

Revisiting Sunset Strip

in dialogue with_ MARKUS OBERNDORFER about his photographic journey through Hollywood 50 years after Ed Ruscha.

REVISITED started in late 2015 with a desire to question the medial parameters of 360 degree video, which as a practice began to establish itself more and more at that stage. My aim was to draw attention to the fundamental shifts that took place between 360 degree video and the two main media of our time – photography and film. By creating an interactive media installation, I wanted to allow the audience to experience these differences first hand.

My interest in 360 degree video is the result of a natural succession within my media-reflexive work up until now. But also more generally, I am fascinated by changes that occur over longer periods of time. That is why I was looking for a place as much as a work of art which I could take as point of departure for my exploration of 360 degree video in REVISITED. In order to create a viewer experience of medial and topographical developments over time, I not only needed a place where a “then and now” or a “before and after” could be staged, but I needed a place that already existed as a representation, i.e. that had already been captured by older media, such as photography and/or film.

I found Ed Ruscha’s seminal photobook “Every Building on the Sunset Strip” (1966) to be the ideal frame of ref-

erence for my project. The book encapsulates the spirit of the 1960s in a daunting way and was also in itself highly experimental, exploring the limits of photography and photobooks. In the shape of a fanfold, Ruscha created a panorama of the buildings on the already then famous part of Sunset Boulevard leading through West Hollywood by mounting an automated 35 mm camera on a pick-up truck. It was a kind of Google Street View *avant la lettre* apart from the fact that Ruscha only recorded one specific sideways view or field of vision, not an all-round gaze.

Half a century after Ruscha’s photographic journey down Sunset Strip I returned to the very street in Los Angeles, primarily known for its nightlife, hotels, and billboards, to once more render these 2,4 kilometers in a mediated and media-conscious way through 360 degree video. To focus attention on the spatial and medial differences in the juxtaposition of the two endeavors, I kept as close as possible to Ruscha’s set-up and course of action. As such, my work could be viewed as a re-enactment and continuation of Ruscha’s performance from 1966 which results in a juxtaposition of multiple discrete media practices, timelines, and perspectives.

Apart from the topographical changes that have taken place over the last 50 years, I am above all interested in the experiential value and the perception of these different representations of an actual space reproduced by visual means. What happens to the viewer and why? What are the qualities of each medial representation, what are the differences?

From photo collage to 6DoF

One crucial difference between the two-dimensional, static visual space of the printed photobook and the three-dimensional dynamic visual space of the 360 degree videos lies in the limitation of the field of vision, i.e. the segment that is shown. This selection of perspective or view is absolutely central in the composition of an image, and while in photography or film, it is the producer of the images who has the power to define this — in Virtual Reality and 360 degree video, the power shifts to the consumer who becomes an active co-producer of the (final) images.

In regard to the composition of the images, Ruscha chose quite a radical approach in his documentation of Sunset Strip. Instead of consciously selecting and composing each photograph, as carried out earlier in a first unsuccessful attempt, he minimized his influence through human or artistic agency by refraining from manually pushing the shutter. By mounting the camera in a fixed position onto a pickup truck and using a serial timer, the exposures are spatio-temporal fragments of a strictly mechanical or automated process. As such, the result is a visually static space predetermined by camera position, perspective, point in time and the rhythm of traffic. Viewers of Ruscha’s photographic recreation of Sunset Strip cannot alter these given parameters retrospectively. They are however given the possibility to open and close the pages of the fanfold book and deter-

mine the rhythm with which their gaze moves through the preselected panorama.

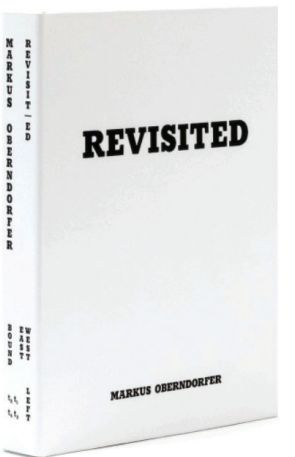
To record my 360 degree videos of Sunset Strip, I mounted a cube with six cameras on a pickup truck and later on stitched the images together. Yet in contrast to Ruscha’s photo collage, viewers of the video cannot determine the pace with which they view and hence travel through space. In a 360 degree video, viewers however are given much greater power to choose the cutout that they want to see within the 360 degree environment, also known as the six degrees of freedom (6DoF). The power thus is transferred from the producer of the images to the person consuming them. Depending on how viewers move their head, new image sequences are instantaneously compiled in the field of vision of the VR headset. As part of my three-piece media installation REVISITED, every one of these unique sequences that are created in real-time by the person wearing the headset can be witnessed on a TV-monitor by everyone else looking at the installation. Every viewer who is willing to embark on this journey through the history of provided mediascapes, starting with an original copy of Ed Ruscha’s book from 1966 and ending in the virtual 360 degree video environment of the Sunset Strip from 2016, thus also becomes a protagonist and active part of the overall performance.

The afterglow

This dialogue between two original works and my continued reflection have led to additional projects and creative explorations of the 360 degree videos and their source material. Under the title “REVISITED Source Footage Collages” and “Collage in the Age of Automation” I examine temporal, spatial, contextual and performative qualities of the installation and its contents. In particular, I have sought to raise questions in these works that Ruscha did not consider or that were not central for him, not least also because they were technically not feasible in the 1960s, at least not without considerable effort. To give an example, I investigated the possibilities of creating seamless panoramas of the storefront plane (à la Ruscha) from video source footage instead of photographs. Also, I looked into what options there are to translate movement. How could I artistically visualize the driving dynamics of the four 360 degree videos I had made in a two-dimensional and static, visual space? The panoramas of spacetime created in such a way depict objects not only based on their volume but also on their extent in time and space.

Using the Sunset Strip as a point of reference, the multiple projects of REVISITED thus offer a complex examination of 50 years of development of media and generally highlight the influence that time and its concepts have on us, our environment, its representations and ultimately, our experience and perception. ☒

MARKUS OBERNDORFER was born in 1980 in Austria and studied Art and Photography at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. He works with a primary focus on photography and audiovisual time-based media, occasionally writes essays and uses performance, objects, additional material, and spatial installations. His projects are usually of a conceptual, interdisciplinary and media-reflective nature. They scrutinize what has been documented and how. They have been published in books and/or were shown at festivals, in museums and galleries.



THE THREE-PIECE MEDIA INSTALLATION REVISITED

starts with Ed Ruscha’s book from 1966 and ends in the virtual 360 degree video environment of the Sunset Strip from 2016.

