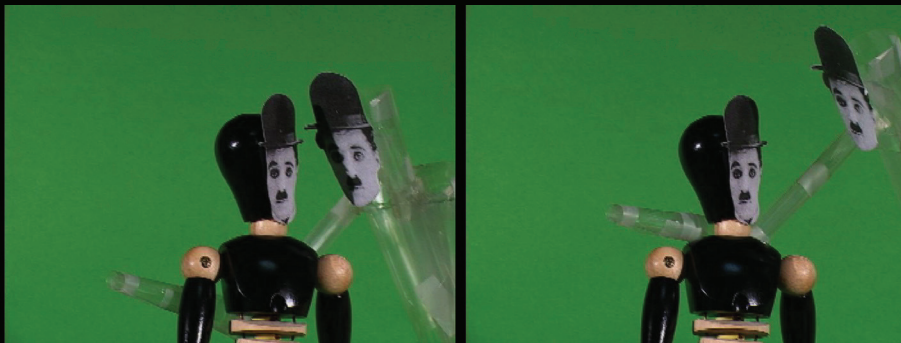


## Theater of Transparency / 2000-2010

A ten-year video project by Osvaldo Romberg



### On the Poetics and Politics of *Theater of Transparency*

Aaron Levy, Peter Weibel, and Günther Holler-Schuster

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## **On the Poetics and Politics of *Theater of Transparency***

*Aaron Levy, Peter Weibel, and Günther Holler-Schuster*

In *Theater of Transparency*, the Argentine artist Osvaldo Romberg takes up the history of transparency and its relation to painting. While Romberg's artistic development began with a conceptual approach to painting, his work finds new articulations today in the field of electronic media.

His "theater" of transparency, of which this publication is an iteration, features three videos that the artist has produced during the last few years. These productions are at the center of recent installations by the artist in the Mirror Room of the Neue Galerie in Graz, Austria (2008) and the museum balcony of the ZKM in Karlsruhe, Germany (2009), where they were projected alongside the protagonists of these narratives--a series of humanoid dolls and puppets made of transparent acrylic. As the transparent dolls and videos are merely surfaces, one cannot help but project onto them one's own significations. This renders problematic conventional ways of writing, and yet without these projections, the cultural material would not exist.

Romberg's work, which emerged in the early 1970s, is representative of a type of post-war avant-garde oeuvre that bridges the gap between modernism and postmodernism, crosses genres and other boundaries, engages performance and cultural issues, and raises questions that at the present moment seem both relevant and historical. In reference to specific materials and practices, Romberg's work is at once about painting and performance, installation and mediation. Technically, he is interested in the emergence of digital culture and the recovery of earlier histories and practices. Thematically, Romberg is atypical of his generation in that he has tried to capture in his work a non-referential

body of meaning that intimates a certain borderline between coherence and incoherence through a diffusion of avant-gardism and its conventional techniques and processes.

In these works, Romberg performs a total dispersion where everything from Bruce Lee, Edith Piaf, Rita Hayworth, Charlie Chaplin, Jesus, and his own watercolors and paintings have been mixed through the collaging of different cultural figures. His particular achievement is to have sustained this vector toward chaos, through a distinctively idiosyncratic approach identifiable in the three videos featured in this publication.

Any reading of Romberg's work must inevitably confront the difficulty of encapsulating this heterogeneity, for the overtness of his imagery is not articulated within a singular aesthetic or a straightforward socio-political critique. Rather, what comes across is a cultural collage which is constructed through a fundamentally performative practice that joins different historical moments, political sensibilities, and cultural identities. He is also fundamentally unlike many of his colleagues in the visual arts in his dependence on the codes and conventions of theater. His videos document a casual artistic performance that dematerializes the object, and record his gestures of collage as the primary means by which to understand his cultural moment and remember its historical significance.

In effect, Romberg's practice is one that accumulates "presences." The relationship of this artist to contemporary society is articulated through a present-tense modality of collection. However, this process resists finality or conclusion and is fundamentally about the process of the artist himself sifting through his relationship to the past and present. This process is linked to the artist's interest in the aforementioned line between coherence and incoherence. His heterogeneous practice juxtaposes disparate artifacts that problematize our relation to the encyclopedic and the archival. Little, if anything, is resolved in Romberg's videos, as

if the artist is deliberately launching questions and layering narratives without planning where these conversations will lead.

Romberg is also experimenting with the degree to which a single work can uphold competing ideologies at the same time, or evade them altogether. To what degree can an artist, scholar or curator avoid taking a stand by positioning oneself in multiple locations or orienting oneself in multiple directions? To what degree is a project's openness to multiple readings or interpretations suggestive of a certain feebleness or inability to declare a single position and take sides? Romberg's work performs these questions, and in this sense is addressed to those practitioners who resist being pinned down by espousing multifaceted approaches. It is in this respect that the artist also invites us to reconsider the perennial politics and theory that surrounds the artistic avant-garde, as well as the role of the artist and how it can be alternately evaded, defined, and expanded.

We thus mark the completion of *Theater of Transparency*, Osvaldo Romberg's ten-year project, with this meditation on the installations and videos through which the project has found its public form, but also with questions of which the artist's project is generative. Our focus is less on the plastic dolls featured in the installations, or the videos as projected onto surfaces of one sort or another; rather, we are interested in the artist's embrace of a form of cultural collage that is itself paradigmatic of global culture today. Through his practice, Romberg desires to universalize the world as an image by mixing narratives, personalities, and temporalities through a post-historical collage technique. He extends the historically determined nature of collage, freeing it from fixed paper and placing it in free-space, where the image behaves like free-floating signifiers. In so doing he disregards fixed histories, contexts, and classifications, emphasizing instead an expressive relationship to history where the likes of Charlie Chaplin, Shakespeare, and Che Guevara seemingly co-exist.

Romberg's work calls attention not simply to the massive visual culture that governs our modern world, but also its fundamental emptiness and negativity. In this sense, Romberg's project is concerned with the politics of transparency and his installations interrogate and question contemporary fixations on content. The dolls featured in his installations as surfaces highlight the fact that they have no fixed meaning apart from what is projected onto them. Their identities and sexualities are in a state of perpetual flux, echoing our modern fascination with consumerism and individual choice. Content-wise, Romberg employs and extends the practice of collage beyond its conventional deployment, so as to construct a theater of identities, of masques and personae (a typical subject of postmodernism). In so doing, he shows the dark side of the modern dream of transparency and technology: delirious machines are traded on a market of desire. Transparency creates monsters like the sleep of reason, transparency is a theater hiding a market of guilt. Our relation to rationality, to culture, is exposed as purely theoretical.

The fact that light moves through everything in his films--including persons, paintings, even architectures--suggests that he is not passively archiving but rather filtering and sublimating. Romberg introduces this line of critique at a moment when an illusory sense of progress and rationality continues to define our every environment. From galleries to cityscapes, the spaces that we live, work, and interact in today are invariably cloaked in see-through skins of glass.

Early modernists dreamed about the ever-growing ubiquity of transparency too, beginning with Bruno Taut's iconic Glass Pavilion (1914) at the Cologne Deutscher Werkbund Exhibition, the clean lines of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, and the all-glass facade of Philip Johnson's house in New Canaan, Connecticut. It was of fascination for Marcel Duchamp, the Surrealists, and other artists--each of whom are part of a long and complex lineage of which Romberg's practice is now a part.

Romberg, however, is uniquely positioned in the present, and he is therefore able to interrogate its ideological underpinnings at this particular moment in late modernity.

These elements within Romberg's work dispose his practice to another reading, one that engages his self-positioning in relation to modernism. His meditations turn toward transparency and archivization, and engage in spectacle and theatricalization. Romberg is particularly interested in addressing his generation's non-recognition of history--in particular, the history of the avant-garde with which his artistic community has always identified. In privileging memory and history in his works, he is perhaps implicitly criticizing his generation for not having done so enough.

According to one reading, his generation neither anticipated, nor fully theorized, the implications of a permanent or sustained avant-garde, nor the fundamental complicities and institutional compromises such a project demands. By marginalizing questions concerning the future of the avant-garde, they bequeathed generations such as ours conceptual categories and dichotomies that are no longer useful or valid, such as the distinction between a bourgeois and an oppositional culture, between politics and aesthetics, and between the periphery and center. Even when certain artists did think about such questions--including, in an earlier moment, André Breton and Bertolt Brecht, who never ceased thinking about their present and future--their ideas were nevertheless superseded by the emergence of theory, which equally affected artists and critical responses.

For Romberg there is no one particular history to uphold or recover. It is for this reason that we find in Romberg's videos myriad references to past histories and legacies. If Charlie Chaplin, Che Guevara, and the aforementioned examples figure repeatedly in the videos, it is not because he is blindly drawing upon their pop mythology. Rather, he is seeking to question

through playful and peculiar juxtapositions the habitual ways we tend to process cultural references such as these. Among the central questions to which the work gives rise we must therefore include the role of memory and history in late modernity. In earlier works such as +/- 2000, even, Romberg expresses his interest in moving beyond dominant histories by recovering “alternative” practices and sensibilities that enable other ways of thinking about social and political engagement. This is also an evasive gesture, which accounts for Romberg’s tendency to adopt various aesthetic codes at once in order to avoid being easily pinned down. But it prompts the question of what precisely he stands for—a question that Romberg himself is consciously and conspicuously asking himself, as well us, to consider.

Our proximity to, but also our increasing distance from, Romberg’s historical period enables a few concluding remarks. In a future moment when nobody recognizes Charlie Chaplin or Che Guevara with the cultural or political immediacy they do today, how will Romberg’s works be read? How will his collage technique find its legibility? Perhaps his work will find its most pronounced reception in that particular moment when a taste emerges for its periodicity, much like those old vinyl records of yesterday. In reproducing these videos in this publication, we have made a conscious decision as curators to encourage such considerations by placing these works not in the institutional archive but rather in the public domain, where they may in turn enable new forms of heterogeneity to emerge.

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