator of a story, but someone who has set up the rules of the game, the formal process for the work. The structural framework for the work is based on pacing, duration, camera position, location, and documentation. It strives for randomness, fully aware that this is impossible. It strives to be unbiased, open and curious.

8

Coming from design, esp. in typography, Switzerland has always been associated with abstract reduction, pushing the limits of the most elementary forms. To enormous effect, swiss graphic design has pushed the limits of the grid, line, and text. Inland archive seems

to push in the same direction of reductionism. The still camera that frees up space for thinking to happen. A slow speed, that seems to work at breath's pace.

Swiss typography, with its economy of means, developed the pictorial qualities of text. There is no narration or soundtrack. Calling the sounds in the Archive background noise is not appropriate. Noise is unwanted, the disagreeable, the sound without meaning. Instead sound here is the aural environment of the scene. Images push beyond the easy visual spectacle normally associated with the medium of video, making it a medium with the possibility for introspection and contemplation. If text can become pictorial, why can't video become literate.

9

Inland archive is the slow photographic striptease of awkward humanity in the monumental ritual of everyday life.

by Donald Mak, architect, Basel, 2004