

To See 360 Degrees: Elka Krajewska and Alan Licht's Plany Mela
by Thom Donovan

Anyway, we used their equipment, but not the way they originally intended, and the star projector was the least of it.

~ Jordan Belsen in conversation with Scott MacDonald

On April 21st, 2007 Elka Krajewska premiered her collaboration with Alan Licht, *Plany Mela*, at the Bristol IMAX Dome Theatre at the Milton J. Rubenstein Museum of Science & Technology in Syracuse for the Syracuse International Film and Video Festival. As the lights went down in the hemispheric theater, a theater specified to show films in the 15/70mm corporate IMAX format, appeared a large pink wheel abuzz with shapes and iconic images steadily rotating as it also quivered. *Plany Mela's* audience encountered this sphere as a dazzling abstraction the very antithesis of what one normally sees in IMAX theaters—those flight simulators for the virtual civilian, vision machines for titillating spectacle and representative information. After a mere ninety seconds Krajewska's IMAX film concluded. At the center where the pink wheel was one now saw a sparse black and white video projection of simple moving shapes (squares, rectangles, circles, etc.) and the letters "I" and "N". The film would only play again twice—a fleeting hijack of high-end corporate media spectacle by avant garde experimentalism.

Informing this dramatic movement between IMAX format and black and white video are the experiments of Mikhail Matiushin (1866-1934), a Russian artist nearly lost to our attention if not for a handful of paintings and the artist's famous collaboration with Malevitch, Khlebnikov and others, *Victory Over the Sun*, for which he composed the music. In his work, Matiushin explored perceptual and sensual experience combining spiritual exercise and scientific experiment. Through this exploration Matiushin would train the sensorium and subtle faculties to experience synaesthesia and other super-sensory phenomena by effort, technique, practice and study: that is, voluntarily. Says Margaretta Tillberg, a Matiushin scholar: *the fundamental concepts of Matiushin's worldview were called "Organic Culture" and "Spatial Realism", which were also the names of the workshops he supervised as a "red professor". Here Matiushin developed a training programme together with his students, including yoga, meditation and various exercises conceived to "create and develop the artist". These new physical possibilities of perception were called "extended" or "amplified vision" which did not only include the eyes, but was expanded to involve hearing, tactility, and thinking - in short, a kind of conscious synaesthesia.*

Two projects I understand to inform Krajewska's and Licht's *Plany Mela* are Matiushin's experiments in synaesthesia, as well as on central and peripheral visual phenomena. In their coordination of visual-acoustic elements Krajewska and Licht induce seeing as hearing and hearing as seeing where Licht's use of "reverb" and other effects provide for a tonal afterimage the

counterpart of afterimages one may attain through Krajewska's thrice shown hallucinatory film (once at the beginning, a second in the middle interposed video, once in conclusion). Likewise, in the alternation between peripheral IMAX film and centered black and white video the viewer is faced with a perceptual dilemma of how one should simultaneously attend focus and blur, moving and inanimate elements, color and shape. Here a chiasmus is constituted whereby center may become peripheral, motion stagnant, focus deformational, spatial objects time-based and vibratory—qualities their inverse. This chiasmus locates the viewer-initiate at the limits of sense experience where sense gives way to subtler faculties. *With a panoramic visual angle of 360° producing a new spatial reality of the fourth dimension, colours would emerge more intensely than in our normal, physical world. With untrained eyes a stone, for example, would seem 'dead', immobile, static. In the fourth dimension, however, it should be possible to see the low frequency waves of solid materials such as stones and minerals. With cars at one speed, people at another, trees growing at yet a third speed, to the untrained eye, the world seems scattered and fragmented. For those who could apply the extended vision however, the whole world would, from an ontological perspective, appear completely different, with all links and connections organically unified.* (Tillberg)

If there is a central movement in the visual portion of *Plany Mela* it is between center and periphery where video attempts to shape the vision, to *in-form* it after one's recent memory of the film. That the film should play three times makes the audience adjust their reception of the film in relation to the video and soundtrack. Here video should assist the memory being reorganized after the intense actuality of the original film stimulus. Significantly, the premiere of the film at the Syracuse International Film and Video Festival should also be the first time Krajewska would view the film she had been crafting with digital animation software for months, as though she would like to remember her own film for the first time before her audience, thus perform memory as it was occurring. She would attempt this performance twice amidst the film's audience on a platform in the center of the unlit theater by arranging a series of shapes and stencil letters upon a masque while controlling a mixer, blending video triggered by Licht's instruments and programmed elements with her improvisation upon the masque.

In the fall of 2006, before she was to make *Plany Mela*, Krajewska traveled for ninety days along the Polish border showing to strangers her initial perceptual experiments for *Plany Mela* and in turn collecting video footage of the people she would meet and interview during her travels. Having seen some of this footage it is astonishing how open complete strangers are to Krajewska as they dress her in family heirlooms they've fitted for her, share their artwork, poems, and birdcalls, and most of all tell their stories for her camera. Such footage is a testimony to Krajewska's own openness and spontaneous generosity as it gathers the actualities of others, involving them in what she has cited alongside *Plany Mela* as a larger work of "structured abandoned" and "exposure". What exists between virtuality and actual sensory-motor

stimulation, reflection and action, encounter and account, here and elsewhere, I and you—the glass of all attempts to see oneself while maintaining the world in perceptive motion.

Works Cited:

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