

Max Wechsler

SPIEGELUNGEN

The image does not reflect reality, but, rather, shows the spectacular end of all reality.

Edmond Jabès

A salient feature of the works Nils Nova has made in recent years is their reliance on the space in which they are presented, where they hover between illusion and reality. Specifically, Nova relates his installations to the real rooms of the exhibition venue, transforming and re-articulating them on-site. He starts by analyzing and deconstructing the respective situation, going through it in his mind and trying out a series of spatial and visual variations. The spatial images or imagined spaces that he comes up with are then converted into constructive ideas that he projects back onto the original space. The medium he has chosen to give shape to his ideas is photography. Nova takes pictures of a room from thoughtfully chosen angles and prints them as wallpaper pictures that he mounts elsewhere in the same room or in a neighboring room. Views of the photographed room are displaced, twisted and multiplied through juxtaposition and mirroring so that perception of the original room is confounded to varying degrees. By using a contemporary medium to create a tromp-l'oeuil effect within a real space, the artist produces a real virtual space – space and the illusion of space are paradoxically interwoven.

REFLECTIONS In this connection I should like to bring into play Michel Foucault's early thoughts on "other spaces", namely those that "are in rapport in some way with all the others, and yet contradict them". Foucault distinguishes two types of spaces: utopias and heterotopias, both of which share the experience of the mirror, because "it is, after all, a utopia, in that it is a place without a place. In it, I see myself where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up potentially beyond its surface; there I am down there where I am not, a sort of shadow ... allowing me to look at myself where I do not exist: utopia of the mirror. At the same time, we are dealing with a heterotopia. The mirror really exists and has a kind of comeback effect on the place that I occupy. ... Hence the mirror functions as a heterotopia, since it makes the place that I occupy, whenever I look at myself in the glass, both absolutely real – it is in fact linked to all the surround-

ing space – and absolutely unreal, for in order to be perceived it has of necessity to pass that virtual point that is situated down there.”¹ Nova’s speculations on varieties of spatial projection are obviously not cited here as illustrations of the insights advanced by Foucault. Rather, I draw on the philosopher’s derivation of the two concepts as a wonderful analogy in characterizing the essence of Nova’s work – and this applies across the board.

In addition to the above-mentioned installations, the oeuvre of this artist has been driven, from the beginning, by an unflagging intensity in a wide variety of media, from painting, photography and video to installations and performance, frequently using several media in one work as well as one medium across several. Nova’s conceptual treatment of subject matter and motifs as well as the way in which he links a variety of media is not based on compositional calculation but rather on an instinctive and associative approach to the respective project. Moreover, regardless of medium, the bass line of this oeuvre takes its cue from a profound painterly mentality aimed at forms of visualization in which the perception of plane and spatial illusion fluctuate, and figuration and abstraction keep overlapping.

ILLUSIONS In an oeuvre of such formal diversity and disparate execution, one can hardly expect to be able to trace clear-cut lines of development – less today, in fact, than ever before. Nonetheless, interesting ties between motifs and forms of visualization can be observed. Space, specifically research into spatial concepts, has always been a key aspect of Nova’s work. In his first paintings, he surprised viewers with cognitive illusions in ambivalent compositions featuring a vigorously geometric, minimalist syntax. Then, in a body of work called *TV-Images* (1997–2000), he photographed the screens of old CRT TV’s, which function as mirrors when in standby. They show a series of interiors, rendered as inkjet prints on canvas. In concert, they become a gallery of spectral, unreal spaces that look as if they were reflecting views from the other side. Looking at the series today one realizes how much the work prefigures the even more explicit heterotopias to come – just as the subsequent series of stills from TV and film pre-figure the increasingly important inspirational field of trivial culture and its distinctive take on the relationship between seeming and being.²

To return to the large-scale installations, the inherent potential of Nova’s works to subtly bewilder and disconcert viewers is at times heightened by integrating paintings and photographed pictures into the photographic, illusionist wallpaper that covers the walls. They may be part of the photograph itself or the artist may hang real pictures and photographs on virtual murals.



In *Similar Encounter* (2008), an exhibition in the venue La Rada in Locarno, Nova had two large adjoining rooms at his disposal in a former schoolhouse, which he linked at intersecting angles. He put a few objects in both rooms to mark them as an

exhibition venue and then photographed each of the rooms from the shared “dividing wall”. He mounted the pictures on the respective wall of the other room so that the two views were placed back to back, as it were. Thus, Liz Taylor as Cleopatra gazes out of the photo wallpaper at an acrylic, enamel painting in fluid blue (*Door*, 2008), propped against the wall opposite, which is in turn pictured in the photo wallpaper in the other room where it is subjected to the scrutiny of another Liz Taylor, represented by Vera, in a framed photograph on the rear wall. At first glance, it looks as if the two rooms were connected or even overlapping, as if one could see and step through the mirror into the miraculous worlds beyond. But then we realize that what we see is the impenetrable and complex artifice of two rooms mirrored in each other. Ultimately, it is only in the imagination of each individual viewer that the installation can be perceived in its entirety.

In *Después y antes* (2009), Nova took reverse-angle pictures of the end walls of the immense exhibition space at the Venice Biennale’s Artiglierie dell’Arsenale when it was still empty. He then mounted the two almost full-scale, head-on photographs on either side of a corner. Not only are the imposing dimensions mind-boggling; the mere placement of the photographed “mirror images” in real space is enough to undermine any sense of its physical boundaries to a distorting and disorienting effect. Once again, viewers are compelled to reevaluate their relationship to space. This unsettling confrontation of seeming and being also prevails when we find a real painting hanging on the white wall of the photographed, actually virtual half of the room, which makes it look as if it were floating freely in space against the photographed background: an illusion compounded by the mirror effect of the highly polished steel ground in the middle of *Empty Center* (2009). The viewer sees herself and her surroundings projected into the picture and unwittingly becomes part of her own perception.

The level of abstraction is driven to even greater extremes when Nova extends the principle by moving rooms substantial distances to other, alien rooms. In 2010 for the exhibition *Zweierlei: Morrens & De Boe Productions present Voorkamer* in Kunstraum Klingental, a venue in Basel, he constructed a one-metre square cube, the *Voorkamer Cube*, with a flowing painting on the outside and compact photo wallpaper on the inside, a miniature, so to speak, of the exhibition space in Lier (Belgium), in which Rik De Boe and Peter Morrens initiated their artists’ project *Voorkamer*, where

VOR DER SUPREMATISTISCHEN AUSSTELLUNG 1999

Acrylic on canvas, 30 × 65 cm

Nova had presented his photographic installation *Valse Wand* the previous year. And for the exhibition at the PhotoforumPasquArt in Biel, he moved his own studio to the museum in the form of a room within a room (*Displacement*, 2011), by means of a complex exhibition choreography that transports the space of artistic production into the space of showing and viewing where it acquires a new quality as a place of contemplation and reflection.



EMPTY CENTER In the *Empty Centers*, the paintings revolve around the center, moving out of it or gravitating toward it from the margins. The motif makes an early appearance in Nova's development, though without being defined as such. In his performative photograph *Time* (2002), for instance, a painting with a similar motif is classically mounted on the wall above the sofa on which the artist is taking a nap. The motif may well have originated a year earlier in a video piece of 2001: *Over your Head*, which shows concentric patches of light rising up out of the darkness and gradually turning into searingly bright, almost blinding emptiness before disappearing into the darkness again – and so on. To the accompaniment of an ethereal humming, the camera films sources of light switching on and off overhead and the vibrating image as well as the fluctuating light are ultimately the consequence of the camera's crude mechanics. Nova later produced a similarly hallucinatory, meditative sequence, *Sunset Motors* (2004), in which edited footage of sunrises and sunsets is presented in an installation with a wooden beach chair. The same chair became part of the video *Dusk* (2004), in which it is set on fire and consumes itself as the only source of light in the gathering darkness. And in the end, in *Love Supreme* (2004), the charred beach chair is seen in front of a radiantly yellow *Empty Center*.

The wide range of associations and meanings encouraged by this motif offers near unlimited potential for interpretation. The *Empty Centers* evoke a space within the painting that is articulated as a kind of depth, as a pulsating movement coming out of the center, and yet it is also reflecting surface. But whatever the case, it is a space that is always empty and virtual space. The emptiness might be read as liberation from the weight of pictorial ballast or it might be read as the idea of distance, much like what painting stands for in Peter Handke's *Niemandsbucht*. His painter/cineaste describes it as immersion in a distance that proves to be the very same blackness he experienced as a child when he closed his eyes, an immeasurable inner space, that he, the child, half-asleep, had soon filled with light and images. Part of the associative field that is galvanized by this emptiness

Michelangelo Antonioni, *BLOW UP* 1966
Film still

undoubtedly includes the oblivion, the self-absorption of plunging into a curious state of simultaneous disorientation and sanctuary. Without going so far as to actually measure and define such inner spaces and states, we are not off target when we speak of transcendency, not to mention metaphysics, as an inescapable factor in Nova's oeuvre – even in his figurative paintings. There is no facile solution in attempting to pinpoint just what it is that this artist does, since, contrary to the manifest appearance of his work, perception is challenged by alien, dreamy situations.

MARYON PARK In 2007, for his exhibition *Zwielicht* (Twilight) at Museum Bellpark in Kriens, Nova filled a number of rooms with a diversity of works: a frieze of faceless portraits hung against the background of an ocean horizon, each of them identified as iconic Western philosophers from Plato and Nietzsche to Derrida only by their beards and hair (*Horizon*, 2007); various optical illusions in space including a room tipped by 90°; and a gallery of painted park landscapes. The latter obviously alludes to Michelangelo Antonioni's legendary film of 1996, *Blow Up*. Nova concentrates on the bewilderment of the fashion photographer who has shot a picture of lovers in Maryon Park and, while developing it, comes across what he thinks is a murderer and a corpse in the background. He returns to the park and actually finds the corpse but it has vanished a day later, just like the evidence that disappears into the steadily coarser grain of the photograph that he tries to enlarge. Perception and imagination become inseparably entangled, conclusively demonstrating how impossible it is to capture the appearance of the world objectively, even in a photograph. Was it all just a daydream? The title of Nova's exhibition prefigures what is to come: seeming and being can no longer be distinguished and we find ourselves groping along in the tenebrous light of a twilight state that threatens to plunge us into shady, ominous situations.

Regarding an audience's perception of such uncertainties, Luis Buñuel conjures the "hypnotic power" of the cinema and it is certainly no coincidence that, at some point, Nova discovered a visual resemblance to the young Buñuel that inspired him to make his first double portrait: *Luis & Nils* (2002). Not only does he conjure his love of the cinema; he also conjures his Latin American origins, his turbulent and happy childhood in El Salvador. He has many memories of those days, among them a wonderful anecdote: his parents were not at home, as so often, and with his three sisters, the little boy indulged in the forbidden fruit of watching a film on television: Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador* (1962). In this surreal, inscrutable film, an upper-middle-class dinner party deteriorates into barbaric chaos when the guests suddenly find themselves confined to the salon of the mansion, invisibly locked in as if on an island, in a kind of uto-heterotopia. As Nova describes

it, it must have been a seminal experience that has become firmly anchored in the artist's repository of thoughts and feelings.

DOPPELGANGERS AND DREAMERS The double portraits that Nova has produced of Luis Buñuel, Peter Lorre (the murderer in Fritz Lang's film *M*), Elvis Presley (in multiple versions) and most recently Georges Braque represent only one avenue of approach to his photographic work. He plays the role himself in these "juxtapositions", testifying to a delight in performance and succumbing, as did Buñuel, to the lure of the masquerade. But Nova does not always rely on himself in the double portraits; with typical images of famous contemporaries stored in memory, he waits until he comes across someone somewhere among his friends and acquaintances, who resembles the person he has in mind. And then he takes action, making a montage of the two together or making a double of the original. He has done so with such luminaries as Liz Taylor, Andy Warhol, Glen Gould, Robert de Niro, Baz Luhrmann and Marcel Duchamp, posing as Rose Sélavy.

This particular category of pictures clearly ties in with all of his other photographs. Nova trawls an immense body of visual material from a wide variety of sources: snapshots made while traveling, all kinds of portraits, stars from every milieu, show business celebrities, press photographs, special spatial contexts and, in a few cases, reproductions of his own paintings – all in all, found footage. The intensity of this material is basically a consequence of its iridescence and intrinsic ambiguity, which is heightened in montage. We have spoken of being disoriented and deceived but we can also speak of enchantment and mystification and of the artist's instinctive ability to stage undeniably compelling scenes. On one hand, the photographs are works of art equivalent to paintings and sometimes absorbed into larger installations; on the other, they appear in what would seem to be a chaotic mix of complex compositions. Time and again, Nova's optical illusions play cat and mouse with collective memory, the authenticity of reality, and assumptions of truth. It is as if, in the process of remembering, pictures surface, take shape, blur and fade, only to reemerge sharply outlined in other fragments of perception while nonetheless remaining impossible to make out with certainty.³ Simulacra and parallel worlds come into play and we are overcome by a sense of vertigo without ever thinking of Peter Schlemihl's shadows or others who have sold their souls.

[1] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" in: *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Baltimore: 1986), pp. 22–27.

[2] See Nils Nova, *Screen*, Luzern / Poschiavo (Edizioni Periferia) 2005.

[3] See the artist's book Nils Nova, *Memory Confronted*, Lucerne / Poschiavo (Edizioni Periferia) 2007.