

Jeffrey Shaw

Revolution, a monument for the television revolution (1990)

Catalogue text by Maurice Nio

Imago, fin de siècle in Dutch contemporary art

Rijksdienst beeldende Kunst/Mediamatic

ISBN 0920-7864

One moment of despair proved to be enough to turn the bulwark of power into a house of cards and to bring it down. Television painfully revealed the confusion of Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu as they had to stand by and watch from the balcony how he staged party demonstration suddenly turned against them. The spark caught on – with the help of television – and on Thursday afternoon, 21 December 1989, Romania was overwhelmed by revolution. From one day to another television underwent a total change: from a dictatorial and repressive medium into a really democratic and revolutionary one. At last its true power could start to flourish, at last it could show, *as an extension of the eye*, what it was capable of. While we were only allowed to receive their revolution in doses, the Romanians could follow it in real time and unedited. This time it was not the television exploiting the events as sensational subject matter (as is usually the case, for example on CNN), this time the events exploited television *as a sensational medium*.

In memory of the Romanian television revolution and in honour of the modern trinity of Food, television and revolution, Jeffrey Shaw has made a monument allowing the viewer physically to launch three hundred years of revolution. *Revolution* consists of a man-sized column with a monitor placed on top of it. The column is fitted with a handle. By pushing this handle, you can make the column turn. When you push it clockwise, the monitor screen will show an image of millstones grinding corn into flour. When you push it anti-clockwise, 180 'revolution images' will appear, based on iconographic material from the same period as the revolutionary event (by means of collage, colouring, distortion and drawing, the meaning of the original visual material is enhanced and renewed). Therefore, the installation is a kind of time machine which takes you back in time from the Romanian television revolution and allows you to survey three hundred years of revolutions.

[...] It is not the first time that Jeffrey Shaw has concerned himself with revolution. In 1988, together with Tjebbe van Tijen, he set up the project *An Imaginary Museum of Revolution* (the 180 images are part of this project). A few weeks after writing this article, the author was very deservedly confronted by the revolution specialist Tjebbe van Tijen with a number of profound inaccuracies in the text. Most of them are concerned with grossly overrated role of television as a catalyst in the revolutionary process. In Tjebbe van Tijen's opinion, television is instrumental not *catalytic*. For example, the confrontation in Timisoara had already taken place before Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu's notorious balcony scene. Furthermore, there are rumours (and even evidence) that the television revolution was no more than a farce. Romanian television does not appear to have changed at all: as ever, it feeds on blood, violence and death. So the Romanian television revolution is nothing more than an episode of the television serial *The Great Revolutions* (we could even seriously consider the question whether this television revolution really happened at all). All this proves once more how dangerous it is to abandon yourself to euphoria. From now on we will look at television with a cold piercing gaze, once again.