Unedited Glamor

The Vienna Opera Ball and Its Rendition by Network Cameras

The Opera Ball, a glamorous societal event, is Vienna´s most prestigious ball which represents the uncontested highlight of the ball season. In 2009, the Swiss photographer Jules Spinatsch introduced an unconventional way of recording the annual Opera Ball. He installed two interactive digital network cameras on the premises of the Vienna Opera. They were programmed to map the entire space from ceiling to floor. Every three seconds one image was taken. The cameras recorded the entire ball from its start at 8:32 pm to its end at 5:10 in the morning and took 10,008 photographs in total. During the designated time, the rotating cameras completed two full circles so that every spot in the opera house was recorded twice. In 2011, Jules Spinatsch displayed the 10,008 images at Karlsplatz, a public space in the center of Vienna. He set up a 360 degree panorama there and arranged the images as a chronological grid allowing the Viennese public to encircle the installation and have democratic access to what is known as an exclusive event. In this rather monumental undertaking, pursued "with the sobriety of a scientific study" (Campany, 2014, p. E 14), Spinatsch re-integrated the different network camera shots into a perceivable spatial order. In another approach following a "Plan B," he displayed the single, blown-up images in a series of thematic grids in the context of a gallery space. In 2014, Spinatsch published the images in a 3-volume book with the title "Vienna MMIX–10008/7000 Surveillance Panorama Project No. 4 – The Vienna Opera Ball," which will form the basis of the analysis of this paper. *Volume I* consists of the 10,008 images recorded by the cameras. *Volume II* displays 71 images that were singled out by the artist and selected from the pool of the 10,008 images. *Volume III* of the publication provides a theoretical background and material for reading.

Volume I with its 10,008 photographs provides a panoramic view of the space. Each of the 576 pages features one minute of the recorded material. Spinatsch arranged the images in the chronological order in which they were taken and fed them into the disciplinary order of a grid system. The result is an almost cinematic arrangement that follows the 3-second-meter rhythm of the camera. Still, despite all the rational parameters at play, the staccato of these images poses a serious challenge to a sense of orientation. Whereas the late 18th and 19th cen-

tury panoramas can be linked to the emergence of a newly empowered bourgeois subject that practices all-seeing (Hick, 1999), the panoramic view provided in Spinatsch´s book allows for very limited visual command. The images offer a splintered, torn, fragmentary version of the ball. In these 3-second units everything falls to bits and pieces and a cognitive model of the space is hard to attain, especially since any predetermined spectator position is automatically abolished. One is confronted with the minutiae of things that one usually tries to eclipse because they form the background noise of any meaningful act of perception. (Fig. 1)

The panoramic project delegated to the network cameras has little in common with the emancipatory project of the rising bourgeoisie and the central position it assigned itself in this extension of the boundaries of vision. Instead, the panoramic view of the digital machinery looks like mere visual overkill. The rotating cameras practice a type of all-seeing which is not based on human parameters of orientation and throws the viewer off balance. In "Philosphie de la disorientation," Suzanne Leblanc (2010) refers to an image used by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980) to describe this disorientation in space. "I am showing my pupils details of an immense landscape which they cannot possibly know their way around"(p. 56e). Spinatsch´s *Vienna MMIX* project generates such a vast landscape of photographic input of an event that it cannot be totalized in any way. While Wittgenstein still acknowledged a human need for "some firm ground," (Wittgenstein, 1980, p.83e) this seems no longer the case in an era of "post-orientation," (Leblanc, 2010) "in which disorientation is interrelated with the fundamental unpredictability of its many non-linear systems" (Leblanc, 2010, p. 57). (Fig. 2)

In a kind of automatic writing, the network cameras provide unfiltered access to what is visually available and as it turns out, the mass of potential data awaiting their visualization is huge. The impartial cameras record irrespective of any pictorial traditions and codes. They know nothing of compositional rules, good form, or powerful framing. They simply follow their programmed logic and chronicle whatever appears within their reach. They picture cracks in the Historicist decoration, a dusty corner, a crumpled tissue behind a stately column, mended parquet, wires, metal grills, metal chains, ropes, cutting through the space, drapery, ventilation shafts, and many other details that are not necessarily compatible with the perfectly sealed façade of the traditional Opera Ball. (Fig. 3 / Fig 4)

In Spinatsch´s choreography, all these backstage and technical support elements assume the same visual presence as the more glamorous aspects of the spectacle. Most disturbing, though, is the fact that the viewer cannot accurately picture where the shots were taken from. The opera curtain, for instance, sweeps

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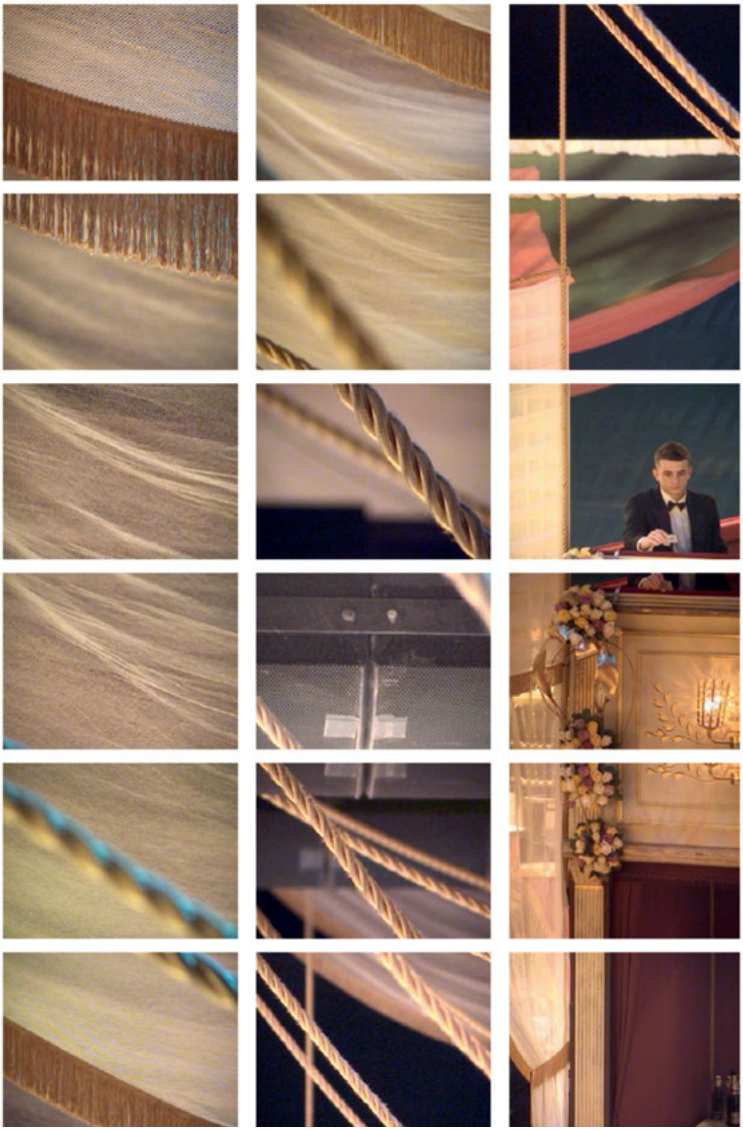
Jules Spinatsch, *Vienna MMIX – 10008/7000 Surveillance Panorama. Project No. 4 – The Vienna Opera Ball, 2014. Volume I. Every Three Seconds.*



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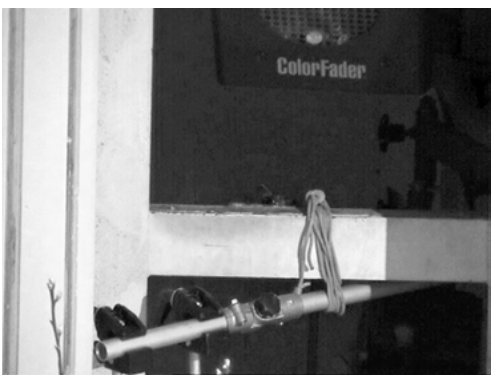
Jules Spinatsch, *Double Page Spread from Volume I*



3 / 4

Jules Spinatsch, *Single Image from Volume II*

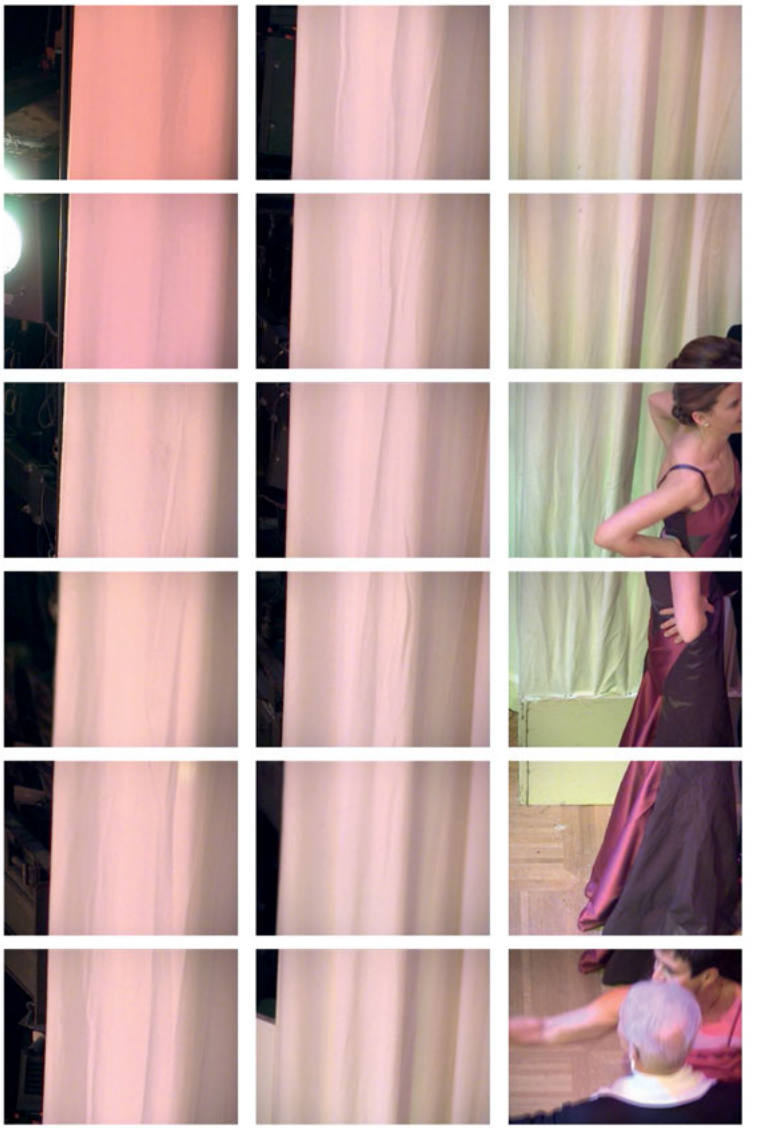
across several pages without giving any clue about its spatial position in regard to the cameras. Most of these disintegrated particles of the ball reality cannot be localized, and with many of the images a mapping of the space is impossible. The rotating cameras seem to have seized the space and twisted and turned it. Ella Chmielewska´s (2010) definition of disorientation as "an immersive condition; an intensely felt blurring of spatial configuration, a breakdown of topo-sensitive semiotic patterns" (p. 246) takes this bodily reaction to disorientation into account and calls to mind the dizziness and vertigo feelings that are mentioned in some of the reports of 19th century visitors on their panoramic experience (Hick, 1999). Spinatsch´s network cameras with their merciless scanning of the space do the same to the viewers. What one "sees" is nauseating. (Fig. 5)

The paradox is that although `Spinatsch´s images´ are hard to verify in terms of their spatial coordinates, they are perceived as unquestionably authentic. This authenticity results from the absence of any human interference. As writers like Dietmar Kammerer (2008) pointed out, surveillance camera photos have this undeniable touch of authenticity because they seem to restore a reference to the real which is increasingly lost in times of digital manipulations. Network camera technology can pass as disinterested in the real sense of the word. The resulting images owe their production to cameras that have no pact with those segments of reality traditionally entitled to visibility. In this respect, the technical and aesthetic imperfection of the photos seems to be a plus and provide additional proof of their veracity. Interestingly and due to this concept of authenticity, a technology generally viewed with suspicion can come to bear the signs of trustworthiness.

Viewing and Being Viewed
The Opera Ball as an Arena of Visual Presence

In Part III of *Vienna MMIX*, David Campany describes the Vienna Opera as a perfect arena of societal visibility.

> *The layout of the Vienna Opera House was modern – not so much for the view of the stage it offered the audience but for the view the audience was offered of itself. The plan optimizes the number of boxes viewable both from each box and from the seats in the stalls. While not the grandest of opera houses, it was the most suited to its social purpose. (Campany, 2014, E 10)*



5

Jules Spinatsch, *Double Page Spread from Volume I*

For his project, Spinatsch chose a 19th century building that was specifically constructed to guarantee a maximum of sight. The opera goers should not just have a good view of the stage and what was going on there, but should also be able to watch each other perform. As Carl Schorske (1980) pointed out, at places like the "Burgtheater" and the Opera, the late 19th century bourgeoisie could freely mingle with the aristocracy, and demonstrate their cultural standing and sophistication of appearance. To be viewed at such places meant to belong to the cultural elite of the time. In 1889, Gustav Klimt was commissioned to paint the Old Burg theatre before it was torn down to give way to the new building on the Ring. He chose to paint the seating space from the stage and to depict more than a hundred identifiable personalities of the Viennese society. As the story goes, many representatives of the fin-de-siècle establishment were anxious to be included in the painting and assigned a place in this societal group portrait. Klimt received "many offers to sit for him" (Morton, 1979, p. 169). "Letters engraved with crests" and "invitations to tea in the Ringstrasse salons of financial barons" (Morton, 1979, p. 169) made it clear how desirable it was to prove one´s regular presence at the theater as a highly contested battle ground of enhanced societal visibility. Speaking of the presence again, for the annual Opera Ball the whole space is remodeled to guarantee an even larger arena of societal performance. Since on this occasion all the seats in the stalls are covered by a ballroom floor, the whole stage extends to a dimension of 90 meters. (Fig. 6)

As a matter of fact, Spinatsch´s network camera images show the Vienna opera public in observation mode and mood. In many of the pictures, they seem to be watching, observing, and monitoring each other. What actually demands their attention, one mostly cannot tell or see because the corresponding scenes lie outside the picture frames. Network cameras are not versed in the filmic eye line match. Especially the privileged people in their boxes are mostly caught in the act of observing others. Their elevated position seems to predestine them to check out others. At the same time, all of them appear highly alert about being viewed themselves. The space seems to resonate with scopic desire. On closer inspection, one realizes that there are cameras everywhere, TV cameras, professional film cameras, single-lens reflex cameras, countless pocket cameras and mobile phones, which are either standing by or randomly directed towards others. In an interesting side remark, Campany (2014) refers to the mobile phone camera as "the logical extension of opera glasses" (p. E 13). The network cameras, probably holding the highest position in space, seem to condone these modest photographic attempts to turn the ball into a memorable event. By photographing the countless other recording devices, they seem to ridicule the limited reach and capacity of their underprivileged peers. The cameras installed by Spinatsch have the final say in this surveillance narrative and successfully establish a kind of hierarchy between these various types of photographic testimony. (Fig. 7)

In terms of their appearance and outfit, the people at the Vienna Opera Ball are well prepared to meet the eyes of the cameras. They have nothing to fear. Big brother will find them strong and well equipped. Their hair styles are impeccable, the females´ cleavages are impressive, their jewelry is shining, and their dresses perfectly fit the occasion. In fact, they seem to qualify for a type of elegance keyed to the media world and its practices. It is the term "Spycam Chic" (Boal, 1998, p.1) as a type of chic that takes the omnipresence of observation cameras into account which comes to mind. In a surveillance society, people have the obligation to look good because they can get on the radar of a camera at all times. In line with the advertisement of an American fashion label, Boal (1998) aks: "Are you dressed for it?" Eric Howeler (2002) refers to fashion, cigarette, and lipstick ads, pinpointing their underlying message as: "Surveillance is a given, it is everywhere. Surveillance is sexy. Big brother is watching, so you have to look good" (p. 1). In Dietmar Kammerer´s view (2005), observation technology creates "glamorous subjects" (p. 104). The Vienna Opera has always been a place of spectacle and glamour. The question will be what the network cameras make of this event and what the specific "unedited glamour" of their recordings does to the protagonists of this spectacle.

Much has already been said about the changed status of the subject and its configuration in a surveillance society. Winfried Pauleit (2005), for instance, views observation technology as intricately linked with new modes of self-perception. Other than mirrors, this technology allows people to see themselves as others view them. Pauleit diagnoses a technologically enhanced self-referentiality. To confirm their subject status, individuals will increasingly rely on camera recordings that attest to their presence and visibility. Encountering oneself on such monitors will be the ultimate mode of proving one´s existence. As Pauleit (2005) points out, the classical psychological model of establishing one´s subjecthood via the other and in interpersonal exchange with the other will become more and more obsolete. Thomas Y. Levin (2000) proposes a reformulation of René Descates´ formula `Cogito ergo sum.´ The new formula will be: "I am surveilled, therefore I am."(p. 60) Surveillance technology with its automatized recording can provide existential proof beyond doubt. People turn into images and internalize this version of themselves. In Jörg Metelmann´s (2005) understanding, there is a fundamental difference between viewing an image that is separated from oneself and the physical experience of permanently acquiring image status in a media world. What he calls "in-der-Medienwelt-Sein" (p. 179) is a state of being, a new ontological state grounded in vision.

So what about the depiction of the ball goers in Spinatsch´s photo books? How are they rendered by the network cameras? As the human inventory of the event, they are guaranteed equal treatment as the non-animated parts of the Opera Ball setting. They are all photographed from a particular angle from above, which gives the im-

6 / 7

Jules Spinatsch, *Single Image from Volume II*

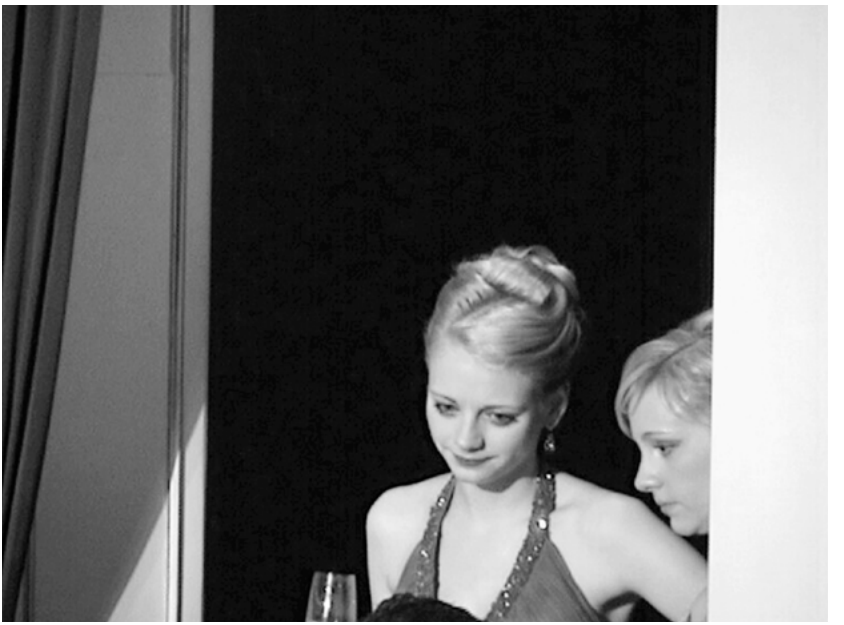
pression of them being subjected to some privileged view traditionally associated with a divine perspective. But, as this impersonal recording machinery above them has no clue of the intricate link between subjecthood and proper framing, it cannot confirm their subject status. There are takes which occasionally resemble well composed images, but those can be attributed to lapses of the recording system. (Fig. 8)

Overall, the fractured picture units present the public as an unredeemed mass. In contrast to the usual conviviality of such an event, the network cameras seem to picture tristesse. The camera recordings turn the ball-goers into a confused and disintegrated crowd looking, glancing, craving an image of themselves. They are registered, but in the careless and inconsiderate manner of a disinterested party that is unable to provide them with the consolation of an acknowledged individual visibility. The visual agent, which could supply them with images of themselves, is hidden from them. No one told them that for the duration of the ball night their existence would be guaranteed by an almighty surveillance technology watching over them. By mischance, the recording system monitoring them lacks the mercy of the conventional all-seeing authority. Many of the people are depicted half way in the process of forming fully integrated and photogenic subjects. There is an abundance of upper bodies, lower bodies, shoulders, legs, etc. No wonder that their half-obliterated and misshaped representations give them a touch of "demi-monde" and that their actions fail to look meaningful. (Fig. 9/10)

In terms of the power structure established by the network cameras, one is tempted to think of the gaze as described by Jacques Lacan (1973). Other than the "look," which can be located in the human eye and which issues from one point, the gaze is independent of human vision. Lacan compares it to an omnipresent observation camera. There is a tremendous amount of authority on the part of the gaze. Spinatsch´s network camera photographs seem to reveal the intricate link between power and vision and the anxiety that resides at the heart of this relation. 10, 008 images of one ball night generate a lot of visibility, but do not necessarily guarantee an empowered version of those depicted. The Vienna Opera Ball recordings display a type of choreography that is most of the time detrimental for those who temporarily appear within their shifting frames.

Photographesomenon

The images assembled in *Volume II* of *Vienna MMIX* clearly show what Eric Howeler (2002) labeled as "the aesthetics of surveillance" The characteristics of this type of representation are, among others, cold colors, graininess, and a slightly distorted optic. For Eric Boal (1998), it is the "pixilated cool" (p. 2) of these images that makes them so attractive as elements in films and advertising.



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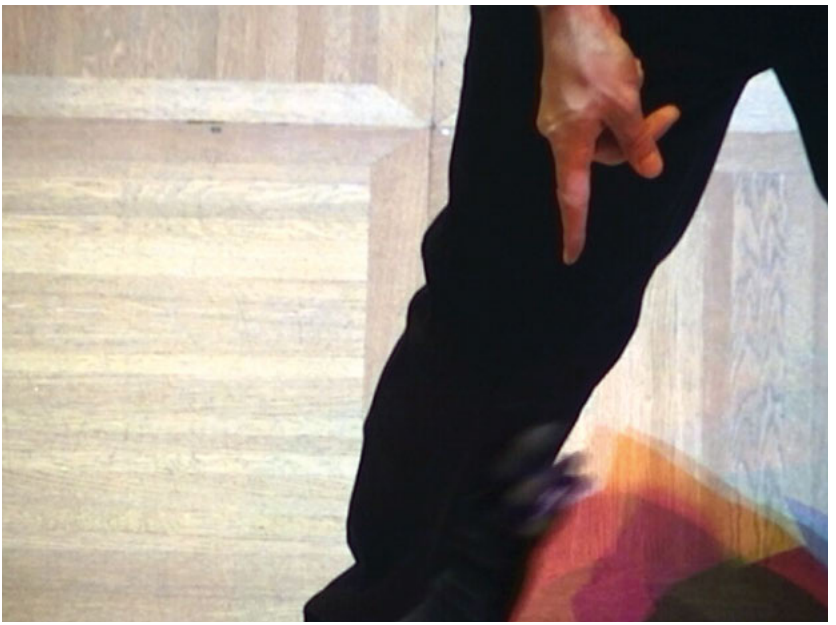
Jules Spinatsch, *Single Image from Volume II*



9 / 10

Jules Spinatsch, *Single Image from Volume II*

> *Surveillance has become a look, sexier and more sinister than any documentary. It lends the power and glory of infotech to anything it touches, from sneaker ad to the blockbuster thriller. The most ordinary image becomes charged once it is invested with a time/date stamp, a grainy low-res surface, and the other signatures of spycam style. (Boal, 1998, p. 2)*

In the case of the Vienna Opera Ball, the images are not faked but genuine surveillance photographs. At the same time, they seem to fall into the category of a "photographesomenon,"as described by Pauleit (2005, p. 76). Observation cameras are programmed to create a digital duplicate of a particular scenario at a particular time. These data rarely make it into the ranks of single frame images. "Photographesomena" are latent images, submerged in the mass of recorded material to eventually serve as evidence one day. As Pauleit puts it, these pictorial units are recorded in the present in order to be retrieved as images in the future. Various interests, a suspicion, and investigations of all sorts may legitimize their re-emergence as single images and differentiate them from the vast amount of the other stored visuals.

In *Volume II* of his publication, Spinatsch presents 71 such images. As "photographesomena," they all have the potential to demonstrate or prove something, yet, the purpose of their selection remains unclear. Freed from the burden of providing insight in hindsight, they speak of a visual universe uncontaminated by semantics. With their anarchic wit they are capable of subverting a long tradition of purposive picture making. In some cases, they do not even re-present, namely refer to some identifiable reality. They are nonsensical data bits that were, for some reason, given preference over others. In Spinatsch´s arrangement of the photos, identifiable motifs alternate with fully abstract pictures of the ball reality. As a matter of fact, the depicted human protagonists are in a lot of cases quite literally pushed to the margins of the images and have to compete with a mass of details that would never make it into a classical picture frame. There seems to be an arguable alliance between digital recording technology and, so far, visually under-represented parts of reality. (Fig. 11/12)

At the same time – and the text by the neurophysiologist Wolf Singer (2014) in *Volume III* seems to suggest that – the random data bits of *Volume II* could be viewed as a commentary on the activities of our brain. As Singer (2014) points out, in order to come to probable solutions, the brain as a highly complex and self-referential system has to compare all incoming sensory data with already installed and familiar models of reality. In the course of evaluating these variables we construct meaning and "synthesize the new data into a coherent picture of the world" (p. E 43). What we perceive as real is, therefore, always the outcome of an interpretative act. The "photographesomena" of *Vienna MMIX Volume II* seem to draw the attention to the constructivist nature of the perceptual process.

11

Jules Spinatsch, *Single Image from Volume II*

The random visuals presented there appear like raw data with their neurobiological processing still pending. There is also a sense of failure. With these scraps of visual input a successful completion of the process may not be possible, the neurobiological reference system may reach its limit and remain clueless. In any case, the ball "reality" as such cannot be held accountable for this kind of rout.

As Ulrike Hick (1999) pointed out, the traditional panorama was also a place where the boundless gaze and its ambition of all-seeing could be rehearsed. In the medial surrogate of the panorama, the new scopic regime of early industrialization with its political and social implications could be tested, internalized, and trained. Jules Spinatsch´s project may provide the same training for his contemporaries. He familiarizes them with a type of all-seeing that largely happens independently of the human eye. This can be legitimately called a panoramic project of unknown dimensions.

> *We are at the point […] where the majority of the world´s images are made by-machines-for-machines. In this new age, robot-eyes, seeing algorithms and imaging-machines are the rule, and seeing with the meat-eyes of our human bodies is increasingly the exception. (Paglen, 2014)*

Vienna MMIX makes a type of machine-seeing tangible that usually happens behind our backs. It draws the attention to a compelling imagery so distinctly different from the ones we issue. By revealing the visual register of network cameras, Spinatsch provides us with an impression of how these images feel, function, and which impact they may have on the depiction of people and their social realities. On the other hand, Spinatsch makes his viewers aware of a type of aesthetics that has become an indispensable part of the pictorial language of our time. Surveillance camera aesthetic has been widely appropriated by, for instance, advertising, the film industry, and the social media, which work with the appeal and anarchic qualities of these images and try to emulate or fake what defies meaning in the classical sense. A new specter of vision has been introduced and as the constructivist charm of the Opera Ball images suggest, the viewers may get addicted to a kind of visual that looks casual, accidental, and effortless in its production while being immune to connoisseurship and expertise.

There is also a nostalgic aspect to this idea of training network cameras on an event like the Vienna Opera Ball because, as Howeler (2002) puts it, "Surveillance is outmoded. […] Control occurs on different levels: through credit checks, career moves and medical histories. The fashionability of surveillance is nostalgic." In that

sense, surveillance cameras as the ultimate signifiers of the predominance of vision over any other form of evidence and the splendid arena of the Vienna Opera as one of the bastions of a collective, real-time celebration of sight and societal visibility do form a good match.

11

Jules Spinatsch, *Single Image from Volume II*