

David Claerbout Doesn't Believe in the Arrow of Time

Spike Magazine, February 16, 2026

Julieta Aranda

SPIKE

ARTIST TALK

By Julieta Aranda

16 February 2026

David Claerbout, Korschthal Esch, Video Art

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Still from David Claerbout, *The woodcarver and the forest*, 2025, single-channel video, color, stereo sound, c. 22 hours

At a playful exhibition at Korschthal Esch, Luxembourg, the new media artist calls for letting meaning grow slowly in the viewer – and teases the notion of collecting a video 1000 years long.

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David Claerbout (*1969), the Belgium-born new media artist, is an artist with whom I have always felt a strong kinship, mainly in that both of our practices center the matter of time. I recently traveled to Luxembourg to see "Five Hours, Fifty Days, Fifty Years," a comprehensive exhibition of his work organized by the Kerschthaler Esch, that allows for a very generous encounter with his oeuvre. The show looks in depth at David's relationship to the image and to representation-through-images, as well as to questions of vulnerability, absurdity, and duration, thematized and narrated in works that enmesh a highly photographic register within digital constructions of reality.

Julieta Aranda: I've been trying to look at your exhibition's gestures, or how the installation is ordered, in terms of time. I don't mean chronological time, but rather in the sense of how time becomes a material in your work. I want to approach this conversation from that angle, which is already there in the title of the show: "Five Hours, Fifty Days, Fifty Years."

David Claerbout: With a whopping 2,500 square meters at our disposal, we decided to fully lean into this abundance, not just spatially, but temporally as well. I did something quite unorthodox by accepting co-curator Ory Dessau's proposal to show some of the works twice. That meant compromising projection quality in some cases, because every duplicated work effectively doubles the budget. The effect is uncanny: two floors that look almost identical. Visitors walk in, and go: "Wait, didn't I just see this?" before doing a U-turn and heading back out, while in fact they're actually five hours later in film time. That was at the heart of our approach: generous space, generous time.

JA: How many works did you double?

DC: I think about four of the roughly fifteen works being shown: *Bordeaux Piece* (2004), *Olympia* (2016), *Backwards Growing Tree* (2023), and *The woodcarver and the forest* (2025), all works in which I have engaged with extreme duration.

For me, this was very experimental. I probably wouldn't permit myself to do this in another context, but here, I felt free to play. We didn't conceptualize it too much at first, but I came to see it as an opportunity – a chance to unsettle chronological time. The best way to do that is to pretend you're cooperating with it – to create the impression you're aligned with it – because the truth is, we're trapped inside it anyway.

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Olympia (The real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years), start 2016, two-channel real-time projection, color, silent, HD animation, 1000 years

JA: I see a particular relationship between *Olympia* (The real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years) and *Backwards Growing Tree* – when they are placed together, something else emerges. Of course, you don't expect anyone to watch them for their entire duration [editor's note: *Backwards Growing Tree* is five years long, *Olympia* one thousand years]; that's not the point. They're moving images, and the moving image *is* time. Not just because there's a beginning and an end, but because with these particular works, there is no real possibility of a loop.

Backwards Growing Tree is five years long; is the tree it five years old?

DC: Actually, I suspect it's much older. When I found the tree in Italy while hiking several years ago, I spent about fifteen minutes with it and never went back. I had been looking for the tree for many years. When I found it, I knew it.

The tree is slightly malformed, because it grows on a hill, exposed to the wind; the climate there is harsh. It looks forever-young because it has a hard life – it's always shredding branches. While I was looking at it, one suddenly snapped, which sparked the idea to recreate it in the film. But of course, what is central here is the absurdity of waiting to detect changes in a tree.

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The woodcarver and the forest, 2025. Installation view, Kongschthal Esch, Esch-sur-Azette, 2025. Photo: Christof Weber

JA: There's something similarly absurd in *Olympia*, about waiting one thousand years for Berlin's Olympic Stadium to turn into a ruin. But beyond its inherent absurdity, something I find very poignant is that the works have opposite temporal flows: *Olympia* moves towards its end; *Backwards Growing Tree* moves towards its beginning.

DC: I noticed that the interest in the work is related to the perception of time in the place where it is shown. In some contexts the perspective was distinctly Western: owning, appropriating time; elsewhere, the work resonated with a more Buddhist view of time as cyclical. Same piece, different readings.

My secret pleasure was imagining a collector who is, let's say, seventy years old when he acquires the work, and seventy-five when the work "ends." The uncomfortable question then becomes: "What did I do in those five and a half years, apart from growing older?" After all, I only gave him a slowly shrinking tree. It's a bit like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (Oscar Wilde, 1890).

It's a very discreet work. Only at the very end do you discover that the film has been running backwards. None of the visible phenomena – the wind, the clouds, the rain – give this away. But after five years, when two figures arrive and pull the tree out of the ground, one realizes that they were planting it.

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I try to let the images have several narratives, instead of having power over a single, final one. And this is, of course, futile – completely utopian.

JA: Looking at your works together, there is a sense of vulnerability in your subjects. In earlier works – *The Stack* (2002), *Sunrise* (2009), *Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain* (2013) – this vulnerability is anchored in the human subject, and it hints at social inequalities. Then, in later works, the environment begins to creep in. The vulnerability extends beyond the human, both in terms of non-human beings and of the environment. And yet, it is always people that produce these vulnerable conditions. I don't know if "political" is the right word to describe this, but there is something that has to do with justice or ethics or balance, that I could feel moving through the exhibition.

DC: Yes. And that's where the question of representation becomes unavoidable. If I think about *The Stack*, there is a glorious interplay of light unfolding around this homeless person that is sleeping in the darkness of the foreground. The critique is always: "There is this comfortable Belgian artist, glorifying the sublime beauty of the light, just like 18th- and 19th-century landscape painters would have idealized the peasant with the cart and the cow ..." I've never believed we have that kind of power over the image. Personally, I feel I should try to approach the motifs in an image as if I was its caretaker, and I try to let the images have several narratives, instead of having power over a single, final one. And this is, of course, futile – completely utopian. These works are exercises in beginnings, and perhaps little more than that – the political component is real, but it's not everything, and more often than not, it remains in the background.

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Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain, 2013, single-channel video projection, HD animation, color, silent, endless

JA: How do you put together “being a custodian of the image” with how time plays in your work?

DC: Well, I don't believe in the arrow of time. I think it's a very convenient proposal – our technology is built around it – but it's still a fallacy. There's a reason why I work with images that appear to be photographic. They inspire trust – you think you know how to relate to them because you know the apparatus. Yet I treat the surface of the image as a world that ultimately remains inaccessible to us. When you go to an exhibition, you look at images, and become absorbed by them. I always insist on introducing something into the images, so that, sooner or later, you realize there is something artificial about the proposal. I belong to a school of thought that insists: these are representations. They tell us something about our time, but they are unable to carry us away.

JA: But even if you don't believe in the arrow of time, it plays a role there, doesn't it?

DC: Time is the only real encounter, even if it often happens with a delay. It may even be necessary to go home, leave the exhibition, and only then allow the work to reach you. I try to resist the call to deliver emotions on the spot.

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What is much more important to me is the missed encounter. Sometimes it's literal. *The woodcarver*, for example, places you inside a building, and it's quiet; then, it moves outside, where it's sunny and the air is full of birds. You're always meeting the character in an "off" timing. It can be frustrating, but it's deliberate.



JA: I would like to hear about your relationship with digital imaging technologies, and how you use them to present transformation and decay.

DC: Digital decay is a subject that interests me a lot. The digital – and its relatives, the virtual and software – are bound together by the same promise: the promise of an immaculate future. A future that cannot be destroyed, only updated. It's one of the last remnants of modernity.

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Yet I keep wondering what's behind this promise. Is it a willingness to let go of matter, dirt, weight, history? Are we ready to turn around and tear all of that down? The shift from hardware to software – does it really make life lighter? Or is it destructive? It's very difficult to answer this question. Whatever you say, you're probably partly wrong. That's why I work with motifs like the Olympic Stadium – you know *where* it is and *what* it is, it's heavily inflected with political significance – or deliberately simpler ones, like trees.

We still lack a culture of thinking about aging in software or virtuality. Everything is constantly covered up by updates. Yet digital ruin is already there – we just don't want to see it.

There's a reason why I work with images that appear to be photographic. They inspire trust – you think you know how to relate to them because you know the apparatus. Yet I treat the surface of the image as a world that ultimately remains inaccessible to us.

JA: You sometimes see it in museum acquisitions, of works made for Netscape or for Flash. How do you preserve something that no longer runs?

DC: Exactly, the reality of digital technologies is that they are in transition. When I was young, I was thinking about digitizing memories. Was it to remember better, or to forget better?

At one point, I began seeking answers in biology. Technology, of course, follows money, but it also echoes our understanding of the nervous system. When the recent AI wave hit, I was initially skeptical. Later, I found myself impressed by the analogies between artificial intelligence and neuronal processes. That's quite genius.

I recently reread a passage by [psychiatrist and philosopher Iain McGilchrist](#) on the brain and language. He argues that our political systems and digital binaries mirror an imbalance in how we attend to the world: a tilt toward focused, manipulative attention at the expense of wider, contextual awareness. Whether metaphorical or not, that idea has guided much of my work – this tension between caring for organic life and immersion in digital systems.

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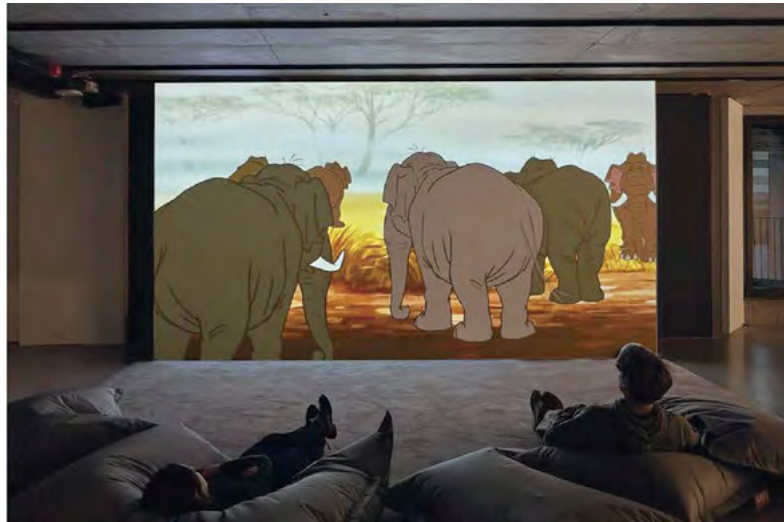
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The pure necessity, 2016, single-channel video projection, 2D animation, color, stereo audio, 50 min. Installation view, Kunschthol Esch, Esch-sur-Azette, 2025. Photo: Christof Weber

JA: I want to move toward forests, because of how they recur and are transformed throughout your work. Seeing them together, I was struck by the transformation from one forest to another. In *The woodcarver*, a living forest becomes a forest of spoons. You never directly show the former being chopped, yet the progression is clear.

DC: I'm very interested in the background. In Disney's *The Jungle Book* (1967), the budget went into animating movement, creating animals that could behave like humans, while the background artists were forced to reduce the forest or jungle into a handful of repeating motifs.

That contradiction – a jungle built from poor, recycled trees – fascinated me. For *The pure necessity* (2016), we used an algorithm that erased all the human traces, and kept the background. It worked precisely because the vegetation is endlessly repeated. It felt like a living metaphor: the background, time and again, is always the one being sacrificed.

Industrial forests are another example. They look efficient, but they are fragile, like chickens in a factory farm.

JA: That difference in time registers came up for me too – like the idea that, unless we share the same temporal scale, we can't recognize another form of life.

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DC: Exactly. We constantly construct the world we live in: at least half of what we observe is what we project. That's why images are so powerful – and so dangerous.

The digital – and its relatives, the virtual and software – are bound to ether by the same promise: the promise of an immaculate future. A future that cannot be destroyed, only updated. It's one of the last remnants of modernity.

JA: Thinking about *The woodcarver*, the introduction of man-made tools felt significant. There's a pleasure there, but also something disturbing.

DC: In a way, it's like an ASMR video. They promise restoration and healing, but they are actually industries of extraction: you're meant to feel good while something is being consumed. Something similar happens with *The woodcarver and the forest*. There are moments in the film where you see thousands of spoons, and the woodcarver turns into a kind of serial killer. The work is not about pointing a finger; it's fully complicit in the destruction. Plus, I consume your time, and I spent plenty of money while making that film. The point is to let it grow slowly on the viewer – until you realize that pleasure and destruction were tangled together all along.

This was also my first, subtle use of generative AI. We designed parts of the imagery with AI, filmed traditionally, and then fed the material back into AI systems. The artificiality approaches quietly; you only see it if I want you to see it. It's too early for me to say exactly what *The woodcarver* will become for me, but I know I didn't want spectacle.

JA: I also noticed that there are a lot of birds in your work – heard more often than seen.

DC: People often ask me if I know a lot about trees or birds. I actually try not to. I don't want to master them. The dream is not knowledge, but attention.

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Birds are a bit of a provocation. What narrative can you expect from them? Somehow, my remaining ambition is to be remembered as the artist who exchanged narrative for bird sound.



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JA: To wrap up, I want to talk about *The Close* (2022), where I see you return to the very vulnerable human subject of your early films, but this time, with a sense of historical perspective.

DC: *The Close* has a lot to do with the history of the camera. I wanted to make an untraceable transition between the beginning and the end of the technology of the camera lens, while also thinking about how to deal with an image in all its extensions. How could I work with a small child, not just dealing with the image of the child, but to actually care for the child himself, which is the desire that comes to the surface. Even more pathetically, it's a silent film about a poor child, somewhere in the 1910s, where poverty becomes a kind of muteness: no money, no voice, as voting voices were only for the upper layers in society. At the end – knowing people might accuse the work of nostalgia – the film is carried by the music of Arvo Pärt, which makes it sound like a beginning. But these visual metaphors belong together: voicelessness, light, care. The moment you have an image, you have light, you have a future.



David Claerbout, 2024. Courtesy: Studio David Claerbout

David Claerbout

"Five Hours, Fifty Days, Fifty Years"

Konschthal Esch, Esch-sur-Azette, Luxembourg

18 Oct 2025 – 22 Feb 2026

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Review: David Claerbout Kasteel van Gaasbeek
Artforum, November, 2025
Tal Sterngast

ARTFORUM

REVIEWS LENNIK, BELGIUM

David Claerbout

Kasteel van Gaasbeek

By Tal Sterngast



David Claerbout, *The Woodcarver and the Forest*, 2025, 4K video, color, sound, 10 hours.

The meditative sound of woodworking dominates David Claerbout's new 4K video *The Woodcarver and the Forest*, 2025, shown for the first time in his solo exhibition "At the Window" at the Kasteel van Gaasbeek, west of Brussels. In the film we see a man inside a Brutalist glass-and-concrete building surrounded by a lush spruce forest. He is immersed in the slow, scrupulous labor of carving wooden spoons, always behind a wall of vertical glass windows through which he can see the forest.

The film alternates between sequences featuring the man inside the building and the forest outside. Video footage in the studio and in European forests, both AI and CGI images, coalesce flawlessly.

As the camera shifts from the silent interior behind the window, the world seems to hold its breath. Then outside screenlike wall separate and connect (physically and metaphorically) the film's two parts. Outside and inside stand in for image-making's multiple dichotomies that put the film in motion.

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As part of Claerbout's ongoing exploration of cinematic duration—the interconnection between the passage of time, consciousness (vision, perception), and the visible world—the onscreen time in the *The Woodcarver* always corresponds with actual time at the exhibition's location and portrays a process that would ultimately last thirteen years, the amount of time it would take, according to AI calculations, to carve spoons out of about ninety trees. It is a work that is meant to be lived with, or at least watched for hours, but that can never be fully seen. Like other works by Claerbout, most notably *Olympia (The real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years)*, which the artist dates 2016–3016, *The Woodcarver* continues to run even when no one is there to see it. *Olympia*, a thousand-year-long computer-generated replica of the 1936 Olympia Stadium in Berlin falling into decay over time, confronts organic time (the animated vegetation gradually consuming the building) and biological time (its viewers' finite lives) with the mythical-ideological-political time span proclaimed by the Nazi Reich. But *The Woodcarver*, designed using generative AI and brought to life by a dedicated film team, is more attuned to the rhythm of breathing as a primal measurement of time, which precedes what the artist calls the domestication of time by chronometry.

The labyrinthine interiors of the picturesque castle, a nineteenth-century fabrication of a medieval fort, are covered in heavy wood decorations echoed by the self-devouring activity of the wood-carver. Earlier works by Claerbout installed among the museum's collections of furniture and applied arts appear as spectral images in the dark dungeon-like rooms. *Breathing Bird*, 2012—Claerbout's work is filled with the sound and images of birds—is a two-channel video loop on two flat screens. It shows two canaries facing each other on either side of a window. The exhalation in the cold air outside creates condensation on the glass—a sign of life and of the impulse to communicate. It also reverberates the wood-carver's separation from the forest and the image's separation from the tangible world.

In the video work *Piano Player*, 2002, a woman runs through monotonous rain. Once indoors, she hears piano music and follows its sound until she reaches a room in which she sees a young girl playing. She stands there on the threshold, watching. Meanwhile, the music turns into an orchestral sound—a sublime contrast to daily reality—that detaches from the projected image and fills an actual space. The viewer, following the sound to a different room, is surrounded by the music.

Emotion is banished from narrative and replaced by phenomena in Claerbout's work. We never see the man outside felling trees, but as the film slowly progresses, we understand: Under the image's perfected surface of mindfulness, a relentless auto-cannibalistic deforestation apparatus is at work.

Dark Optics': David Claerbout's Unstable Images

Ocula, October 22, 2025

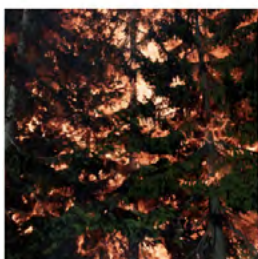
Finn Blythe



By Finn Blythe - 22 October 2025, Luxembourg

At first glance, it could be a frame from a high-definition nature documentary: a stand of trees, light slanting through foliage, smoke rising in delicate, painterly plumes. Look closer and the image insists you look again: the leaves tremble, shadows lengthen, wind animates branches—but the flames are locked, frozen in a single, unresolved instant. This is *Wildfire (meditation on fire)* (2019–2020), a cameraless CGI scene built in a real-time engine and then arrested at the one element we expect to move.

Shown on monumental LED screens in cold, resonant spaces, like Antwerp's Saint Nicholas Chapel in 2022 or Passage Sainte-Croix in Nantes last year, the work unsettles both eye and body: viewers instinctively register heat where none exists. It's a fitting point of entry to the practice of the Belgian artist David Claerbout, who, over the past 25 years, has become one of the most incisive interrogators of what happens when images slow, stop, or slip free of their technological origins. Working between photography, film, simulation, and drawing, Claerbout uses time as both material and subject, asking us to inhabit images rather than simply look at them.



David Claerbout, *Wildfire (meditation on fire)* (2019–2020). Single channel video projection, 3D animation, stereo audio, color, 24 min, in collaboration with Musée Brugge Courtesy Emanuel Hoffmann Foundation, on permanent loan to the Öffentliche Kunstsammlung Basel.



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Ocula, October 22, 2025

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This inquiry is brought into sharp focus in his latest major institutional exhibition, *Five Hours, Fifty Days, Fifty Years*, running at Korschthal Esch in Luxembourg until 22 February 2026. Bringing together key works from across Claerbout's career—including *Wildfire*, *Olympia*, *Birdcage*, and *The woodcarver and the forest*—the exhibition traces the evolution of his thinking around duration, simulation, and the porous boundary between the real and the virtual.

Claerbout's artistic motivations emerged early. As a young painter and draughtsperson, he found himself drawn not to cinematic movement but to stillness. 'I had trouble processing the moving image and finding moments of significance within it,' he reflects over a video call. 'I was always drawn to the stillness of the photographic image, especially those that were hidden in books and libraries that were calling for my help to get out of there and give them a second life.' This urge to rescue images from dormancy shaped his earliest works in the late 1990s, when he began gently animating archival photographs. In *Ruurlo, Borculoscheweg, 1910* (1997), leaves rustle almost imperceptibly in a rural photograph; in *Retrospection* (2000), a class portrait subtly shifts as if breathing. These are not spectacles but exercises in temporal excavation, bringing background processes—weather, light, time—into perceptual focus.

Claerbout's formation as a painter matters here. Born in Kortrijk in 1969, he spent his childhood indoors, drawing, rather than playing outside. Trained at the National Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, he developed a meticulous, procedural approach that would underpin even his most technologically advanced works. Though never a confident speaker in his younger years, he describes language itself as 'a visual system that has nothing to do with the voice', a statement that illuminates how his works operate: less as stories than as visual grammars unfolding in time.



David Claerbout, *Ruurlo, Borculoscheweg* (1910). Single channel video projection, black & white, silent, 10 min loop. Courtesy the artist.

His admiration for artists who combine conceptual ambition with procedural rigour was formative. 'I was highly in admiration of artists like [Jeff Wall](#) or [Stan Douglas](#),' he recalls, 'by coincidence two Canadian artists but both with complex procedural thinking, who seem to gather so much with so much liberty.' From the outset, Claerbout's work has positioned itself within this lineage: conceptually ambitious, technically precise, and deeply concerned with how images structure perception.

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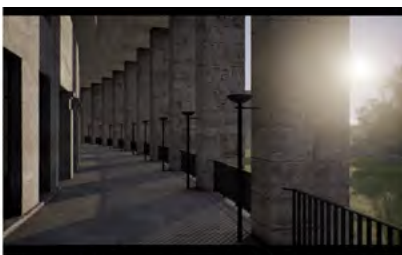
Finn Blythe

Over time, this concern developed into what Claerbout calls 'photographic madness': a worry that the camera, once a source of communal material, now generates fragmented, private 'hallucinations'. 'I see the day and age in which we live as an age in which these common sources, which were held together by the photographic apparatus, are falling apart,' he says. 'Hallucinations cause conspiracy theories. They cause all sorts of breakdowns in what we have in common. And they promote a sense of highly individualistic perception.'

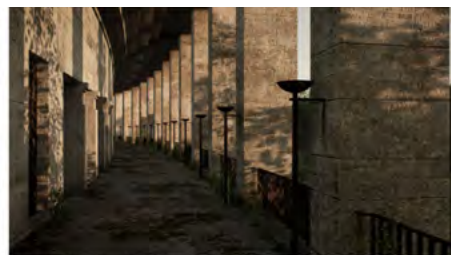
For Claerbout, this is not simply a cultural phenomenon but a neurological one. 'Up to this day I studied the neurological pathways involved in perception and memory and found to my astonishment that the pathways are actually the same,' he says. 'The brain is essentially a prediction machine. We assemble the world in a way which is strikingly similar to the technologies that we develop and that could lead us to mistakenly believe that our organic perception resembles those technologies. But it's actually the other way around.' Claerbout's works make this instability visible, turning images into spaces where the viewer's perceptual apparatus is forced to do the work.



David Claerbout, *Olympia* (The real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years) (2016–ongoing). Two channel real-time projection, colour, silent, HD animation, 1000 years (with support from VAF Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds). Courtesy Collection M HRA / Collection Flemish Community.



David Claerbout, *Olympia* (The real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years) (2016–ongoing). Two channel real-time projection, colour, silent, HD animation, 1000 years (with support from VAF Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds). Courtesy Collection M HRA / Collection Flemish Community.



David Claerbout, *Olympia* (The real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years) (2016–ongoing). Two channel real-time projection, colour, silent, HD animation, 1000 years (with support from VAF Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds). Courtesy Collection M HRA / Collection Flemish Community.

This philosophical attention to perception is matched by a technical evolution in his work. By the mid-2010s, Claerbout had begun to abandon the lens altogether, moving into CGI and real-time simulation. He even paused his studio practice for nearly a year to research language-based image simulation, understanding it not just as a tool but as a new cultural condition. *Olympia* (2016–ongoing), a real-time simulation of Berlin's Olympic Stadium that is programmed to decay over centuries according to live weather data, marked a decisive break with conventional photography.

Claerbout calls this shift 'dark optics': a way of making images beyond light. But he never fully embraces the virtual; instead, he approaches it with a tactile sensibility and encourages viewers to do the same. 'The virtual is an in-between state,' he maintains. 'It has never completely left where it came from, and it will never completely arrive where it's headed. That in turn makes the [viewer] use every sensorial possibility available to the body to populate those images.'

That duality also converges in *Birdcage* (2023), a film that begins and ends in stillness. It opens with a sequence of nature shots—a tranquil lake framed by willows, bees buzzing in golden sunlight, flowers nodding in a gentle breeze. The scene feels almost too composed, its bucolic calm edged with artifice, as if the world were holding its breath. When the camera pauses on a cluster of roses, a red filter descends, and the illusion begins to slip. From afar, an explosion, suspended in motion, flares before a stately house. As the sound of birdsong fades, the camera begins a slow, hypnotic advance until it enters the suspended fireball itself. What had

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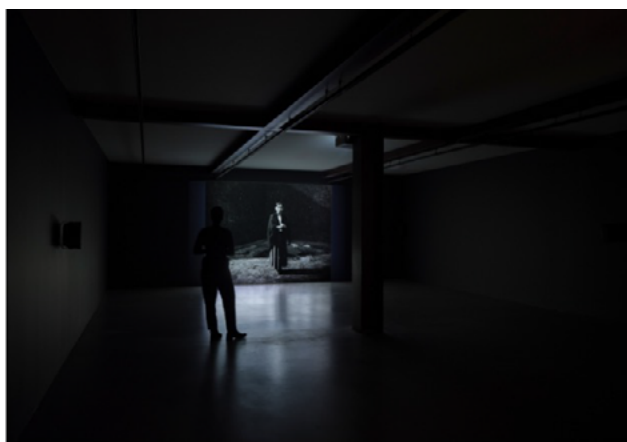
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Dark Optics': David Claerbout's Unstable Images

Ocula, October 22, 2025

Finn Blythe

appeared serene is revealed as a simulation of catastrophe, and at its centre two birds—a thrush and a starling—hang mid-flight, engulfed in flame. Claerbout stages this with the poise of René Magritte's *L'Empire des lumières* (1954), where daylight and darkness coexist in impossible balance. Here too, contradiction is sustained: calm and violence, life and image, coexist in the same breath. When the camera finally retreats, returning to the still lake and the re-emergence of birdsong, the world restores its order—but we no longer trust its peace.



Exhibition view: David Claerbout, *Five Hours, Fifty Days, Fifty Years*, Korschthal Esch, Luxembourg (18 October 2025–22 February 2026). Courtesy Korschthal Esch. Photo: Christof Weber.

The bird has been a recurring motif throughout Claerbout's career—from *Cat and Bird in Peace* (1996) to *Backwards Growing Tree* (2003)—always signalling the boundary between human and non-human temporalities. *The pure necessity* (2016), in which Claerbout and his team recreated every frame of Disney's *The Jungle Book* but stripped away the dialogue and anthropomorphism, is emblematic of his interest in non-human time. What remains of the film are ambient sounds and animal movements: a patient, slow temporality that resists narrative consumption.

Recent projects extend these questions into the terrain of artificial intelligence. *The woodcarver and the forest* (2025) stages a mythic encounter between human craft and automated generation. A woodcarver labours in a forest composed not of timber but of algorithm: trees and undergrowth generated via AI tools trained on woodland imagery stretch infinitely. Amid this forest, the artist carves wooden spoons by hand—a humble, tactile act—while surrounded by machine-grown simulacra of trees. Claerbout and his team then translate AI outputs back into filmed and drawn sequences, insisting on the human touch even within the proliferating machine world. Claerbout's attitude to AI balances scepticism with fascination. He likens generative AI images to a dessert made entirely of sugar: visually spectacular, but when you really taste it, it's found wanting. Yet he also concedes that AI can act as a revealing instrument that 'fills in a lot of gaps in your unconscious processes'. For Claerbout, AI is not a replacement for human authorship or perception but a tool that exposes what's ordinarily hidden, an echo of the unseen in the seen.

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David Claerbout, *The woodcarver and the forest* (2025). Single-channel video projection, colour, stereo sound, ca. 20 hours, and 7 black & white photos. In collaboration with Gaasbeek Castle and Korschthal Esch. Courtesy the artist and galleries Pedro Cera, Annet Gelink, Sean Kelly, Greta Meert, Esther Schipper, Rüdiger Schöttle.

Claerbout's critical engagement with technology extends beyond the studio. He is acutely concerned about the epistemic and political consequences of big tech. 'One thing I'm particularly worried about is the viral strength of conspiracy theories,' he says. 'Once you have echo chamber rhetoric, once technology allows this huge spreading, it becomes a very dangerous situation and one we currently have no alternative to counter with.' His response is not retreat but a call to historical consciousness: 'I think that is the cry for knowing your history.'

This scepticism extends to the art world itself, which Claerbout sees as often complicit in the very structures it critiques. 'One of my criticisms of the art world is that they have become a bunch of sheep, going to one biennial after the other, celebrating action in art for climate change. No, they're not. Hans Ulrich Obrist is on a plane every day.' He is equally frank about the environmental contradictions in his own work. His large-scale simulations and LED installations are resource-intensive; works like *Wildfire* stage ecological crisis through energy-heavy means. But he doesn't seek purity. Instead, his practice lays these tensions bare, asking audiences to dwell within the contradictions rather than gloss over them.

Time remains Claerbout's primary material. From the barely perceptible tremors of early works to the ecological and even geological durations of later simulations, he has consistently treated time not as a frame but as a medium in itself. His works resist preservation as static objects; he prefers to think of them as 'small signs to the future', adaptable gestures to be carried forward. His closing warning is less about technology than about historical vigilance: 'The danger is always in virtualisation; it's a question that haunts every generation,' he says. 'What modernisation does is it virtualises as much as it can in order to solve problems. But at the same time there is always a risk of discarding organic reality in favour of dehumanisation. So each generation needs to ask itself: where do we stop?' —[O]

David Claerbout: Five Hours, Fifty Days, Fifty Years is on view at Korschthal Esch in Luxembourg until 22 February 2026.

Main image: David Claerbout, *The woodcarver and the forest* (2025). Single-channel video projection, colour, stereo sound, ca. 20 hours, and 7 black & white photos. In collaboration with Gaasbeek Castle and Korschthal Esch. Courtesy the artist and galleries Pedro Cera, Annet Gelink, Sean Kelly, Greta Meert, Esther Schipper, Rüdiger Schöttle.

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David Claerbout: 5 hours, 50 days, 50 years at Korschthal Esch

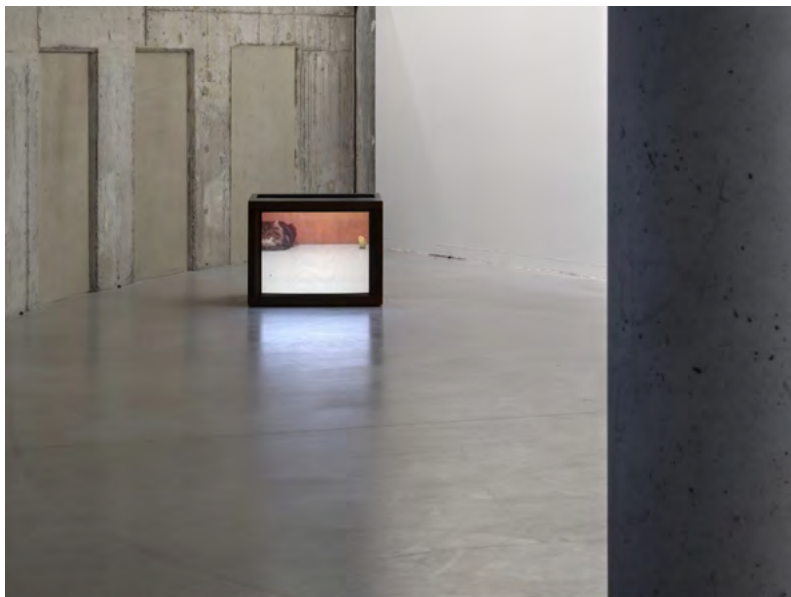
Elephant, November 5, 2025

Gabriela Acha

ELEPHANT

David Claerbout: 5 hours, 50 days, 50 years at Korschthal Esch

At Korschthal Esch, David Claerbout tests cognition through subtle distortions and the manipulation of time itself. [Gabriela Acha](#) explores how his digital environments turn time into both medium and illusion.



Installation view. *Cat & Bird in Peace*. Photo by Christof Weber

As the title *5 hours, 50 days, 50 years* suggests, David Claerbout's work is deeply concerned with the concept of time in the moving image. Although the motifs depicted in his films are diverse, they consistently engage with the paradoxical nature of cinematic temporality: the closer a film comes to representing real time, the more difficult it becomes for the viewer to endure. Conventional film narratives, therefore, rely on the condensation of time to produce a coherent and engaging experience. Time and motion constitute the two fundamental dimensions of the moving image, and Claerbout's practice is dedicated to manipulating these in order to unsettle the viewer's perception and challenge their cognitive expectations.

At the Korschthal Esch, Claerbout's exhibition unfolds across three floors, each largely dedicated to a single work. By chance, I began my visit on the third floor, where I first encountered *The Woodcarver and the Forest* (2025). From there, I moved on to *Olympia* (2016) and *Backwards Growing Tree* (2023), two works projected side by side in the adjacent room. I then descended to the second floor, where, directly beneath *Olympia* and *Backwards Growing Tree*, the very same films were being shown again.

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David Claerbout: 5 hours, 50 days, 50 years at Korschthal Esch

Elephant, November 5, 2025

Gabriela Acha



Installation view. *Wildfire, Mantova Pigeon and Oilworkers* at Korschthal Esch. Photo by Christof Weber

“Wait, what?” I thought at first, before assuming that this must simply be the order of things in *5 hours, 50 days, 50 years*. Perhaps this was what the “madness” mentioned in the introductory wall text referred to – the rupture between my vision and my perception of the world, the so-called “feeling of smooth hallucination.” [1] In this exhibition, cognition is tested not only through subtle distortions and machinic image generation but also through the unexpected manipulation of physical space. I eventually reconciled with what I had initially regarded with skepticism and allowed myself to be carried by the smooth hallucinations devised by Claerbout. [2]

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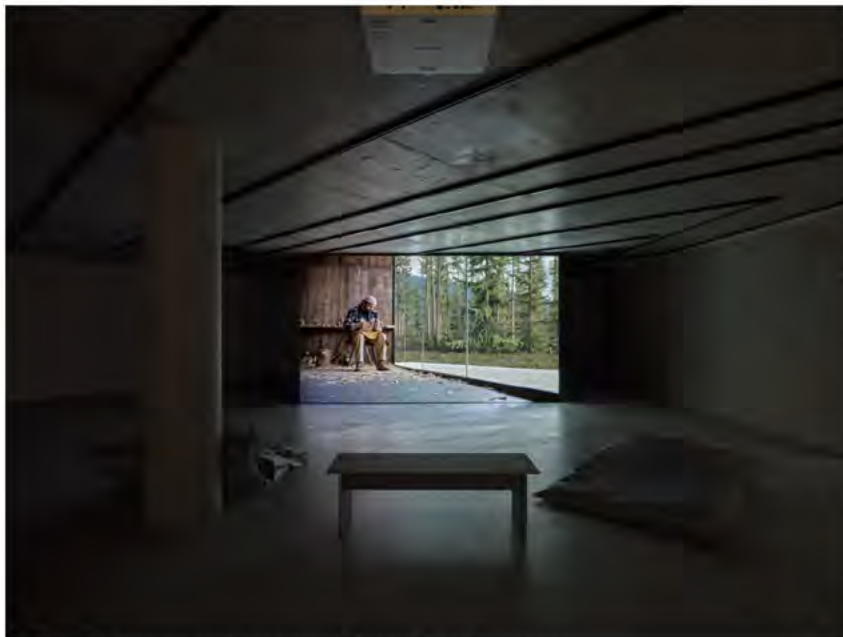
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David Claerbout: 5 hours, 50 days, 50 years at Korschthal Esch
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Installation view. *Olympia* at Korschthal Esch, 2025. Photo by Christof Weber

I then watched *Olympia* (*The real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the course of a thousand years*) for the second time – or rather, a minuscule fragment of it, since the complete work spans an entire millennium. Such duration is made possible through computer simulation, which reconstructs the stadium built for the Nazi 1936 Olympic Games and renders its gradual decay over time. The simulation operates according to real-time environmental parameters – such as the position of the sun, the intensity of light, humidity levels and other atmospheric conditions. The resulting scene is thus generated entirely from data and mathematical modeling, without the direct intervention of a camera or a human hand.



Installation view. *The woodcarver and the forest* at Korschthal Esch, 2025. Photo by Christof Weber

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I entered the space directly beneath *The Woodcarver and the Forest* (2025) on the second floor, where I – now unsurprised – found myself watching the same film once again. Sitting on a similar cushion placed at the same spot, I again watched the bearded logger carve a piece of wood into the shape of a spoon, in his brutalist villa surrounded by a dense – most likely artificially generated – forest. The amplified sound of the metal sliding and rubbing against the wooden surface became unexpectedly pleasant, reminiscent of the “oddly satisfying” short videos of machines cutting pasta, mixing paint or smoothing melted chocolate into moulds. This effect is, in fact, deliberately achieved, informed by the Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) phenomenon, through which Claerbout seeks to deceive the senses.



The woodcarver and the forest, 2025. Single channel colour video projection, stereo audio. Courtesy the artist.

Woodcarving is a popular form of mindful resistance to the omnipresence of screens and digital devices. Claerbout, however, transforms this gesture of withdrawal into a conceptual paradox: he presents, on a screen, an activity designed precisely to evade it – extended over a twenty-hour duration. As the exhibition curator Ory Dessau observes in its catalogue, the work functions as “a ruthless deforestation machine disguised as an image of mindfulness,” exposing a latent violence underlying both ecological exploitation and aesthetic contemplation. The work thereby collapses the distinction between meditative attention, mechanical production and environmental destruction.

The latter turned a recurrent topic in Claerbout’s work, present in works such as *Wildfire* (*Meditation on Fire*) (2019–2020), a simulated close-up of a forest fire filmed from a position no human body could inhabit. This inhuman perspective, compressed into a twenty-four-minute temporal frame, stages an impossible proximity to catastrophe. Claerbout’s sustained engagement with cycles of creation and destruction thus acquires a posthuman dimension where nature and technology, as well as perception and simulation converge in a single image that reveals the limits of human experience – and its fragility.

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The woodcarver and the forest, 2025. Single channel colour video projection, stereo audio. Courtesy the artist.

Human decentring is a constant in Claerbout's practice, which often navigates art, entertainment, and parasience at their intersection. Although his work depends on human-made technology, his process minimises direct human intervention: no camera operator, no filmed subjects. Yet the simulations remain fundamentally anthropogenic, as their parameters are set by human intention. The human hand is displaced, not erased, operating through algorithms rather than gestures. Each work constructs a world sustained by simulated temporality, where the hyperreal supplants the real. As Jean Baudrillard observed, the proximity to reality in the hyperreal produces its own disappearance, and Claerbout's images evoke that tension: the more reality they approximate, the more they estrange it. His digital environments thus stage the paradox of contemporary perception, where cognition oscillates between belief and disbelief. In this sense, Claerbout transforms cinematic duration into algorithmic process, and thus time into both medium and illusion – an artificial construct through which the “real” is continually deferred.

[1] Ory Dessau, *David Claerbout*, 2025, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, Köln and Korschthal Eschp, p.8

[2] Ory Dessau, *David Claerbout*, 2025, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, Köln and Korschthal Eschp, p.8

David Claerbout, resucitar e inventarse las imágenes

El Cultural, November 1, 2023

Luisa Espino

EL ESPAÑOL

EL CULTURAL



'Birdcage', 2023. Foto: Galería Pedro Cera

ARTE

David Claerbout, resucitar e inventarse las imágenes

La galería portuguesa Pedro Cera inaugura un nuevo espacio en Madrid con dos vídeos del artista belga.

1 noviembre, 2023 - 02:21

Luisa Espino

En la última edición de ARCO participaron 211 galerías, 71 de ellas españolas y 17 portuguesas, país en el que la feria tiene instalado su satélite desde 2017. Y entre los nombres lusos, dos de las galerías más potentes son Cristina Guerra y **Pedro Cera**, que acude a la feria desde 1999 y acaba de dar el salto definitivo a Madrid con **un nuevo espacio en su 25 aniversario**.

La expansión sorprende, pues mantiene su sede en Lisboa, pero no es un hecho aislado y se suma a otros nombres de galerías internacionales –la alemana carlier | gebauer, la colombiana La Cometa o la cubana El Apartamento– que también han dado el paso. El mercado español, a nadie se le escapa, no es el más boyante, pero es también una manera de acercarse a los coleccionistas latinos con casa en Madrid y de fichar a nombres españoles.

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David Claerbout, resucitar e inventarse las imágenes

El Cultural, November 1, 2023

Luisa Espino

Cera ya trabajaba con **Antonio Ballester Moreno** y cuenta con una nómina de autores de amplia trayectoria como Berlinda De Bruyckere, Tobias Rehberger o David Claerbout (Kortrijk, Bélgica, 1969), que ha sido el encargado de inaugurar el espacio de la calle Barceló con un vídeo recién salido del horno, *Birdcage* (2023), y una obra anterior, *The Close* (2022). Los dos, como ya se presupone de Claerbout, son **películas de cuidadísima factura en las que se cruza lo real y lo construido** (trabaja con imágenes encontradas y con creaciones en 3D), el movimiento y la quietud, la memoria y la fragmentación en un *totum revolutum* en el que no es fácil distinguir lo real de lo inventado.

Dos niños se convierten en los protagonistas improvisados de una película en la que, intencionadamente, no ocurre nada

En el primero de los vídeos –sin sonido, aunque se contamine del de la pieza de la planta baja–, el comienzo es pura calma: **unas relajantes vistas de los jardines** de una bucólica casa de campo en la que los insectos vuelan de flor en flor, los nenúfares flotan en el estanque y un sauce llorón se refleja en sus aguas. Pura fachada. Una fuerte explosión y un cambio cromático hace que todo salte por los aires, incluidos dos pajarillos de aspecto casi disecado, en los que quizá el filme se deleite demasiado.

Pero uno de los aspectos más interesantes de Claerbout, al que el público español recordará por su individual en el MNAC de Barcelona (*Olympia...*, 2017) o por la del CGAC de Santiago de Compostela en 2003, es su propio proceso creativo, que deja a la vista en esta exposición: formado en la especialidad de pintura, **apoya todos sus proyectos audiovisuales en fotogramas dibujados** como los de *Birdcage*, de factura entre puntillista e impresionista. De ellos dice Claerbout que le sirven para reconectar lo virtual (sus vídeos) con lo táctil, lo material (el papel).

[Bill Viola: "Uso la cámara como si fuera un pincel"]

Es más rotunda su película *The Close* (2022), en la planta baja de la galería, con la que rinde **un cierto homenaje al cine mudo**, la textura del blanco y negro y la estética de la *Street Photography* de los años 20. Dos niños se convierten aquí en los protagonistas improvisados de una película en la que, intencionadamente, no ocurre nada, pues son fruto de instantáneas sin autor. Combina esas imágenes con reconstrucciones en 3D que se deleitan en la figura de uno de los chicos e incorpora sonido, algo que no es habitual en muchos de sus trabajos, una pieza coral del compositor estonio Arvo Pärt acomodada con precisión a las imágenes.

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ARTFORUM



David Claerbout, *the "confetti" piece*, 2015–2018, double-channel video projection, 3-D animation, silent, color.
MOSCOW

David Claerbout

GARAGE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART
Krimsky Val, 9
March 26–May 3, 2021

The supplanting of the lens-based practices by the digital, David Claerbout proposes in his essay for the exhibition “Unseen Sound,” sealed the fate of photography’s claim to indexicality. What enters in its place, negating light-reliant media’s promise of transparency, are what Claerbout refers to as the Dark Optics—an atavistic return to a pre-photographic Dark Ages when visual culture had no purchase on objectivity or veracity. The four video works that make up the exhibition test the vagaries of that early claim as much as the dangers of its successor.

An ambiguous pastiche of digitally manipulated video, *the "confetti" piece*, 2015-2018, brings to mind an election-themed Brooks Brothers catalog. A panoply of generic Aryan types frozen in mute jubilation—their homogeneity broken only by a lone, silently screaming Black child—are looped in an ambling succession of still frames, forming a background to the work’s only moving element: a CGI splatter of confetti. In *Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment*, 2008, *Sections of a Happy Moment*, 2007, and *The Quiet Shore*, 2011, sequences of black-and-white images of families at leisure tease the viewer to imagine a *La Jetée*-like narrative while denying any cathartic foothold for interpretation. All of the pieces are displayed in the same room, bound together by anesthetic atonal muzak. The perfect soundtrack to one’s bored musings in a hotel lobby, it suggests both a knowing exacerbation of photography’s mnemonic promise and a deconstructive slashing of the narrative cinema’s emotional manipulation through musical cues. How strange it is, Claerbout seems to suggest, to take someone’s “having been there” as an emotional anchor—yet how disconcerting not to be able to.

— Valerie Mindlin

2020 Adelaide // International
Artlink, March 29, 2020
Chloé Wolifson

Artlink

2020 Adelaide//International

Chloé Wolifson

Review

29 March 2020

Samstag Museum of Art
University of South Australia
28 February – 18 September 2020



Brad Darkson, *Research for Hold Me*, 2020. Photo: Brad Darkson

A Telstra Touchfone, that classic landline model once found in many Australian homes, is mounted on the wall outside the entrance to Adelaide's Samstag Museum of Art. Lifting the handset allows us to eavesdrop on a family's conversation with Centrelink call centre staff. Listeners might catch a staff

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2020 Adelaide // International

Artlink, March 29, 2020

Chloé Wolfson

member trying to simplify a complex process for the client who, by the sounds of things, is doing the washing up while conducting the conversation via speakerphone, or perhaps they will hear the frustrating strains of Centrelink's hold music.

Hold Me by Brad Darkson, one of five presentations as part of the 2020 *Adelaide//International*, explores the architecture of bureaucracy and the way it choreographs our lives. The subject of Darkson's work is his own experience of addressing a "robo-debt" ascribed to him while working as an artist, sessional university teacher and freelance sole trader. Inverting this private setting into the public sphere, Darkson highlights the divides between the domestic and bureaucratic, between paid and unpaid labour, not to mention class and racial divides. A side-effect of our pandemic world is that social welfare has become a reality for many who never previously believed they would need it. These divides are dissolving and those whose skills were previously valued by the state now find themselves joining Darkson in the ever-lengthening Centrelink queue.

A lot has happened in the world since I visited Samstag during the launch of the Adelaide Festival a few weeks ago. The buzz of those opening events has been replaced by the buzzwords "social isolation" and "social distancing". Many a meme has been circulated poking fun at the idea: "I've been preparing for this my whole life". But while the World Wide Web provides a way for many to remain connected and continue their employment and other obligations, what of our physical bodies and the way they relate to each other and the spaces around us?

As Samstag Director and *Adelaide//International* curator Erica Green presciently writes, this year's iteration of the exhibition "looks to the ways in which built forms can make us aware of the social, spatial and temporal present". Across five exhibitions-within-an-exhibition, this ranges from the literal built form, to its imagining, reimagining, and dismantling. At the core of the exhibition and of Samstag itself is John Wardle Architect's work *Somewhere Other* (2018), a maze-like wooden concertina structure formed in the mind of an architect, informed by the work of an artist and filmmakers, and activated in the spatial and bodily interactions of the audience.

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John Wardle Architects, *Somewhere Other*, installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, 2020. Photo: Sam Noonan

Wardle worked with visual artist Natasha Johns-Messenger to develop and incorporate into *Somewhere Other* two mirrors which are set at angles within the structure in such a way as to confound the visitor's sense of trajectory through the space. At least, I think it is two mirrors. The unsettling cleverness of Johns-Messenger and Wardle's creation is the slippage of boundaries. Is that my shadow, or someone else's, approaching? Who is around the corner? Where am I headed? The disorientation is offset by the warmth and intimacy of the structure and its materials. The reddish tones of the work's wooden panelling contributing to a cocooning effect, while a bright red, blown-glass nasal-phallic protrusion at one end punctures the structure, creating a viewfinder containing a mirror which somehow draws in images from outside the gallery door. The external form, characterised by jutting asymmetry, is traced with straight lines of steel which cast zig-zagging shadows over the surface. These lines recall and celebrate the draughtspersonship of architectural practice, the mark of the architect's hand which is usually long gone by the time their work enters the built environment.

A bespoke flatpack in a world of Allen keys (a seam runs horizontally through its centre), *Somewhere Other* was originally shown in Venice at the 16th International Architecture Biennale and has journeyed across the seas and been reassembled in Adelaide. Its bellows-like structure and apertures suggest a long lens between Venice and Australia, playing with the motifs of the long-nosed Venetian mask and Ned Kelly's helmet. At Samstag it can be viewed from above through the atrium of the museum Wardle himself designed. When viewed from this aspect, *Somewhere Other* appears like a camouflaged creature resting on a leaf, its wooden panelling echoing the floorboards of the gallery. This structure-within-a-structure is experienced as serendipitous but is no doubt a result of Green's deep familiarity with Wardle's building.

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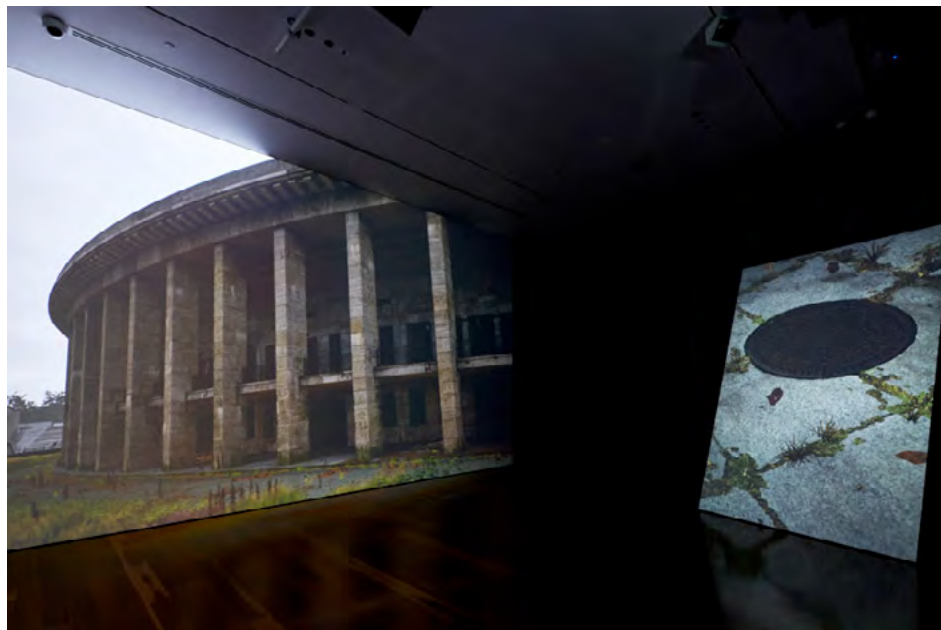
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Somewhere Other suggests it is possible to occupy a contemplative interior state while stickybeaking on the outside world. While this can obviously be understood in the context of contemporary life, particularly under the present circumstances, it also evokes the invention which inspired its form – the camera, by playing with the trickery of lenses, and bringing images from the exterior into its interior. This is also achieved through Coco and Maximilian’s video works, digital portals depicting architectural interiors that sit within an overall structure which is both enclosing and expansive.

Wardle’s work was not conceived as a miniature or fragment of an architecture project, but as an instrument to present an idea about placemaking. Belgian artist David Claerbout also considers placemaking in his work *Olympia (The real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years)* (2016 – ongoing). Hitler’s architect Albert Speer visualised the stadium, built for the 1936 Olympics, as simultaneously a homage to the glory of the Roman empire, and a monument to Nazi ascendancy that would gain gravitas as it crumbled into decrepitude over the following millennium. With the stadium now repurposed, Claerbout takes humans out of the picture, constructing a digital doppelganger which will algorithmically surrender to nature in real time. The human body is in one sense redundant in this scenario – the stadium is left to the forces of nature as flora creeps in and the seasons have their way with the building.



David Claerbout, *Olympia (the real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years)*, 2016. Installation view, Samstag Museum of Art. Photo: Sam Noonan

On the other hand, the human body is central to this work – the stadium was built as a monument to the magnificence of human achievement, and its monumental scale was intended to humble the individual. Claerbout’s work is conceived as a 1000-year undertaking, bigger than any of us but with the individual at its core – making, maintaining and viewing it. (The work is guaranteed to continue

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through Claerbout's lifetime.) The scaling of his video work, with its two screens, one wall-scale and horizontal, the other vertically presented at a lean, carefully considers the viewer's body. The larger screen pans around the stadium endlessly at a walking pace. Yet Claerbout's longitudinal approach to time challenges the fallibilities of the human body in the exhibition space, where attention spans wane.

In Georgia Saxelby's *Lullaby*, we also see monumental architecture, this time in direct interaction with the human body. Saxelby's work is part of *Effect in three movements*, the only presentation in 2020 *Adelaide//International* focusing on the work of women practitioners. The exhibition has a distinct tone, representing a softening, a folding, of the traditional structures and strictures dictated through the built environment. (In a sense Johns-Messenger's mirrors play a similar role in Wardle's work – folding and reopening the space in new ways and bringing humanity and humour to the serious business of architecture. Wardle professed to being surprised by the often-humorous reception of his work during its Venice presentation.)

In *Lullaby*, three red-clad figures occupy a neoclassical colonnade, performing individual and synchronised gestures against the soaring columns and endless steps. The two-channel video is projected wall-scale into the corner of a gallery space, the channels' central seam becoming a point of reflection and inversion for the images. The figures caress the white stone and wring their hands against a backdrop of water. Moving together, the angles of their bodies reflect those of the structure yet contrast with its immovability.



Georgia Saxelby, *Lullaby* (still from video performance), 2017, in collaboration with Viva Soudan and Bailey Nolan.
Photo: Kristin Adair

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While Saxelby's video is tucked away in a corner, Helen Grogan's work ruptures out of the walls and infiltrates other parts of the space with interventions intended to be altered by the artist during the exhibition. Titled *SET AND DRIFT (unfolding as 2-4 constellations for/of Samstag Museum of Art, 2020)* (2020), Grogan's work employs the "secondary architecture" of the gallery, exploring and exposing the behind the scenes elements, the fixtures and support structures that are usually invisible to most visitors. Banal video and photographic elements are positioned to draw viewers around the gallery, causing us to follow paths and sightlines we may not have otherwise. This is choreography both deliberate and open to chance.

In Zoë Croggon's series of sculptural relief works, women's fashion magazines are folded and collaged to juxtapose and superimpose bodies, objects and spaces. The curve of a jawline drifts into a swathe of fabric; a shoulder morphs into a handbag which switches into a stairwell. Croggon's works themselves are not entirely fixed – the magazines themselves are left in their rolled or folded state, and it's disconcerting to realise that these women are being bent and folded to fit these material trappings. This slipperiness of humans in the face of architecture can be seen across all the works in *Effect in Three Movements*, and new gestural relationships are tested.



Helen Grogan, *Set and Drift (unfolding as 2-4 constellations for/of Samstag Museum of Art, 2020)*. Installation view.
Photo: Sam Noonan

A few doors up in SASA Gallery, artist and architect Matthew Bird's exhibition *Parallaxis* centres on a video work depicting two figures crossing a starkly beautiful landscape with large wheel-like objects. Bird employs a coolly seductive sci-fi aesthetic to imagine a futuristic mapping scenario drawing on celestial surveying techniques. The two spacesuit-clad protagonists and their glowing wheels move gracefully and continually, in a paradoxical attempt to pin coordinates through perpetual movement

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as they cross vast salt lakes and bushland, encountering nineteenth-century architectural ruins along the way. Whilst mapping and surveying are central to humans establishing domestic settlements, Bird shows their unlimited potential when looking to the vastness of outer space.

Museums are always implicated in the choreography of the body through space, and a key element of exhibition-making considers the intellectual and physical narrative that plays out during a visitor's experience. Of the 2020 *Adelaide//International's* five exhibitions-within-an-exhibition, four are solo presentations and one a group show. The exhibitions of Bird and Darkson are located outside the walls of Samstag itself, creating a clear delineation for those projects, while Wardle and Claerbout's projects and *Effect in three movements* are located inside Samstag. Wardle's work sits at the heart of the space, inhabiting the entire of the ground floor gallery and able to be viewed from the first floor where Claerbout, as well as Croggon, Grogan and Saxelby's work, is found. Depending on whether visitors travel to the first floor via the lift or stairs, they might encounter Claerbout's work first, or Saxelby's. The slippage between these elements is inevitable and serves as a reminder of architecture's active role in the navigating and synthesising of exhibitions.



Matthew Bird, *Parallaxis*, installation view, SASA Gallery, University of South Australia. Photo: Sam Noonan

As Green states in her introduction to the catalogue, architecture has an “indispensable role as a ‘choreographer of human experience’”. Temporarily at least this has taken on new meanings. We dance around each other in space, instructed to leave a designated amount of room around our own bodies. Our domestic spaces take on new significance: backyards and front verandahs, balconies, the views from our windows, changing value as other options are denied. For some, a clear separation between home and work has been shattered, as work enters the domestic sphere. For others, the

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home-office has long been a reality, but it is now occupied by other members of our family. For many including those experiencing homelessness, the closure of public facilities will have a deep impact. COVID-19 has forced humans to re-examine their relationship with architecture.

It has also forced a re-examination of our relationship with time. While we wait for unknown, unspecified weeks and months in isolation, without work, without physical contact with our communities, architecture exists, persists, in the background, supporting, surrounding, interrupting, enduring, collapsing, being propped up. At Samstag, the apertures of Wardle's organic-geometric structure draw the gaze across an ancient-contemporary timeline; Claerbout's video piece imagines the present while creating the future; Saxelby, Grogan and Croggon rupture what seemed fixed; Bird's sci-fi-scape connects us with the universal expanse. And all the while we join Darkson and his family in their kitchen, on hold with Centrelink. This suite of exhibitions serves as a timely reminder of the dance that exists between space and time, and the capacity for architecture to conduct, contain, record and imagine possibilities for the human condition.

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David Claerbout dehumanizes jungle book's animals in 'The Pure Necessity'
designboom, January 29, 2020
Kieron Marchese

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david claerbout dehumanizes jungle book's animals in 'the pure necessity'

parasol unit presents 'the pure necessity,' belgian ar st david claerbout's reimagining of the 1967 film 'jungle book'. the near hour-long adapta on dispenses with the anthropomorphiza on of animals, copying the original's se ngs and characters but in a version that's more like a nature documentary than a disney film.

designboom had the opportunity to catch up with the ar st after he introduced 'the pure necessity' at engadin art talks (E.A.T.). the theme for the two day programme was 'silent – listen', exploring the many aspects and rela onships of silence and listening and the communica on of nature in its many facets, all themes that are central to claerbout's prac ce.



the pure necessity (s II), 2016. singlechannel projec on, 2D anima on, stereo sound, 50 min. courtesy of the ar st. video: david claerbout, the pure necessity, 2016. film trailer. courtesy the ar st.

'in our lives we're saying goodbye to a culture where you take vision for granted and it's problema c because we cannot live a single day without this confidence system. it's a process that lasted almost 200 years, from the development or inven on of industrial prin ng to the photograph, and then the sequen al moving image.'
claerbout says.

'we've created a confidence system in which we make an analogy between the body of the camera – the lens – and our own eyes. we go with the flow and understand. we carry a little thing in our pockets, a phone with something which we s ll call a 'lens' and that, as we speak, is disintegra ng and it's interes ng to see what it is being replaced by.'

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the pure necessity (still), 2016. single-channel projection, 2D animation, stereo sound, 50 min. courtesy of the artist.

'we're obviously going to get something which will photograph out of darkness. the future of 'the camera image' is obviously without the lens. it's a paradox. dark optics!'; claerbout adds.

'we live in a visual culture and in our relationship to technology we become technology. I ventured into aspects of perception and started to understand how we actually see. interestingly, we don't really see with our eyes, we essentially use our brains. how does the brain synthesize perceptions, emotions from our sensory signals that knowledge is provided?

what we know is based on centuries of a constructivist process. we capitalize on a huge amount of stored knowledge and how our vision works is kind of similar to the digital camera (far more than to the analog camera). but the digital camera is obviously in a transition period. what we venture towards is something quite different.'

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the pure necessity, 2016, installation view facade kunsthhaus bregenz, 2018. photo: markus tretter. image courtesy of the artist and kunsthhaus bregenz

rather than repeating the story of a little boy abandoned in the middle of a jungle, 'the pure necessity' reshapes the sentimental story into a film that leaves off from the 'humanization' of animals. instead, the troupe of dancing and singing animal characters behave as their species would do naturally. balloo, bagheera and KAA, whose songs have delighted children and adults for decades, are now back to being bear, panther and python.

claerbout works at the intersection of photography, film, and digital technology. he was originally trained as a painter, before becoming more interested in time through investigations in the nature of photography and film. his works and immersive installations fuse together the past, present, and future into elastic timelines that engage the viewer with philosophical contemplations on our perception of time and reality, memory and experience, truth and fiction.

'when I started to work with 3D imaging I learned how vision separates shape, line, structure, texture, ... it even brought me back to early renaissance painting where you have a similar built up of the optical position, starting with the line and ending with texture,' he explains.

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the pure necessity, 2016, installation view facade kunsthhaus bregenz, 2018. photo: markus tretter. image courtesy of the artist and kunsthhaus bregenz

often depicting some everyday activity or familiar event, claerbout's works alter audience perception of time and narrative, forcing them to process an unexpected reality. as is the case with 'the pure necessity', it also features key characteristics in claerbout's investigations such as time and silence, emphasising the ambient sounds of the jungle and the meandering nature of animals that at times appear almost motionless.

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the pure necessity, 2016. installation view at the chapel of san bastiaun, zuoz, upper engadin, switzerland, january 2020. image courtesy of the artist and parasol unit foundation for contemporary art.

the hour-long adaptation took david claerbout and a team of professional artists over a period of 3 years to create. it involved painstakingly redrawing the individual frames of the original movie by hand, one by one, and then assembling them to create an entirely new, lifeless animation. without narrative, the animals move amidst the jungle as if the story were of their own making.

'when we have no more confidence we can do two things: we can go mad, or we can pick up the project of the enlightenment and reconsider many aspects of what the previous confidence system was based on – and find it back.

initially, the reason why I work with the moving image is that I sense all this as not 'within my universe in which I feel at home', but I wanted to find back confidence!'

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the pure necessity, 2016. installation view at the chapel of san bastiaun, zuoz, upper engadin, switzerland, january 2020. image courtesy of the artist and parasol unit foundation for contemporary art.

claerbout explained how these ideas 'fit' into this year's engadin art talks' theme 'silent – listen'...

DC: 'the cinema became a place where people came to sit down together in silence, side by side, subcontracting the conversation to the screen. cinema had become a unifying space. destruction, the carnivalesque, romance or dance could be replayed ritualistically in a temporal space that was certain to end, and often did end well. only now that we watch content on tablets -alone- it becomes possible to appreciate cinema and television as a place for being together, even if that means just sitting side by side in silence.'

...and how 'the pure necessity' was a reflection on the distance between sentimental fantasy and reality:

'the pure necessity' is made frame per frame by professional animators who were asked to take away life. the choice to work with 'jungle book' was not accidental. the story is that of the strong and potentially cruel helping the weak, until emancipated and ready to face modern life. around 1967, the individual did not look anything like the individual of today. the individual was a single brick in the architecture of society, today the individual is that society, millions of them.'

the pure necessity is currently on show in the romanesque chapel of san bastiaun, in upper engadin in switzerland.

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David Claerbout: l'image, cette ennemie
Artpress, January, 2019
Étienne Hatt

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l'interview

DAVID CLAERBOUT

l'image, cette ennemie

interview par Étienne Hatt



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C'est au milieu des années 1990 que David Claerbout, jusqu'alors graveur, initie une œuvre au croisement de la photographie et du cinéma. Il a joué de leur porosité et de leurs différences pour créer des paradoxes spatio-temporels saisissants. Pourtant, à bien l'entendre, il semble surtout en lutte. Dans cette interview réalisée à l'occasion de ses expositions aux galeries Untilthen à Paris (18 octobre - 22 décembre 2018) et Annet Gelink d'Amsterdam (23 novembre - 5 janvier 2019), ainsi qu'aux Abattoirs de Toulouse (21 septembre 2018 - 10 février 2019), le Belge né en 1969 revient sur les fondements de son travail qui entend, en effet, dépasser le caractère « totalitaire » de l'image.

■ **Votre récente exposition à la galerie Untilthen, organisée autour de *Riverside* (2009-18) et *Radio Piece (Hong Kong)* (2015), mettait le son en exergue. Cet aspect n'a pourtant jamais été commenté. Quelle importance lui accordez-vous ?** Je n'ai fait que quatre ou cinq œuvres sur le son et l'ouïe mais, qu'ils soient visuels ou sonores, je suis toujours à la recherche de phénomènes poussés vers la poubelle du sensoriel. *Radio Piece (Hong Kong)* est la plus littérale des deux car elle reprend le thème du *real estate*, de l'immobilier, pour dire que la tête, l'espace entre les deux oreilles, doit devenir un espace réel de refuge, dans lequel on pourrait habiter. Le son de l'œuvre est enregistré avec un système binaural qui est l'équivalent de la vision virtuelle. Je perçois toujours les idées dans une dichotomie. Il y avait d'un côté le visuel et de l'autre le sonore. Pour le premier, j'avais l'idée d'un mouvement sans interruption, en l'occurrence un long travellin arrière qui, partant d'une image accrochée au mur, traverse une pièce et une fenêtre avant de montrer la façade du bâtiment, un immeuble de l'ancien bidonville vertical de Kowloon. Pour le sonore, il devait s'agir d'un voyage dans plusieurs endroits du bâtiment, à l'intérieur, mais aussi à l'extérieur. Ce qui m'intéresse est la spatialisation du son, son déplacement, alors que le corps reste immobile. Cela renvoie à la malédiction de l'image qui peut nous emmener très loin, dans la tête ou le temps, mais doit toujours immobiliser le corps. L'image implique que certains processus biologiques soient temporairement oubliés et que tout passe à travers les yeux, la vue, qui est le sens dominant. C'est une question qui revient souvent chez moi : face à la domination du visuel, comment s'adresser aux autres sens, maltraités ou oubliés ?

Cette domination est-elle aussi à l'œuvre dans l'une de vos photographies, *Orchestra* (2011), qui montre un chef d'orchestre et les spectateurs tournés vers l'objectif ?

Ils sont photographiés au moment où l'orchestre doit commencer à jouer mais ne commence pas, en raison du spectateur qui regarde l'image. La scène ne semble pouvoir se dérouler tant que le spectateur est là. Je m'interroge sur la nature de la photographie à l'époque de sa « disparition ». Elle connaît, en effet, une éclipse comme la peinture l'a connue avec l'invention de la photographie. Cette dernière a vécu cent quatre-vingts ans. Conceptuellement, elle ne peut plus continuer.

« *Orchestra* », 2011. Transparent, caisson lumineux. 302 x 155 x 18 cm. (Court. l'artiste et galeries Untilthen, Paris ; Sean Kelly, New York ; Rüdiger Schöttle, Munich ; Esther Schipper, Berlin, pour tous les visuels / for all images, sauf mention contraire). *Transparency, lightbox*





Pour quelles raisons ? Elle a perdu l'authenticité mutuelle entre celui qui regarde et photographie et ce qui est photographié. La virtualisation de l'image a cassé ce lien et réintroduit une image pensée, alors que la photographie avait permis de ne plus penser l'image et introduit une vitesse d'image inédite. Avec le numérique, l'image s'apparente de nouveau à un tableau.

Dès son origine, la photographie est une image pensée. Les images de Hippolyte Bayard sont des mises en scène. Le faux est présent d'emblée. Par définition, la photographie est libérale. Elle n'a pas de programme. Elle peut tout recevoir. La photographie était une vérité. Elle est devenue une proposition.

ARRIÈRE-PLAN

Vous disiez être à la recherche de phénomènes poussés vers la poubelle du sensoriel. Que vouliez-vous dire ? Après *Bordeaux Piece* (2004), j'ai vraiment compris que je cherchais à donner la parole à l'arrière-plan, aux

éléments qui n'appartenaient pas au film, qui n'avaient pas de rôle, comme, dans cette œuvre qui reprend un même scénario à différents moments de la journée, le mouvement des ombres ou tout ce qui faisait décor. J'ai toujours eu ce rapport de haine et d'amour avec le cinéma, d'ailleurs plutôt de haine que d'amour. Je m'oppose au caractère totalitaire de l'image, qui ne peut servir que l'avant-plan, alors que nos yeux sont faits pour chercher plus loin. Le projet de toute mon œuvre est, avec des résidus sensoriels, d'essayer de collaborer avec mon ennemi qu'est l'image et de retrouver ce qui n'aura jamais de chance d'exister à l'avant-plan. J'ai toujours été un soigneur de cas accidentés d'images.

Par exemple ? Dès le début de mon travail, j'ai travaillé sur des photographies anciennes, comme pour *Ruurlo, Bocurloscheweg, 1910* (1997). Le village sur cette image de 1910 avait changé mais l'arbre était toujours là. Je pouvais le filmer et incruster ces images mobiles dans la photographie. J'ai toujours détesté travailler avec des outils analogiques, comme la

photographie ou le film sur pellicules, et j'ai vite senti que le digital allait nous obliger à remettre en cause notre rapport à l'image. La virtualisation implique de tout mettre en doute, d'abandonner toute croyance en l'image. Elle réintroduit la parole dans l'image.

La parole dans l'image ? La peinture servait la parole. La photographie a permis une vitesse de voir qui était plus intelligente et autonome que la parole qui est beaucoup plus lente. Mais cela touche à sa fin. La parole se réintroduit d'une nouvelle façon, préphotographique. Nous reculons vers le 19^e siècle.

À propos de *Four Persons Standing* (1999), œuvre qui remploie une image trouvée et qui est présentée actuellement aux Abattoirs de Toulouse, vous avez récemment écrit, dans le catalogue *The Power of the Avant-Garde* (2016, Bozaar) : « I tried to make a found picture – lost in a book – act like a photograph. » Quelle distinction faites-vous entre l'image trouvée et la photographie ? Je ne sais plus de quels livres viennent les images que je trouve. Ce devait être un livre de photographies d'architecture, mais pas d'architecture importante, car je ne travaille jamais avec des choses importantes. Il y avait dans cette toute petite image quelque chose de très fier, quatre personnes sans doute mises en scène par le photographe. Elles semblaient ne rien se dire mais, en ne se disant rien, elles donnaient une importance à l'image. Je voulais rendre à cette image son côté inachevé.

LE MONSTRE DE FRANKENSTEIN

Votre œuvre a-t-elle évolué depuis vingt ans ? Oui, car j'aime les nouvelles choses. Je suis plein de paradoxes. Je suis le plus grand ennemi des nouvelles technologies, mais je les utilise. Elles sont chères, complexes, lentes. Ce qui m'intéresse est le moment où l'image dépasse son efficacité économique. Un renversement étrange se produit quand on a passé des années à travailler sur une pièce non spectaculaire mais qui dévoile un espace de travail et d'effort gigantesque. Par exemple, *The Pure Necessity* (2016). Certains pensent que j'ai simplement adapté le film original, le célèbre *Livre de la jungle* (1967), alors que je l'ai entièrement refait pour effacer tout anthropomorphisme. La discrétion est l'arme la plus efficace. *Olympia* (*The Real Time Desintegration into*



De haut en bas / from top: « *Radio Piece* (Hong Kong) ». 2015. Projection vidéo mono-canal, son binaural, casques. 11 min 40 sec. (En collaboration avec / in collaboration with RAY Fotografieprojekte Frankfurt / RheinMain). *Single channel video projection, binaural sound over headphones* « the "confetti" piece ». 2018. Projection vidéo bi-canal, animation 3D. Env. 16 min. (Court. Studio D. Claerbout). *Double channel video projection, 3D animation*

Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years (depuis 2016) est la pièce la plus radicale car elle va m'occuper le reste de ma vie – et je le regrette.

Pourquoi ? C'est une œuvre générative qui va vivre sa vie pendant mille ans et monter, en temps réel, le devenir ruine, selon les théories d'Albert Speer, du stade olympique de Berlin. C'est comme le monstre de Frankenstein. Il faut la soigner, la mettre à jour. En plein cœur du nazisme, le vrai sujet devient la croissance des plantes, l'arrière-plan qui n'a, lui, aucune histoire à raconter. Je suis obligé de développer mes connaissances en biologie. On pourra voir dans cette œuvre une insulte car le bâtiment, un des symboles du nazisme, va disparaître derrière les arbres, la pièce va s'effacer elle-même. *Olympia* est une aventure avec les images qui n'est pas de l'ordre des *likes* et des clics.

On pouvait également voir à la galerie Untilthen un dessin préparatoire à un travail, cette fois, sur la décroissance d'un arbre.

Je suis tombé dans un petit village sur un petit arbre qui devait avoir entre 25 et 30 ans. J'imaginai les employés municipaux le plantant. Comme pour *Olympia*, il s'agirait de gérer le temps dans l'image. Mais, cette fois, je le renverserais en cherchant dans les archives météorologiques les données afin de programmer un ordinateur pour faire vivre un arbre en arrière, jusqu'au moment où, dans vingt-cinq ans, deux employés l'enlèveraient et disparaîtraient avec la camionnette. Ce serait alors la fin de la pièce.

Mais, si j'en crois ce qui est annoncé, le petit arbre devrait être replanté ailleurs. Je n'en suis pas sûr.

Je trouvais l'idée intéressante car, pour la première fois, vous seriez sorti de ce monde

des images, avec ses temporalités et ses espaces paradoxaux, pour réinvestir le monde réel et ses contingences. Je me trouve à un moment de ma carrière où beaucoup d'idées se sont accumulées sans que j'aie le temps ou la capacité financière de toutes les réaliser. Je viens de finir *the « confetti » piece*, une pièce importante à mes yeux, actuellement montrée à la galerie Annet Gelink. Elle se tient pendant des élections locales aux États-Unis, dans un lieu non défini. Des milliers de confettis tombent du ciel. C'est comme une image de propagande, une image du bonheur. Mais un petit garçon ne veut pas participer à la fête et se protège des confettis. C'est à nouveau une pièce sur la matérialité digitale qui a comme caractéristique de pouvoir

« *Four Persons Standing* », 1999. Projection vidéo mono-canal, amplificateur, 4 enceintes. 60 min en boucle. *Single channel video projection, amplifier and 4 speakers, loop*





renverser les rôles et me permet de rendre quelque chose de léger et festif lourd comme une pierre.

Comment définir la matérialité digitale ? C'est entre le sommeil et le réveil. Entre le conscient et l'inconscient. C'est de l'ordre de la folie.

INTERACTIVITÉ TÊTUE

Vous avez fait des œuvres interactives, comme *Man under Arches* (2000), où un personnage quitte l'image quand un spectateur entre dans la salle. C'est une interactivité têtue ou inversée. L'image essaie de ne pas s'adresser au spectateur et l'interactivité dit, mais pas de façon agressive ou cynique, que nous ne sommes pas mutuels, que nous n'avons pas le même temps, la même durée, que nous ne nous appartenons pas. Mais, peut-être, alors, y aura-t-il un vrai contact. Quand je pense à l'art du passé, j'en reviens toujours à cette générosité indirecte de l'artiste qui ne veut pas s'adresser au spectateur dans l'immédiat, mais dans le passé ou le futur. À Pérouse, dans les fresques du Collegio del Cambio peintes par Il Perugino, se trouve un petit portrait du peintre qui s'adresse ainsi au futur.

Vous vous êtes incrusté dans quelques œuvres, comme dans *Untitled (Single Channel View)* [1998-2000], une salle de classe animée par les ombres mobiles d'arbres. C'était par manque de figurant, non pour m'adresser au passé ou au futur. Chaque image a un rapport difficile, incertain, avec le futur. Par exemple, je voulais m'approprier

une photographie de Noël Quidu, un photoreporter français. Il me demandait si je comprenais bien ce qui se passait dans l'image montrant une personne en détresse. Je lui ai répondu que celui qui regardera l'image dans le futur ne saura rien de tout ça. L'information qui semble aujourd'hui la plus importante sera la première à disparaître. Cela vaut pour toute image qui, dans un livre ou une archive numérique, devient une image orpheline. Ce qui, pour moi, est une manière de me venger de l'image.

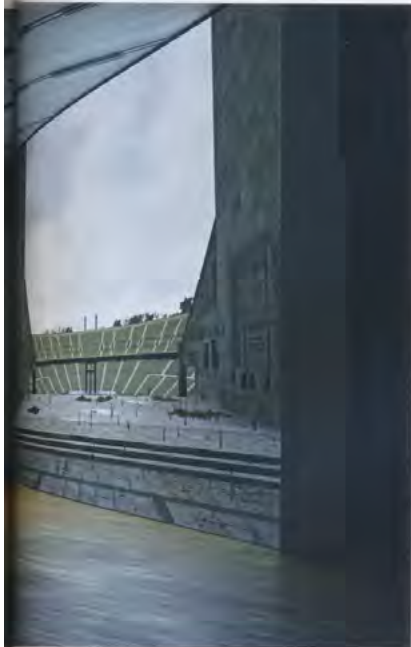
Certains de vos projets reposent sur la répétition. La situation d'exception permanente à l'époque digitale est qu'elle essaie d'effacer les distinctions entre le passé, le présent et le futur. Tant que nous avons une bande magnétique ou un rouleau de pellicule, il y avait une fin certaine à un événement. On pouvait rembobiner et mettre en boucle. J'ai l'intuition que le digital dans lequel nous vivons tend à se synchroniser avec notre biologie, à s'installer en nous. Le digital offre cette vie parallèle à la progression biologique qui n'est jamais dans la répétition. Si j'ai travaillé avec la répétition, c'était pour développer des différences. Dans *Sections of a Happy Moment* (2007) et *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment* (2008), ce que l'on voit c'est la répétition d'un même moment mais saisi d'un point de vue toujours changeant. Je veux donner l'apparence de la répétition, mais laisser le spectateur avec une sensation opposée. On revient à la notion de la matérialité digitale. Dans *Sections of a Happy Moment*, *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment* ou *The Quiet Shore* (2011), les êtres humains sont devenus des

« Olympia (The Real Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years) ». Depuis/start 2016. Projection vidéo bi-canal en temps réel, muette, animation HD, 1000 ans. (Avec le soutien de *With support from VAF Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds*. Installation, Schaulager, Bâle, 2017. Court. Esther Schipper, Berlin; Sean Kelly, New York. Ph. Tom Bisig). *Two channel real-time projection, silent, HD animation, 1000 years.*

objets. Eux n'ont pas évolué. Nous, oui. Là sont le changement et la progression.

Cela se passe au sein d'une œuvre. Qu'en est-il de la répétition d'une œuvre à l'autre ? Y a-t-il des différences, par exemple, entre *Sections of a Happy Moment* et *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment* ? Très peu. Elles appartiennent à un groupe d'œuvres. Dans *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment*, il y avait les oiseaux qui, au premier abord, semblaient une simple complication de *Sections of a Happy Moment*, mais, pour moi, étaient une meilleure définition de la verticalité. Les oiseaux, comme les confettis, sont un index du passage du temps. Ce sont les derniers éléments dont on pense qu'ils pourraient rester immobiles.

Faire l'expérience de vos œuvres, n'est-ce pas prendre le risque de se retrouver fasciné par leur virtuosité ? C'est un danger inévitable mais qui a comme vertu de permettre de dépasser la virtuosité. Si on reste dans l'œuvre, on déconstruit ma façon de travailler. Je veux que cette image ne soit plus vécue comme authentique mais comme une fabrication. Quand on regarde les premiers documents de la pho-



The image, the enemy

In the mid-1990s David Claerbout began making work at the intersection of photography and cinema. Using their porosity and their differences he creates stunning spatio-temporal paradoxes. But listening to him, he seems to be in a state of conflict. In this interview, conducted at the same time as his exhibitions at Galerie Untilthen in Paris (18 October–22 December 2018), Annet Gelink Gallery in Amsterdam (until 5 January 2019) and at the Abattoirs de Toulouse (until 10 February 2019), the Belgian artist, born in 1969, talks about the fundamentals of his work, which aims to go beyond the 'totalitarian' nature of the image.

Your recent exhibition at Galerie Untilthen, organized around *Riverside* (2009–2018) and *Radio Piece (Hong Kong)* (2015), places sound at the centre of your work. This aspect has never been discussed though. How important is it to you? I've only made four or five works on sound and hearing but whether its visuals or sounds, I'm always looking for phenomena pushing towards the sensory trash can. *Radio Piece (Hong Kong)* is the more literal of the two because it takes up the theme of real estate and buildings to say that the head—the space between the two ears—must become a true space of refuge, one in which we can live. The sound of the work was recorded with a binaural system that is equivalent to virtual vision. I always perceive ideas in a dichotomy. On one side the visual and on the other the sound. For the first, I had the idea of uninterrupted movement, in this case a long travelling shot behind, starting from an image hung on the wall, passing through a room and a window before showing the building's facade, a building in Kowloon's old vertical slum. For the sound, it had to be a journey in several parts of the building, inside but also outside. What interests me is the spatialization of sound, its movement, while the body remains motionless. This refers to the curse of the image that can take us a very long way, in our head and in time, but always immobilizes the body. The image suggests that certain biological processes are temporarily forgotten and that everything that passes before the eyes, sight, which is the dominant sense. This is a question I often think about: in the face of visual domination, how to address the other abused or forgotten senses?

Is this domination also at work in one of your photographs, *Orchestra* (2011), which shows the conductor and the audience turned towards the lens? They're photo-

graphed at the moment when the orchestra is supposed to start playing but doesn't because of the spectator looking at the image. The scenario seemingly can't take place as long as the spectator is there. I question the nature of photography as the time of its 'disappearance'. Indeed it is experiencing an eclipse as painting did with invention of photography. The latter lived 180 years. Conceptually it can't continue.

Why? It's lost the shared authenticity between the one who looks and photographs and what is photographed. The image's virtualization has broken the link and reintroduced a thought image, whereas photography had made it possible to stop thinking about the image and introduced an unprecedented speed of the image. With digital technology, the image is again like a painting.

From the beginning, photography has been a thought image. By definition, photography is permissive. It has no programme. It can receive anything. Photography was a truth. It has become a proposition.

You said you were looking for phenomena pushing towards the sensory trash can. What do you mean? After *Bordeaux Piece* (2004), I really understood that I was trying to give a voice to the background, to the elements that didn't belong to the film, that didn't have a role, like in this work that uses the same scenario at different times of day, the movement of shadows or everything that made up the decor. I've always had a love-hate relationship with cinema, more hate than love. I oppose the image's totalitarian nature, which can only serve as the foreground, while our eyes are made to search further. My entire work's project is to use sensorial residues to try and collaborate with my enemy, the image, and to find what will never have the opportunity to exist in the foreground. I've always been a healer of the accidental image situations.

For example? Since the very beginning of my work, I've been working on old photographs, like *Ruurlo, Bocurloscheweg, 1910* (1997). The village in this 1910 image had changed, but the tree was still there. I could film it and embed those moving images in the photograph. I've always hated working with analogue tools, like photography or moving images using film, and I quickly felt that digital technology would force us to question our relationship with the image. Virtualization involves questioning everything, abandoning all belief in the image. It reintroduced speech to the image.

tographie, on ne peut pas les saisir de façon immédiate. On perçoit la technologie qui est devenue obsolète. Pourquoi devient-elle obsolète? Il y a sans doute une réponse plus intéressante que celle qu'on entend toujours.

La technologie évolue, mais les œuvres restent. Comment faire cohabiter des œuvres fondées sur des technologies de la fin des années 1990, à l'origine de réalisations simples, avec des travaux récents beaucoup plus complexes? Il faudra espérer que mon allié principal, la durée, fasse son travail. Si j'ai utilisé, dès le début de ma carrière, des images déjà datées, c'était pour éviter qu'elles soient datées une deuxième fois. C'est aussi le cas d'*Olympia* sauf que, cette fois, c'est le lieu qui est daté. La technologie est datée, mais elle a comme but de faciliter cette expérience de la durée et non d'être du côté du spectaculaire ou de faire accepter ce que l'on ne devrait pas croire. Les générations suivantes n'ont plus l'énergie de s'investir dans une image qu'elles trouvent vieillie, inutile. C'est à ce moment-là que cette image a besoin de son allié.

En quoi la durée est-elle l'alliée de l'image? L'image existe parallèlement à la vie vécue. Pour en revenir à *Ruurlo, Bocurloscheweg, 1910*, l'image devait être sauvegardée tant que l'arbre existerait. Or, l'arbre a été coupé. Je me suis alors demandé si l'œuvre avait encore une raison d'être.

Serez-vous prêt à mettre fin à une œuvre? Non, car je considère que chaque pièce est le meilleur moment d'une époque. ■

Speech in the image? Painting serves speech. Photography allows a speed of vision that was smarter and more autonomous than speech, which is much slower. But this is coming to the end. Speech is being reintroduced in a new, prephotographic, way. We go back to the 19th century.

Regarding *Four Persons Standing* (1999), a work that uses a found image and is currently being shown at the Abattoirs de Toulouse, you recently wrote—in the catalogue *The Power of the Avant-Garde* (2016, Bozar): 'I tried to make a found picture—lost in a book—act like a photograph.' How do you distinguish between the found image and the photograph? I don't know which books the images come from. It was supposed to be a book of architectural photographs, but not of major architecture, because I never work with major things. There was something very fierce in this very small image, four people undoubtedly staged by the photographer. They seemed to say nothing to each other, but by saying nothing to each other, they gave importance to the image. I wanted to give this image back its unfinished side.

FRANKENSTEIN'S MONSTER

Has your work evolved over the past twenty years? Yes, because I like new things. I'm full of paradoxes. I'm the greatest enemy of new technologies, but I use them. They're expensive, complex and slow. What interests me is the moment when the image goes beyond its economic efficiency. A strange reversal happens when you've spent years working on a piece that's not spectacular but that reveals a space of work and enormous effort. For example, *The Pure Necessity* (2016). Some people think I simply adapted the original film, the famous *Jungle Book* (1967), but I completely redid it to remove all anthropomorphism. Discretion is the most effective weapon. *Olympia (The Real Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years)* (since 2016) is the most radical work because it will occupy me for the rest of my life—and I regret that.

Why? It's a generative work that will live for a thousand years and show, in real time, how—according to Albert Speer's theories—the Berlin Olympic Stadium will become a ruin. It's like Frankenstein's monster. It needs to be cared for, updated. At the heart of Nazism, the real subject becomes plants growing, the background that has no story to tell.

Cette page/this page: «Sections of a Happy Moment», 2007. Projection vidéo mono-canal, son stéréo. 25 min 57 secondes en boucle. Single channel video projection, stereo audio, loop



I'm obliged to develop my knowledge of biology. We can see in this work an insult because the building, a symbol of Nazism, will disappear behind the trees, erasing itself. *Olympia* is an adventure with images that is not in the category of likes and clicks.

Until then also showed a preparatory drawing for a work, this time on the decay of a tree. I found a small tree in a little village that must have been between twenty-five and thirty years old. I imagined the city workers planting it. As with *Olympia*, it would be a question of managing time in the image. But this time I would reverse it by searching

weather records for dates to programme a tree to live backwards, until two workers would, in twenty-five years, remove it and disappear with the van. Then it would be the end of the play.

But according to what you say, the small tree should be replanted elsewhere. I'm not sure about that.

I find the idea interesting because for the first time you'd leave the world of images with its paradoxical temporalities and spaces, to reinvest in the real world and its eventualities. I'm at a point in my career



where many ideas have accumulated without me having the time or the financial means to realize them, I've just finished the 'confetti' piece, a work that is important to me, now being shown at Annet Gelink Gallery. It is set during the United States' local elections in an undefined location. Thousands of confetti fall from the sky. It's like a propaganda image, an image of happiness. But one little boy doesn't want to take part in the celebrations and shields himself from the confetti. Again, it's a piece about digital materiality that is characterized by being able to reverse roles and allows me to make something light and festive heavy as stone.

How can we define digital materiality? It's between sleep and waking. Between conscious and unconscious. It's like madness.

OBSTINATE INTERACTIVITY

You've made interactive words, such as *Man under Arches* (2000), where a figure leaves the image when a spectator enters the room. It's an obstinate or inverted interactivity. The image tries not to address the viewer and the interactivity makes clear—though not in an aggressive or cynical way—that there is no mutuality, that we don't not share the same time, the same duration, that we don't belong to ourselves. But perhaps then there will be real contact. When I think of the art of the past I always come back to the indirect generosity of the artist who doesn't address the viewer in the present but in the past or the future. In Perugia, in the Collegio del Camio frescoes painted by Il Perugino, there is a small portrait of the painter that speaks to the future.

You've embedded yourself in a few works, such as *Untitled (Single Channel View)* (1998–2000), a classroom enlivened by the moving shadows of trees. It wasn't because of lack of extras, or to speak to the past or the future. For example, I wanted to appropriate a photograph by Noël Quidu, a French photojournalist. He asked me if I understood what was happening in the image of a person in distress. I told him that whoever looks at the picture in the future won't know about any of this. The information that today seems to be the most important will be the first to disappear. This applies to any image from a book or digital archive that becomes an orphan image. Which for me is a way to get back to the image.

Some of your projects are based on repetition. The situation of permanent exception in the digital age is that it tries to erase the distinctions between past, present and future. While we had magnetic tape or a roll of film, there was a certain end to an event. We could rewind and loop. I have the feeling



« Ruurlo, Bocurloscheweg, 1910 ». Projection vidéo mono-canal, muette, 10 min en boucle. Single channel video projection, silent, loop

that the digital age in which we live tends to synchronize with our biology, settling within us. Digital offers a life parallel to biological progression that is never repeated. My work with repetition was to develop differences. What we see in *Sections of a Happy Moment* (2007) and *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment* (2008) is the repetition of the same moment but captured from an ever-changing point of view. I want to give the appearance of repetition but leave the viewer with completely opposite feeling. We are back to the notion of digital materiality. In *Sections of a Happy Moment*, *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment* and *The Quiet Shore* (2011), human beings have become objects. They haven't evolved. We have. There is change and progress.

This happens within a work. What about repetition from one work to another? Are there any differences, for example between *Sections of a Happy Moment* and *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment*? Very little. They belong to a group of works. In *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment*, there are birds that at first sight seem like a simple complication of *Sections of a Happy Moment*, but for me they were a better definition of verticality. Birds, like confetti, are an index of time passing. These are the last elements that we think could stay immobile.

In experiencing your works isn't there a risk of being captivated by their virtuosity? It's an inevitable danger but one that comes with the virtue of allowing virtuosity

to be overcome. If we remain in the work, we deconstruct the way I work. I want the image to not be experienced as authentic but as a fabrication. When you look at the first photographic documents you can't understand them immediately. We can see the technology that has become obsolete. Why does it become obsolete? There is probably a more interesting answer than the one we always hear.

Technology is changing but the works remain. How can we bring together the works based on technologies from the late 1990s, the source of simple realizations, with recent, much more complicated works? We'll have to hope that duration, my main ally, will do its job. While I used already-dated images at the beginning of my career, it was to stop them becoming dated a second time. This is also the case with *Olympia*, except that this time it is the place that is dated. The technology is dated, but its purpose is to facilitate the experience of duration and not to be spectacular or to make people accept what they shouldn't believe. The following generations no longer have the energy to invest in an image they find old and useless. That's when this image needs its ally.

How is duration the image's ally? The image exists in parallel with the life lived. Returning to *Ruurlo, Bocurloscheweg, 1910*, as long as the tree existed, the image had to be saved. However, the tree has been cut down. Then I wondered if the work still had purpose?

Would you be prepared to put an end to a work? No, because I consider each piece is the best moment of an era. ■

Translation: Bronwyn Mahoney

frieze

Your Guide to Amsterdam Art Weekend 2018

From David Claerbout's 'rigged' election to Jimmy Robert's homage to Stanley Brown, the best shows and openings for the annual art event

C BY [CARINA BUKUTS](#) IN [CRITIC'S GUIDES](#) | 22 NOV 18



David Claerbout, *the "confetti" piece*, 2018, film still. Courtesy: the artist and Annet Gelink Gallery, Amsterdam

David Claerbout, 'the "confetti" piece'

[Annet Gelink Gallery](#)

23 November 2018 – 5 January 2019

The room is filled with joy. Well-dressed couples embrace each other, clap their hands and look at the ceiling where shiny confetti rains slowly down. David Claerbout's latest video *the "confetti" piece* (2018) captures a moment at an election night party in the United States. But what first appears joyous soon turns sinister – as in much of Claerbout's work, the devil is in the detail: while all the other guests celebrate, a young boy silently screams trying to protect himself from the falling confetti as if in mortal danger. Suddenly the colourful particles lose their lightness and a gravitational force seems to pull the confetti to the ground. Using digital modification techniques, Claerbout's videos reflect upon time and its manipulation. In this regard, the quotation marks in the title already hint to the artist's interest in the margins between appearance and reality – the confetti pieces are actually computer generated. Before the artist produces his elaborate videos, he usually starts by plotting the story on paper, scene by scene. At Annet Gelink's project space, The Bakery, one can follow how the artist turns analogue into digital by looking at the drawings. In addition, the Eye Filmmuseum have invited Claerbout to give a talk on 'dark optics', a phrase he coined to describe image-production as a process which increasingly takes place on computers rather than through the camera's lens.

David Claerbout. Moving images humanization

Domus, August 8, 2018

Ginevra Bria

domus David Claerbout. Moving images humanization

In Austria, at Kunsthaus Bregenz, Belgian artist turns the museum into an unnatural landscape, disintegrating space and time.



David Claerbout at Kunsthaus Bregenz offers a meditative show, consisting of video and sound works. No curator, not title, the exhibition turns the Austrian institution into a tangible phantasmagoria. In full compliance of Peter Zumthor's suave building. *The Quiet Shore* (2011) *Travel*, (1996-2013) *Breathing Bird* (2012) *Radio Piece (Hong Kong)* 2015, *Olympia (The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years)* 2016 – 3016 and *The Pure Necessity*, 2016 inhabit four ambiances, from the façade to the third floor.

Each single Claerbout solo show enshrines a *gemma*, a work relating and grafting whole of the imagery branches of his poetic. From Van Abbemuseum (2005) to Centre Pompidou (2007) from WIELS (2011) to SFMOMA (2011) from Marabouparken Konsthall (2015) to MNAC – Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, (2017) as well as to Schaulager, Münchenstein (2017).

Even at Kunsthaus Bregenz, as it happened in Berlin in 2016, at KINDL – Centre for Contemporary Art, the exhibition blooms around *Olympia (The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years)*. This huge cinematic narration, based on the computer-generated replica of the Olympic Stadium, enhances the Ruinwert's theory on human decadence.

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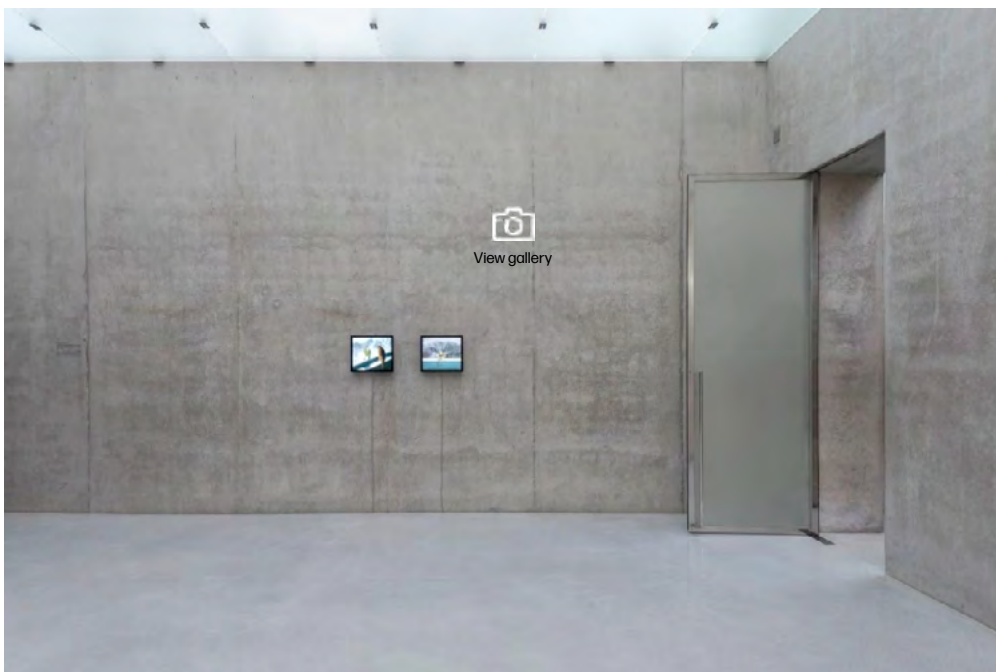
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David Claerbout. Moving images humanization

Domus, August 8, 2018

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domus



David Claerbout, installation views inside Kunsthaus Bregenz ambiances, 2018

On the third floor, time and its perception becomes a single dimension. And the video installation could be read as an attempt to measure biological duration against imaginary duration. The grass slowly begins to grow, and lichens and other plants run wild. The influence of the actual weather plays a crucial role in the work: real-time weather information is constantly integrated into the ongoing disintegration of Claerbout's digitally rendered stadium.

The same approach to *natura naturans* concept corresponds to *The Pure Necessity*, a single channel video, installed and projected directly on the façade. Over a period of three years, David Claerbout and a team of professional artists painstakingly redrew the frames of the original movie *The Jungle Book* (1967). Unlike his other films, these shots were not digitally rendered. Instead, each frame was drawn by hand in the style of the original animated film. In this Claerbout's film, Baloo, Bagheera, and Kaa do not play no more a musical, but they act as bear, a panther, and a snake into the wild. They are no longer anthropomorphized.

David Claerbout. Moving images humanization

Domus, August 8, 2018

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domus

A similar process, involving a certain kind of in-human research has been contextualized into the *walled city* of Kowloon. Indeed, on the second floor, at Kunsthaus Bregenz, the audio-visual installation titled *Radio Piece (Hong Kong)* shows an uninterrupted backtracking camera, smoothly moving from one type of space into another, starting inside a photograph of a Zen garden, gradually revealing a cramped room, and finally escaping from the vertical slum in the district of Hong Kong. Here a ritual sequence of sounds misrepresents the perception of architectures, living conditions, mental and virtual spaces, revealing how our mind could become unexpectedly *hurbanized*.



David Claerbout, Olympia (The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years), 2016-2016, third floor, Kunsthaus Bregenz

Exhibition Title: David Claerbout **Opening dates:** 14 July - 7 October 2018 **Venue:** Kunsthaus Bregenz **Address:** Karl-Tizian-Platz, Postfach 45, 6900 Bregenz, Austria

Jungle Zoek
De Tijd Sabato, May 26, 2018
Thijs Demeulemeester



THE JUNGLE BOOK ZONDER MOWGLI TIJDENS **ANTWERP ART WEEKEND**

JUNGLE ZOEK

Drie jaar en 500.000 euro kostte het hem, maar in 'The Pure Necessity' kneep videokunstenaar David Claerbout alle leven uit 'The Jungle Book'. Wie vanaf dit weekend in Antwerpen naar de animatiefilm zonder Mowgli en zijn dansende vriendjes komt kijken, kijkt naar zijn eigen doelloze verveling. 'Ik vind het niet erg als mensen in slaap vallen.'

TEKST: THIJS DEMEULEMEESTER FOTO: DIEGO FRANSENS

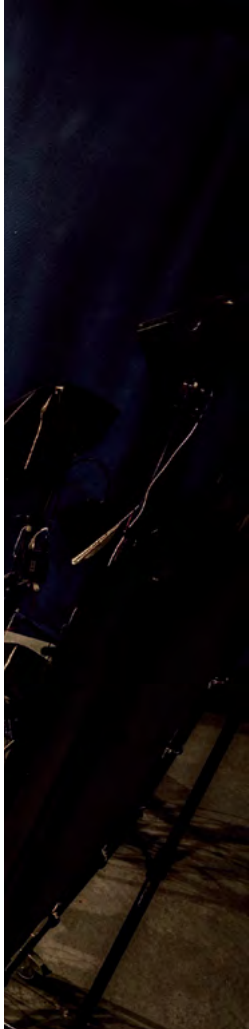
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'The Pure Necessity' van videokunstenaar David Claerbout is 'The Jungle Book', maar dan zonder actie. De beren, pythons en slangen dolen in dit werk een uur lang verhaalloos en doelloos rond.

In oktober komt 'Mowgli' uit: een actiefilm rond Disneys 'The Jungle Book' met Christian Bale, Benedict Cumberbatch en Cate Blanchett in de hoofdrollen. Maar verder dan David Claerbouts versie - vanaf dit weekend te zien bij galerie Micheline Swajcer tijdens het Antwerp Art Weekend - kan die actieprent niet staan. Zijn 'The Pure Necessity' is 'The Jungle Book' zonder Mowgli. Maar ook zonder dansende en zingende beren, pythons en slangen. Zonder tekst of soundtrack. Zonder alle vermenschlijkte elementen tout court.

Een uur lang zit je alleen naar de dieren uit 'The Jungle Book' te kijken. En die wandelen verhaalloos en doelloos rond in 'hun' natuur. 'Zo'n 500.000 euro heeft de animatiefilm me gekost', zegt David Claerbout (49) als we hem ontmoeten in een van zijn Antwerpse ateliers. 'Drie jaar hebben we eraan gewerkt met een studio van twaalf man. Dit lokaal stond vol teken tafels en computers. We rekruteerden met afgestudeerde animatoren om bij ons te komen werken. Alle frames uit de animatiefilm hebben we lijn per lijn opnieuw getekend. Ik ben er bijna failliet aan gegaan.'

ONWAARSCHIJNLIJK SAAI

Als het een troost mag zijn: ook voor Disney was 'The Jungle Book' in 1967 een kostelijke grap. Met 4 miljoen dollar was de verfilming van Rudyard Kiplings boek uit 1894 de duurste animatie ooit. Maar die bracht al snel een veelvoud op. Met cameratracking werden toen al de bewegingen van echte dieren geregistreerd als inspiratiebron voor de animaties. De

catchy liedjes en levendige scènes met Mowgli en de jungle-dieren maken de laatste tekenfilm van Walt Disney himself tot jeugd sentiment voor vele generaties.

Maar met die herinnering - en het bijbehorende verwachtingspatroon - speelt Claerbout meesterlijk. 'De film en het boek zitten in het collectief geheugen. Maar ik maak er fictie van. Mensen zien niet wat ze zich willen herinneren. Zo doe ik een ruimte ontstaan tussen het geheugen en het kijken', zegt Claerbout. 'Dat is meteen voelbaar als ik mijn versie in een cinema vertoon. Na vijf minuten vragen kinderen 'of het nog lang duurt'. Ze vinden het onwaarschijnlijk saai. En omdat er geen muziek of tekst is, hoor je heel duidelijk de magen van de toeschouwers grommen. Zelfs toen ik de film in het Centre Pompidou in Parijs toonde, viel me dat enorm op. Ik vind het niet erg als mensen in slaap vallen bij mijn kunst. We beschouwen slapen als een noodzakelijk kwaad, als inefficiënt tijdverlies. Maar ik beschouw tijd als rijkdom. Ik push de perceptie van tijd in mijn werk.'

OBSCEEN GENOT

Claerbout maakte letterlijk een 'slaapverwekkende' versie van 'The Jungle Book'. Hij en zijn team tekenden alle frames opnieuw, maar knepen er alle actie eruit. Claerbout gaf de dieren hun jungle en hun 'normale leven' terug. Nu zijn het eerder passanten in een documentaire dan acteurs in een film. 'In de originele tekenfilm zit een enorme puls: het is entertainment dat als een verslavende suikerrush werkt. Daarom blijf je ook kijken: de film laat je niet los.' ->



‘In plaats van te dansen en te springen, moesten de dieren in mijn versie net lam zijn. Ik zocht urenlang naar beeldmateriaal van dieren die zich vervelen. In de dierentuin van Spa liet ik me opsluiten bij de wolven om te zien hoe ze bewegen in gevangenschap. Ik wou ruimte geven aan hun eenzaamheid, want de dieren in de film zijn nooit alleen of aan hun lot overgelaten. Dat was voor mij het grootste plezier van ‘The Pure Necessity’: binnen-dringen in het DNA van de animatie. Er zijn weinig mensen die de film zo in detail kennen als wij. Het was bijna obsceen hoe we de figuren eruit haalden, hun energie leegzogen en ze weer uitspuwden.’

FREAKY

David Claerbout is wereldwijd bekend om zijn installaties met bewegende beeldmanipulaties, waarin hij boetseert met tijd(sduur). In België kreeg hij in 2011 een solo in Wiels in Brussel, maar hij exposeerde ook al in Schaulager in Basel, het Städel Museum in Frankfurt, Museum De Pont in Tilburg en het San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. Vanaf dit weekend is zijn ‘The Pure Necessity’ te zien bij de Antwerpse kunsthandelaar Micheline Szwajcer, die na een kort avontuur in de Brusselse Regentstraat haar oude galerieruimte heropent als projectspace. Claerbout zag Disney's verfilming van ‘The Jungle Book’ voor het eerst als zesjarig jongetje, in Cinema Majestic in het West-Vlaamse Harelbeke. ‘Maar het idee voor mijn kunstwerk kwam eerder toevallig. Toen ik voor een ander filmproject aan het researchen was naar beelden van wilde dieren, botste ik op YouTube toevallig op een opname van ‘My Own Home’: een tragisch liedje uit ‘The Jungle Book’. Ik kon het nog woord voor woord nazingen. Echt freaky, na 43 jaar. Het nummer bleef plakken en ik kreeg het idee om ‘The Jungle Book’ te ontmenselijken. Ik wou vorm geven aan de eenzaamheid. Eerst probeerde ik het via 3D-technologie: we maakten 3D-animaties van alle dierlijke personages. Maar na een half jaar zagen de beelden er te fake uit. Vijftigduizend euro lichter besefte ik dat ik een inschattingfout gemaakt had: al het werk in de vuilnisbak. Dus begonnen we opnieuw. Eerst storyboards tekenen en dan frame per frame de tekening ‘ontzielen’. Animatie is leven blazen in een verhaallijn. Ik deed het omgekeerde: ik slorpte het leven eruit.’

Wat overblijft na die enorme klus is een tekenfilm met beesten die doelloos rondlopen. Je hoort wel takken kraken en bladeren ritselen. Maar voorts gebeurt er niks. Soms zit je zelfs secondenlang



**‘DRIE JAAR
HEBBEN WE
AAN DEZE
ANIMATIEFILM
GEWERKT, MET
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TWAALF MAN.
IK BEN ER
BIJNA FAILLIET
AAN GEGAAN.’**





'Na vijf minuten vragen kinderen al 'of het nog lang duurt'. Ze vinden 'The Pure Necessity' ontzettend saai.'

naar een leeg landschap te kijken. 'Als je de dieren in 'The Pure Necessity' bezig ziet, denk je: zijn dat nu de filmsterren van toen? Ze lijken wel eenzame mensen, alleen op hun appartement. Een soort OCMW-bejaarden zonder levenslust, die duidelijk gebrek hebben aan sociaal contact.'

Het saaie, lege bestaan dat de dieren in zijn film leiden, is een metafoor voor het leven dat Claerbout al even doelloos vindt. 'Het leven heeft geen scenario, geen happy end. Voor mij is dat een bevrijdende gedachte. De dood is niets anders dan een vorm van recyclage.'

RECHTSSZAAK?

Benieuwd of Walt Disney Claerbouts titanenklus ook als 'creatieve recyclage' beschouwt. Een rechtszaak is er nog niet van gekomen, maar de kunstenaar heeft er sowieso een goed oog in. 'Niet dat ik ze kan betalen, maar als er ooit een proces komt, dan win ik het. Op de kunstbeurs Art Basel was de film te zien op de sectie Unlimited. De Aziatische vertegenwoordiger van Disney, een grote kunstverzamelaar, kwam na de projectie naast me staan. 'Am I in trouble?', vroeg ik hem voorzichtig. Hij stelde me gerust: ik moest me geen zorgen maken. 'The Pure Necessity' lijkt op het eerste gezicht plagiaat of appropriatie. Maar als rechters de hele film bekijken, zullen ze onmiddellijk begrijpen dat mijn werk iets compleet anders is.'

'Het onderwerp van 'The Pure Necessity' is niet 'The Jungle Book', maar de mens die aan het kijken of wachten is', aldus Claerbout. 'Als je het geduld hebt om te blijven kijken, voel je de eenzaamheid van die dieren echt. En die straalt af op de toeschouwer. Ook hij begint zich eenzaam en verloren te voelen. De film slaat over op het lichaam en de geest van de kijker. Die zit naar zijn eigen verstrikkende tijd te kijken. Dat is de kern van mijn hele oeuvre.'

Ook het anti-anthropocentrisme is een thema dat in heel veel van Claerbouts videowerken terugkomt. 'Ik duw de mens graag naar de achtergrond. Dat heeft een reden: we moeten als mens dringend beginnen te beseffen dat de wereld ons minder nodig heeft dan wij haar. Cinema is narcistisch: het onderwerp is altijd de mens. Maar in mijn films is de tijd de topic.'

Daarom noemt Claerbout 'The Pure Necessity' ook een sleutelwerk in zijn oeuvre. 'Zelfs een van de vijf belangrijkste die ik heb gemaakt. De film geeft zo'n grote vorm aan tijdsverloop. Het werk heeft eeuwigheidswaarde, omdat alle tijdelijke elementen die naar de beschaving verwijzen, weggegomd zijn.'

MICHAËL BORREMANS

Het is aanlokkelijk om na te denken over welke andere films of fabels je nog zou kunnen 'ontmenselijken' zoals 'The Jungle Book', 'Alice in Wonderland' bijvoorbeeld, geschreven in dezelfde tijd als het verhaal van Rudyard Kipling, met dezelfde soort pratende dieren in de hoofdrol, die mensen een gelijkaardig moreel lesje willen leren. 'Ik heb erover nagedacht. Maar echt waar, zoiets doe je maar één keer in je leven. Ik heb dit project echt wel gepusht tot aan mijn limieten, ook financieel. Vergeet niet dat ik Michaël Borremans niet ben: mijn schilderijtjes verkopen niet automatisch. Ik ben misschien een van de vijf videoartiesten op de wereld die goed van hun werk kunnen leven. Maar van deze film bestaan maar zeven versies en één artist's proof. Dat verkoopt niet zo makkelijk als een schilderij.' 📍

David Claerbout, The Pure Necessity, nog tot 30 juni bij Micheline Szwajcer, Verlatstraat 14 in Antwerpen. Behalve Claerbout nodigt Szwajcer ook de Brusselse galerie Dvir uit, met werk van Latifa Echakhch en Mirosław Balka. www.gms.be
Het Antwerp Art Weekend, tot 27 mei op zestig verschillende locaties in en rond Antwerpen. <https://antwerpart.be/weekend/>

Views

David Claerbout
 "Olympia"
 Schaulager
 1.6. – 22.10.2017

BASEL

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David Claerbout: I've always known that I didn't want to be "political" and instead always tried to work from a diverted perspective. With anything

anywhere else. It's still very difficult to talk about National Socialism, and it seems there is no other way to address it than through horror. When I conceptualised the work, I really liked the idea of talking about vegetation and weather and in this way distracting the viewer from the building standing right in the centre of the screen. By focusing on secondary items digitally, I want to prevent verbal conclusion.

You manage to build situations that look as real, if not more, than their models. Once animated, they usually simulate what they usually do, in a very unspectacular fashion. Why do we need to simulate something that is already happening?

With any technological device, the first thing that is lost is the sensation of synchronicity. To be here and now with the work is a battle that is long lost in gaming and cinema. I accept this suspension of disbelief and wouldn't pretend to present a world that is more real, as I'm trying to create one in which the forgery gives itself up rather quickly. In *Olympia* the way the camera moves autonomously, without any operator, indicates that it's a completely synthetic situation. I also decide to sometimes focus on grass or small background elements that are rendered glitchy by the computer, in order to reveal the mechanism behind it. Things never look photo-real, but they look in sync with what we would consider photographic. I'm excited to see how *Olympia's* aesthetic will survive in the coming years. I hope that by choosing an icon that belongs to the past, I protected it from visual obsolescence. The work was born old and that helps to preserve it from momentary trends. This brings us back to the unspectacular: it's very strange to work with a technology that is so demanding and expensive to handle in order to generate a tree that is growing and moving in real-time, because it's completely pointless. We usually expect technologies to be spectacular, and to use them to create a trivial thing is by itself a gesture that defies the current economic model.



Olympia (The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years) (2016–) is a digital reconstruction of the Olympic Stadium in Berlin created by scanning every stone of the Nazi-built edifice in order to produce the most accurate 3D version of it possible. Since it was first exhibited in New York in March 2016, the building has been subjected to a real-time simulation of natural erosion that is planned to last for a thousand years. The two-screen projection shows the trajectory of a camera circling the exterior of the stadium, as well as the evolution of the surrounding vegetation, which is synchronised with Berlin's current weather conditions. An interview by Elise Lammer.

Elise Lammer: In this work as well as in Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain (2013) you address traumatic episodes of recent and current European history, from colonialism and the exploitation of West African workers to the legacy of National Socialism. But your work is never directly confrontational – it's as if you were trying to avoid making political assumptions.



political, the trap is that the moment that the urgency of the topic disappears, the validation of the work is called into question. That said, and you're right, my subject matter always has a political load. For *Olympia* it was really about a narrative pleasure that I couldn't find

Installation view
 Ausstellungsraum Klingental, Basel

Photo: Tom Blisig, Basel © Bildrecht Wien, 2017
 Courtesy Esther Schipper, Berlin; Sean Kelly, New York

David Claerbout, *Olympia (The real-time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years)*, start March 2016
 Two-channel real-time projection, colour, no sound, HD-animation, 1000 years

MILLENNARIAN CINEMA: DAVID CLAERBOUT AND OLYMPIA

KINDL Center for Contemporary Art, Berlin
September 11, 2016 - May 28, 2017

From September 2016 through the end of May 2017, David Claerbout's new piece entitled *Olympia (The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years)* is shown in a huge room of the KINDL Center for Contemporary Art in Berlin. A smaller version of the moving-image installation was put on display last fall and winter at the De Pont Foundation in Tilburg, the Netherlands.

Olympia is a two-channel video projection that simulates the natural process of decay of the 1936 Berlin Olympic stadium. One screen shows only static shots of details of the impressive building designed by Werner March and the archaizing sculptures by Karl Albiker, as well as shots of the pavement, trees, and grass. The other screen, much larger than the first, is a simulation of an uninterrupted, slow tracking shot of the digitally rendered building's exterior. Emphasizing the solidity, monumentality, and sculptural qualities of the structure, Claerbout's HD animation film evokes a disembodied camera that situates the stadium in a world devoid of human beings. In addition, there is hardly a sense of scale. Even the windows, doors, and gates of the

building might be more appropriate for the Olympian superhumans in the opening sequence of Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938). Designed for cheering crowds, the now empty and silent stadium creates an uncanny atmosphere tallying with the sublime dimensions of the building as well as with those of Claerbout's film, which is supposed to last for a thousand years.

In large parts of the film, we can see a glimpse of the building's context on the edge of the frame: a misty landscape with some trees and contours of adjacent buildings. At a certain moment, apparently determined by actual weather conditions, the camera approaches the stadium and climbs into the external gallery on the first floor, now offering a better view on the surrounding park-like landscape, the road, and the wide-open cement plaza. When the camera passes the main gate, we get a clear view of the stadium's interior with the impressive spectators' area and the metal cauldron for the Olympic flame. Following in an anti-clockwise direction, the circular camera movement on the oval-shaped building emphasizes the endlessness (or rather the millennial proportions) of the film. At certain moments,



David Claerbout, *Olympia* (2016), screengrab.

one gets the impression that the building itself is rotating on its axis, almost like a huge mechanical clockwork or a ring-shaped monument with 178 unadorned pillars, the site of an ancient solar cult. As it turns out, the camera circles the building in the course of exactly one hour.

With its focus on the Berlin stadium, *Olympia* connects with many of Claerbout's earlier works featuring architecture. Like *The Stack* (2002), it visualizes the play of light on architectural fragments in a dilapidated landscape. Like *Man Under Arches* (2000), it evokes the sublime power of empty spaces and neoclassical buildings. Like *Kindergarten Antonio Sant'Elia, 1932* (1998) and *Reflecting Sunset* (2003), it deals with 1930s official architecture in a totalitarian state. Many of Claerbout's works are characterized by his interest in modernist architecture and its utopian aspirations, perfectly evoked by the geometric surfaces and the glass volumes in *Shadow Piece* (2005), in which characters seem incapable of entering the building. The Berlin stadium, of course, and its vast solid volumes as well as its associations with a regime marked by obscurity, contrasts sharply with the elegant glass volumes celebrated in modernist architecture. Ironically, to Hitler's dismay, Werner March initially designed a modernist stadium for the Berlin Olympics. Albert Speer allegedly redesigned it overnight, giving it a more classical look to invoke comparisons with the Colosseum in Rome. In his memoirs, Speer advocated the Romantic *Ruinenwerttheorie* (or theory of Ruin Value), which stipulates that a building should be designed such that it would leave behind aesthetically pleasing ruins after its eventual collapse. In so doing, Speer made a plea for an architecture with its appearance in a thousand years in mind, the Colosseum being an explicit example, reflecting the notion of a "Thousand-Year Reich" propagated by the Nazis.

In this way, the building combines architecture with time, the other major preoccupation in Claerbout's oeuvre. Often exploring the boundaries and tensions between still and moving

images, Claerbout's works are primarily understood as reflections on time and duration. Extended duration and the idea of an endless, eternal, or cyclical film already marked *Bordeaux Piece* (2004), another film featuring an architectural landmark (Rem Koolhaas' *Maison à Bordeaux*). Watching this film, spectators only gradually realize that the work does not consist of a loop projection but that the actors and crew are repeating the same scenes over and over, spanning an entire day from dawn to dusk. *Olympia*, too, stretches the limits of the perception of time as Claerbout now exceeds the human ability to imagine the real-time projection meant to last thousand years. The work itself, of course, changes endlessly and a visitor seeing the work in May 2017 will have seen a quite different film than somebody seeing it a few months earlier or several years later.

Moreover, Claerbout plays on the contrast between the solidity of the massive building and the small contingencies of the passing of time. The eternal structure of the stadium becomes the stage for the presence of ephemeral elements such as moving leaves on the floor, growing weeds, fluctuating light, and meteorological changes. With the help of a real-time computer program, real-time weather information and the position of the sun and light conditions are constantly integrated into the film. Claerbout evokes the limits of the "digital sublime" rather than the imperial dream of a millennial architecture. Although the work is the result of a vast undertaking involving many collaborators, which, at this stage, already guarantees the work's progression for the next 25 years, the promise of an "eternal" film can only be considered ironic given the short life span of digital formats and the constant need of software updates. *Olympia* is not only a memorial for (im)perishable buildings, it is also a meditation on the disintegration of their visualizations.

STEVEN JACOBS

Millennarian Cinema: David Claerbout and Olympia
Millennium Film Journal, Spring, 2017
Steven Jacobs

David Claerbout, *TOP Olympia (Simulation View from Albiker to East Gate in Snow)* (2016), drawing. Courtesy the artist.

BOTTOM *Olympia (Impression of Rain)* (2016), drawing. Courtesy the artist and De Pont, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tilburg.





4

Appropriate Behaviour

David Claerbout's highly original works are often obviously and explicitly derived from pre-existing sources, from Disney's *The Jungle Book* to Alfred Wertheimer's photograph of a young Elvis Presley. "Appropriation culture, which is enormous and will only increase, will expose the limits of copyright law," the Belgian artist tells Emily Steer. "I expect the whole system to implode at some point."



research in zoos and animal parks where I could observe animals in captivity. That project didn't happen because while preparing for it I got the idea for *Die reine Notwendigkeit*. I had so much footage in my head from filming animals and they happened to coincide with the characters in *The Jungle Book*. I came across the final song where the girl sings as she approaches the water and notices Mowgli. I realized the last time I heard that song must have been when I was six or seven years old and I didn't know if the song was uncanny or familiar, whether it was horrific or soothing. At that moment the synthesis of the whole project came—that this was going to be something where I removed all narration and all dialogue, every type of dancing and, as much as possible, all anthropomorphic features from the animals. I realized from day one that the copyright issue might be enormous, but this is always interesting in the relation between conceptualizing something and actually making it. You have to produce the work in order to see the concrete reality of these issues for yourself. Where we are now, three years later, most of the advice that I have been getting from professional lawyers has been in my favour—even for the coloured version, which me and my studio feared looked too much like the original—but only on one condition: that the viewer sees the entire hour. If the viewer only sees an excerpt, a few seconds, stills or installation shots, then it will give an enormously distorted image of what I have done with *The Jungle Book*. That brings me to something that I have always been looking for: that duration is key to understanding what I'm doing.

Copyright can be very complicated, especially in art copyright cases where there are a lot of grey areas that can be open to interpretation. During the process did you receive very varied feedback on what was and wasn't advisable?

You can be in a comfort zone one minute, and then the next question comes and you're in an illegal zone. There was the question: Did you reuse the coloured backgrounds from the original? I had reused and altered the original painted backgrounds because we needed that to erase the border between the original and my piece, which is crucial to the work. There we immediately entered into a territory that the lawyer said was problematic, because the background itself is also a work of art. I was amused by this verdict because it's always been at the core of my work too, the relation between background processes and the foreground.

The backgrounds are all new now, so there is very little recuperation of the original. We have worked with professional animators, eight of whom have this animation as their most complex and challenging work. Some had a moral problem with it. Mainly in the beginning they weren't sure if they wanted to work on it because they were afraid of being prosecuted themselves, even though I'm the only one signing off the work. But as the work nears completion we feel more relaxed about the copyright issue. There

While not strictly an appropriation work, David Claerbout's *Die reine Notwendigkeit* (*The Pure Necessity*) has the potential to ruffle feathers, and it's not difficult to see why. Disney aren't known for their warm and cuddly approach to borrowers, and Claerbout's hour-long animation carries many visual similarities to the 1967 *Jungle Book*. The work presented a potential legal minefield for the artist, who has spent three years seeking advice on various elements of the film, from the idea of using the original background (itself deemed "a work of art") to the presentation of individual stills and clips independent of the complete work.

This isn't exactly new ground for Claerbout. His works often touch on issues of borrowing, though they feel far more complex than the more brazen kind of appropriation we typically associate with the likes of Richard Prince and Jeff Koons. Things tend to be complicated by the artist's penchant for new technology too. In the case of *KING* (After Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 *Picture of a Young Man Named Elvis Presley*), Claerbout

brought a photograph of Elvis to vivid three-dimensional life by grafting fragments of the singer's skin taken from a multitude of other images to the 2D original.

"How do you claim copyright of a thing that has been entirely blended into a new synthetic reality?" the artist asks when we discuss *Die reine Notwendigkeit* and his wider use of found imagery. "I think in the end an ideal court case is one where, through democracy, our common values are the only reference."

What first interested you in working with The Jungle Book for Die reine Notwendigkeit? I was working on something else which was going to be a spatial installation with a wolf, a deer and several other animals observing a tent in a forest early in the morning. It was going to be about a very simple back-and-forth of mankind looking at nature and animals in a suspicious way, and, on the other hand, nature and animals looking back at mankind in a very open way. That was in my head for more than a decade. I started doing

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALERIES ESTHER SCHUPFER, BERLIN, AND SEAN KELLY, NEW YORK

Previous pages

Die reine Notwendigkeit
(black & white), 2016
Still

These pages

Die reine Notwendigkeit
(colour), 2016
Stills



COURTESY THE ARTIST AND GALLERIES ESTHER SCHUPPER, BERLIN, AND BEAN KELLY, NEW YORK

Appropriate Behaviour
Elephant Magazine, Spring, 2017
Emily Steer



THE BORROWERS 105

Pedro Cera

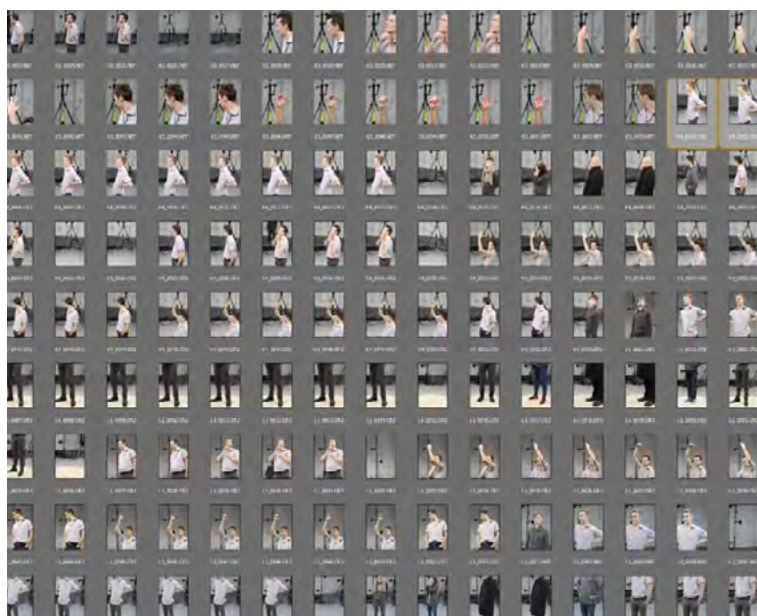
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Appropriate Behaviour
Elephant Magazine, Spring, 2017
Emily Steer

These pages
KING (after Alfred
Wertheimer's 1956 picture
of a young man named
Elvis Presley), 2015–16
Production screen shots

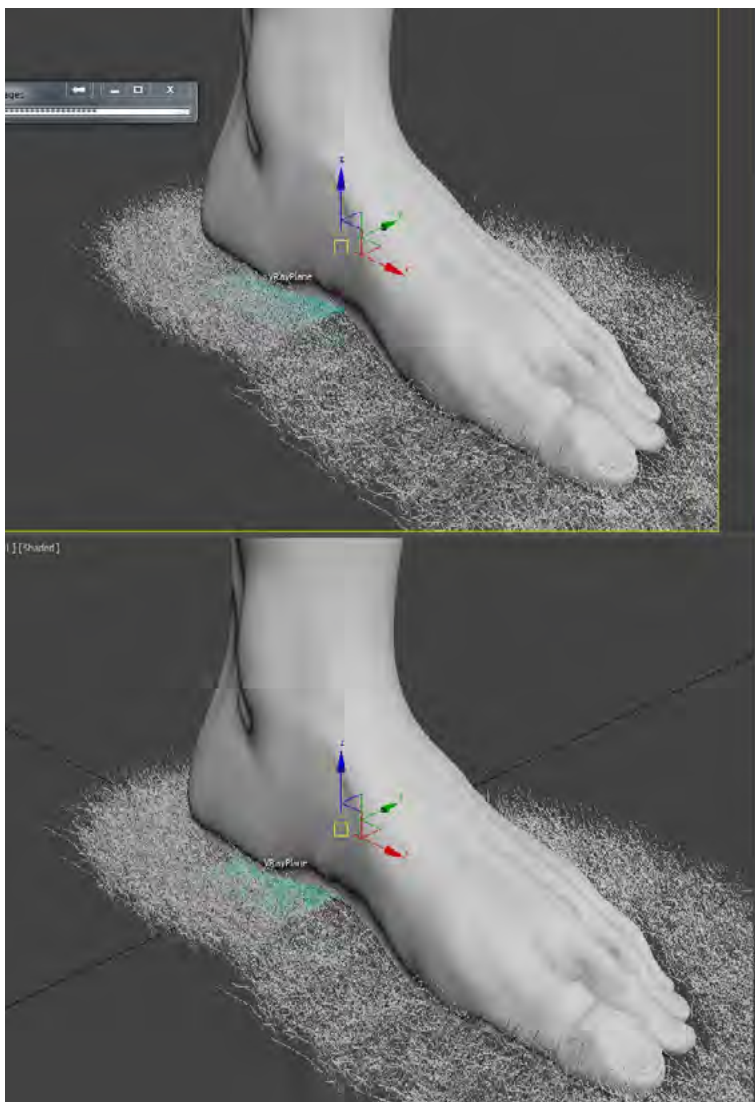


are some of these pieces, as an artist, that you just have to do. You are ideologically motivated by them and it helps not to want to get rich. Do you know the irony? It's not even an appropriation work. Certain cultural aspects of *The Jungle Book* have been appropriated but concretely the entire animation has been made anew.

Do you want the question around copyright to be present for the viewer, or do you see it as a separate, practical issue?

I think it is an involuntary question, so it happens and I love to talk about it, but it's not about copyright. The production that I've made is very close in appearance to the original—unless you keep looking. The more you keep looking—and this brings me back, I suppose, to the signature in all the work I've made—the more the same thing transforms into a different reality, a different being. *Die reine Notwendigkeit* is just a simple piece of language and the complexities of it don't lie in the copyright issues, I don't think. It might become, and I hope it does, a fruitful basis for conversations on copyright because it is a very slow-burning example. The work of Richard Prince is of a different nature, it's much more tableau-esque than mine, it's far more monumental. Some of the Koons pieces that he's been contacted about [regarding copyright infringement] become obviously incorporated capitalist sculptures. Pieces like that beg for prosecution. I have followed certain cases with great interest, like Luc Tuymans. In the case of Tuymans you automatically drag the idea of the masterpiece into the equation and singularity versus the product of a photographer which is plurality and reproduction. Then of course there's the market value, which can go to several millions of dollars versus a more evenly distributed, demographic reproduction as in photography or video. That plays an important role, I think, whether you work in the market of scarcity or the market of plentitude. What I've noticed in all the discussions of copyright issues is there is a tendency to look for general solutions, which is normal—people would like to mould things in law which apply across a load of artworks. For each case that I've followed,

“Do you know the irony? It’s not even an appropriation work”



from the Tuymans case up to my own efforts to make *Die reine Notwendigkeit*, the mistake is to try to generalize things that have a very specific language. The reason it’s becoming so complicated, I think, is because copyright laws are based very much on a time when image culture had not developed the way it has in the last forty or fifty years. The language of image culture has become a very sophisticated language spoken by the intelligentsia. It’s lightning-fast language that makes it very hard for a proper judgement in court.

In KING (After Alfred Wertheimer’s 1956 Picture of a Young Man Named Elvis Presley) you used many pre-existing photographs to build a 3D image of Elvis. Do you feel the use of 3D technology further complicates the idea of borrowing images?

Absolutely. I think artists who mix previously separate media are exemplary of contemporary visual language. Obviously things will have to be reconsidered. More broadly this whole culture is locked up in a balloon that is ever expanding. Nothing falls out of it and nothing escapes from it. It is as if we are grabbing from a pool of source material which has been produced already and has a certain authorship already. Looking is increasingly happening in darkness, coming from gathered ideas that are found here and there. So the whole issue of observation is changing, image-making is changing. Appropriation culture, which is enormous and will only increase, will expose the limits of copyright law. I expect the whole system to implode at some point.

Is it not possible for the law to catch up, then?

No, I don’t think so. For example, you mentioned the case of *KING*. For *KING* we have authorization for the original image to which I refer in my rather long title, but there is another aspect. In order to make the work I gathered every possible piece of skin I could find in photographs of Elvis Presley. How do you claim copyright of a thing that has been entirely blended into a new synthetic reality? I think in the end an ideal court case is one where, through democracy, our common values are the only reference or the only guidelines.

David Claerbout: "Olympia"

11 Sep 2016 — 28 May 2017 at the KINDL - Centre for Contemporary Art in Berlin, Germany

30 APRIL 2017



Exhibition view "Olympia", Photo: Jens Ziehe, © David Claerbout / VG BILD-KUNST, Bonn, 2016

David Claerbout shows his work *Olympia* (The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years) in the imposing 20-metre-high Boiler House of the Kindl – Centre for Contemporary Art. This will continue the exhibition series inaugurated by Roman Signer's *Kitfox Experimental*: once a year, the Kindl invites an artist to realise a single work for this unique space.

Video installations of suggestive slowness are characteristic of the work of the Belgian artist David Claerbout (born in 1969). Through his precise compositions, the flow of time becomes almost physically tangible. The artist often draws his material from reconstructed or computer-generated images, historical photographs, or his own film footage, which he weaves together into multilayered works.

With *Olympia*, which was completed this year, Claerbout now aims at a dimension that far exceeds the human ability to imagine time: the real-time projection is meant to last 1,000 years and thus radically surpasses our own experience of the world. Its point of departure is the Berlin Olympic Stadium—the site of the 1936 Olympics—which the artist painstakingly digitally reconstructed to show its disintegration over the next 1,000 years. The work makes reference to the "Thousand-Year Reich"—a concept that was adapted above all by the Nazis—and the crude ideas of the architect Albert Speer. In his "theory of ruin value", Speer called for architecture to be designed with its appearance in 1,000 years in mind, with the Colosseum in Rome as his explicit example.

Beyond these references, however, David Claerbout's project *Olympia* is primarily to be understood as a reflection on time and perception. The slow disintegration of architecture does not fit within our time horizon. In real time, this process will be shown on a monumental screen in the Boiler House at the Kindl. The grass slowly begins to grow, and lichens and other plants run wild. The influence of the actual weather plays a crucial role in the work: real-time weather information is constantly integrated into the ongoing disintegration of Claerbout's digitally rendered stadium. In order to allow visitors to experience the effects of various seasons, times of day, and weather conditions, *Olympia* will be on view free of charge at the Kindl for approximately nine months.

Countering the classic: Cheeky David Claerbout

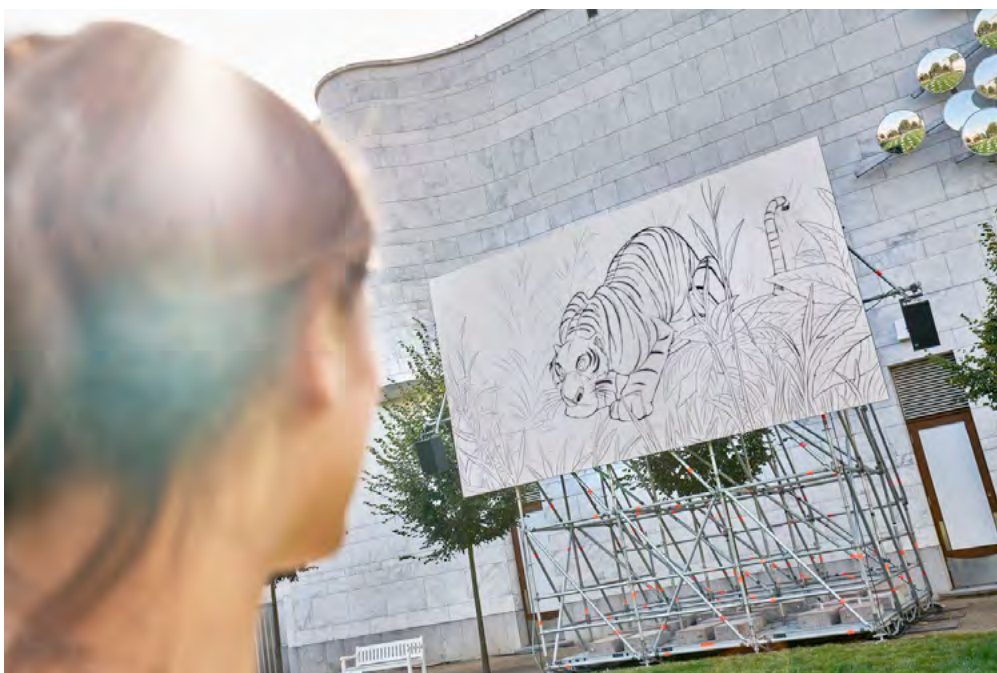
DAMN Magazine, December, 2016

Ana Sansom

DAMN° 59 ⁽¹⁾

LONGS READS (/CATEGORY/NEWS)
PRODUCTIVITY (/PRODUCTIVITY)

CALENDAR (/CALENDAR)



Die reine Notwendigkeit, 2016 Exhibition view B+W animation Duration: 60 min Courtesy of the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin

COUNTERING THE CLASSIC

CHEEKY DAVID CLAERBOUT

With an uncanny knack for clashing the familiar with the unfamiliar in a thoroughly meticulous way, David Claerbout explores the conceptual impact of the passage of time. In manipulating both moving and still imagery, he creates an ethereal quality in his work, suggestive of another plane of existence, one that moves seamlessly between past and present within an undefined space; the result is at once evocative, enchanting, and perturbing. The images the artist creates are mere frameworks in which another image is suspended. DAMN° caught up with Claerbout, to delve into the meaning and method behind the marvellous madness.

ANNA SANSOM ([HTTPS://WWW.DAMNMAGAZINE.NET/AUTHOR/ANNA-SANSOM/](https://www.damnmagazine.net/author/anna-sansom/))

December 2016

David Claerbout admits that premiering two new works at the same time, one in Berlin, one in Frankfurt, is "a bit of a competition". For an artist whose practice questions notions of duration, place, and history, the coinciding of his exhibitions is a chosen paradox. Comparison between the pieces – Die reine Notwendigkeit at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt, and Olympia at the KINDL Centre for Contemporary Art in Berlin – is inevitable, as is searching for commonality. As he says, "What I'm happy about is that they look radically different from one another on the surface, but the shared point between the two is

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a certain day-to-day, banal reality.” The Belgian artist, who explores the intersections between moving image, photography, and digital technology, often tackles political ideologies. In his latest works, the themes he draws upon and the modes of construction differ. Yet, his interrogations, both enveloped in deliberate slowness, invite the visitor on a journey of failed utopias and the purpose of image making.

We are meeting at the museum in Frankfurt where his exhibition, the name of which translates as *Pure Necessity*, an adaptation of *The Jungle Book* (1967), is displayed in the garden. The one-hour looped film upturns Walt Disney’s classic animation musical about a young boy called Mowgli and many humanoid animals, based on Rudyard Kipling’s collection of stories. Claerbout has dispensed with the saturation of colour, narration, and singing and dancing. In the black-and-white, hand-drawn frames, Mowgli has vanished and the animals, stripped of all characterisation, are reduced to a portrayal of their species: a panther climbing a tree, a snake slithering over a tree trunk, a bear staring at his reflection in the river, a pack of wolves relaxing in an enclave, and a herd of elephants standing by the water. Their inertness is set against the painstakingly drawn lushness of the moving landscape. The mood is melancholic, while the animals appear indolent, roaming disinterestedly as if inhabiting an enclosure. The film ends with the young girl singing about having to fetch water for a future husband, her destiny – an out-dated perspective by today’s standards.



Die reine Notwendigkeit, 2016 Production images Photos © David Claerbout

INAPPROPRIATENESS“I was working on something else that never crystallised but for which I shot a lot of footage in zoos”, explains Claerbout. “During that research, I saw an excerpt of the girl singing on YouTube. I hadn’t seen the film for 40 years – I saw it with my parents at the age of six. They were volunteers in the Scouts and *The Jungle Book* was a template. When I heard the song again, it felt uncannily close, as if it had never left my brain. The lyrics were politically correct in the 1960s but when you recontextualise the song, it sounds rather wrong.” Taking this as a starting point, Claerbout set about transforming the movie. “Everything had to be drawn again, frame-by-frame, and the scenes were adapted ever so slightly”, he continues. “The panther, instead of jumping energetically over trees, becomes a panther with no purpose. It’s a kind of revenge on a form of modern utopia. I made the animals into hybrid, domesticated creatures who might pretend to be in the body of *The Jungle Book* but are actually living in captivity, not engaging in any action whatsoever.” Although Claerbout does not have any children himself, he adds, “I wonder how children will look at it, because I probably made it for them.”

His method of extracting these anthropomorphic qualities was labour-intensive. He hired 12 animators to work on the project, culminating in 90,000 hand-drawn frames. “Animation drawing is a sort of religion – giving energy to lines and making them appear vivid”, he says. “So what I was asking these animators to do was diametrically opposed to what they were trained to do. Several people came and went, because they didn’t agree or didn’t understand or were afraid of being considered thieves by making something that resembled the original movie.” The project took a year to get going and then three-and-a-half years to complete. “It was a difficult birth, as we had to imagine everything from scratch”, he recounts. “It drained all my resources and I wasn’t even sure if I was going to be able to show it to the public due to copyright problems.” Claerbout consulted lawyers who evaluated how much of it was appropriation versus new artistic input. “They came to the conclusion that while I would certainly win the case [if Walt Disney were to file a lawsuit], I could never afford to pay the lawyers”, he chuckles. “But it was one of those projects that you knew you had to do. Otherwise you’d always think: I wish I had done it.”

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Die reine Notwendigkeit, 2016 Production images Photos © David Claerbout

MAKING IT LAST Claerbout says that he “sculpts in duration” and tends to “replace narrative with duration”. This idea is at the heart of his film *Olympia* (*The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years*), currently being shown in the former brewery that is home to the newly opened contemporary art centre in Berlin’s Neukölln district. The starting point was the city’s Olympic Stadium that hosted the 1936 Olympics (the site was renovated after the unification of Germany). Claerbout has digitally reconstructed the original building to show its disintegration over the subsequent 1,000 years. The work references the concept of the Thousand-Year Reich, Nazi architect Albert Speer’s aspiration for architecture to be designed with its future appearance (i.e. in 1,000 years’ time) in mind, the Colosseum in Rome being his prime example. The only building on the Olympic site that is included is Corbusierhaus, Le Corbusier’s *Unité d’Habitation* high-rise (1956-1958). “I left it in because I trust that it will disintegrate even faster than the [virtual] Olympic Stadium”, says Claerbout. This virtual reconstruction relies on Google Earth’s real-time data on weather conditions, making the piece a hybrid of computer-generated images and real-time duration. “It’s a computer program that lasts a total of 25 years and – hypothetically – will run for a thousand years”, he proclaims. “This is a piece that I will spend the rest of my life working on.”

SOPHISTICATED REVENGE Claerbout, who is based in Kortrijk but comes from the countryside (cue his interest in nature), worked with an architect, a biologist, and various other experts on the piece. “If you have a wet summer season, it has an effect on plant growth over the coming months”, he informs. The piece moves imperceptibly, as if one is merely observing the architecture and that which surrounds it, from a distance. “One could say it’s a techno hippie piece about weeds growing and trees falling down, naturally overtaking the building in a number of years. After the first 25, the real cracks will start to appear.” Claerbout based his anticipation of the site’s disintegration on the Ukrainian city of Pripjat, where the Chernobyl nuclear disaster occurred in 1986. He’s going to be visiting Pripjat, to generate a clearer understanding of the way nature takes hold.

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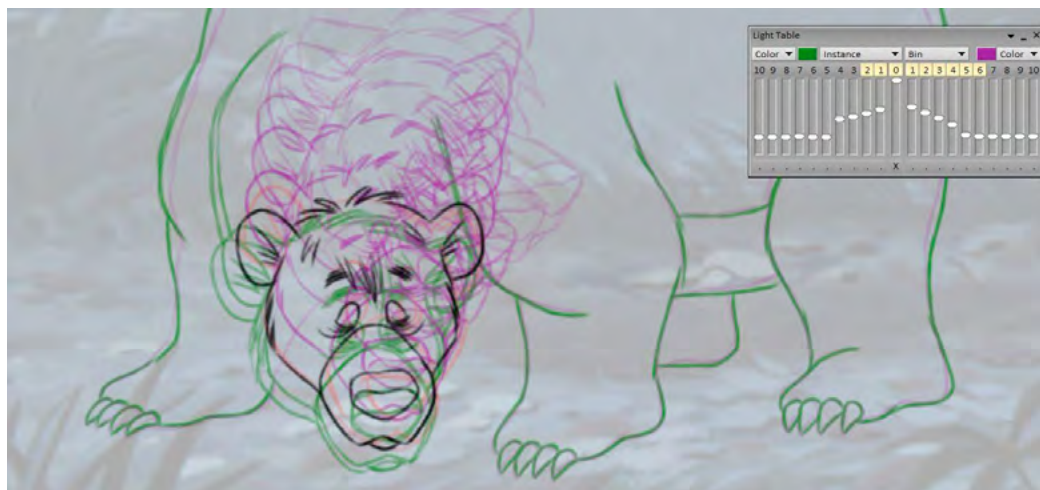
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Die reine Notwendigkeit, 2016 Production images Photos © David Claerbout



Die reine Notwendigkeit, 2016 Production images Photos © David Claerbout

As with the Frankfurt piece, Olympia encompasses a form of payback. "It's a form of sweet revenge on the grand ideologies of modernity: communism, fascism, ... and it focuses on modernisation as a phenomenon", Claerbout explains. "I became fascinated with the idea that Hitler and Speer were considering the spectator in a thousand years' time, anticipating their own magnificence and genius in a fully utopian way." The making of the work addresses

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the paradoxes inherent in the necessity to harness technology. "You need virtual reality in order to try and sculpt something that looks like eternity", he asserts. Indeed, somebody who has not read the press release might be fooled into thinking that the building is real. "I am trying to be a high-level spy; that's maybe a cheap answer to criticism about my work being technologically sophisticated", Claerbout admits, laughing. The fact that the software needs to be frequently updated gives the piece biological significance. "It's precisely because I'm using software to simulate something, that the piece is truly biological", he declares. "That's the triangle: software, modern utopia, biological reality."

A GAME OF CATCH-UP Claerbout is also working on real-time in his forthcoming piece, Sections of a Tragic Moment. It follows on from Sections of a Happy Moment (2007), about a Chinese family, and from The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment (2008), about Algerians. Sections of a Tragic Moment takes place at the Lebanese-Israeli border around Nakba Day on 15 May, when Palestinians commemorate the 1948 Palestinian exodus after the creation of Israel. "Every year there's a festival at the border, where the Palestinians go to mourn their country", informs Claerbout, who has visited the Israeli side. The piece fuses two of his fascinations: Palestinian-ness and the zombie. "The zombie is the quintessential modern figure that loses his purpose and roams, brainlessly, across the planet, searching for nothing whatsoever. You can shoot him down 20 times and he'll stand up again and continue on, which is a metaphor for working-class people, canned-in figures who do exactly what they're trained to do."

In Sections of a Tragic Moment, the Palestinian diaspora finds personification in the zombie. "Around the 15th of May, you'll see zombies filling the landscape", Claerbout says. Their bloodied appearance refers to how 11 Palestinian refugees were killed during Nakba in 2011. "People took photos on their cellphones – there are hundreds of images of what happened. From those, I've selected a single image, and each year my camera will go back to that photograph and show it in 3D for a moment. It will look very distant, as if there were surveillance cameras. After that, the image will retreat and spend the rest of the year floating around the landscape. You could say it's an overtly political piece, but the irony is that (most of the time) you'll never see anything happening other than weather passing over the terrain. So it will be endlessly frustrating for the people who want me to illustrate something! It's like biological reality catching up with virtual reality."

The second piece that Claerbout is working on concerns his "mid-air fascination with confetti when everything looks fine". It is the falseness of the cliché situation that interests the artist. "Confetti is always about a celebration, a baroque phenomenon", he says. "I'm trying to confront that with the harsh reality of white, Anglo-Saxon people celebrating a graduation on a Sunday afternoon. And there's going to be a small black boy in the picture who'll be the centre of the work." Without expanding further, Claerbout says, "It would seem as if any action needs some kind of justification – social or aesthetical or ecological – and I'm opposed to that in my work. I don't function in a very essayistic manner." Yet every piece by the artist is subtly political, tugging at the visitor to consider not just societal issues but the meaning of photography and the moving image.

Olympia (The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years) is at KINDL Centre for Contemporary Art, Berlin, until 28 May 2017.

David Claerbout: *FUTURE* is at Museum De Pont in Tilburg, Netherlands, until 29 January 2017.



Olympia (The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years) Exhibition views Two channel video installation Colour, stereo sound, HD animation
Duration: 1000 years Courtesy of the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin; Sean Kelly, New York; Micheline Szwajcer, Brussels Photos © Andrea Rossetti

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HYPERALLERGIC

ART

A Computer-Generated Coliseum that Will Disintegrate for 1,000 Years

Sitting in the 20-meter-ceilinged space of the Boiler Room watching this infinite building disintegrate infinitely slowly, you cannot help but feel infinitely tiny.



Adela Yawitz December 8, 2016

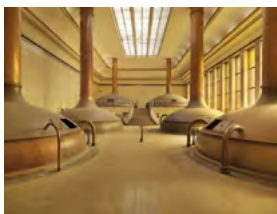


KINDL - Zentrum für zeitgenössische Kunst /
KINDL - Centre for Contemporary Art (all
photos by Jens Ziehe)

BERLIN — When you visit one of the many high-ceilinged, post-industrial cultural spaces in Berlin, they might seem like they were just built for site-specific, oversized contemporary art. You might avoid asking about their original construction, so as not to ruin the fun. Contemporary art spaces here are sometimes awkward about acknowledging the historical precedents that created their huge, airy exhibition halls, conveniently located in city centers. In Berlin, these include WWII bunkers redesigned to house [private art collections](#), hospitals turned residency programs, a former crematory animated with performance and music, and repurposed

factories — once the epicenters of urban modernity, now gutted of machinery and ready for art interventions.

So when you walk into the newly opened [KINDL Center for Contemporary Art](#) in Neukölln, an imposing brick structure complete with a tower and industrial-size chimneys, it's no shock to find an art space. The collector couple Burkhard Varnholt and Salome Grisard purchased the landmarked brewery in 2011, and its comprehensive renovation and restoration, led by Grisard, kept some of the rugged surfaces and detailing while redoing other areas into expansive white cubes. The building's original use is still visible: The center adopted the manufacturer's name, Kindl (as in, the watery brew favored by locals), and named its various venues after their bygone usage: the Boiler House, the Power House, and the Brew House, a massive hall housing six brewing coppers, huge upside-down golden funnels running from floor to ceiling.



KINDL Brew House

The Brew House, sparkling and packed for the opening, is both awe-inspiring and alienating. Its brewing coppers are incredibly beautiful and perfectly useless, an embodiment of the process formerly functional architecture undergoes when transitioning into the mandatory blankness of an art space. Kindl Brewery becoming an art space is one more case in a city packed with repurposed buildings variously haunted by their pasts. They are part of what makes Berlin exciting, but it's also intriguing that contemporary art is drawn to such places, managing to rewrite them time and again as “blank” backdrops. Art spaces apparently provide

a renewing energy, which holds both regenerating and blinding, erasing potential. Back in 1978, Carol Duncan and Alan Wallace deconstructed museum “blankness” as a manufactured condition that serves art's ideology in *The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: an Iconographic Analysis*: “According to prevailing beliefs, the museum

A Computer Generated Coliseum that Will Disintegrate for 1,000 Years

HYPERALLERGIC, December 8, 2016

Adela Yawitz

space itself, apart from the objects it shelters, is empty. A structured ritual space — an ideologically active environment — usually remains invisible.” None of this is new, but it still works.

It’s a whole lot easier to recognize ideologically charged spaces of the past than those of our own time. David Claerbout’s two-channel video installation, *Olympia (The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years)* (2016), now on view at KINDL, is a reflection on another monumental space of the past, seen clearly through the lens of its failed ideology. For this installation, Claerbout digitally reconstructed Berlin’s Olympic stadium, a crucial image of Nazi propaganda. The stadium hosted the 1936 Olympics, Nazi paramilitary training, and postwar refugee camps, then reopened in 2004 as a sports and music venue. Its architecture still evokes the physical conditions of its long-gone ideology: symmetry, awe, non-human scale, historical weight — not exactly the stuff of Depeche Mode concerts or German league soccer games. Claerbout’s piece demonstrates how impossible it is to physically experience this sort of architecture: He constructed a CGI model of the site and programmed it to disintegrate as it would over a thousand years, and then captured the process digitally. The video is in real time, so its running length is also one thousand years. Sitting in the 20-meter-ceilinged space of the Boiler Room watching this infinite building disintegrate infinitely slowly, you cannot help but feel infinitely tiny — an effect of space and time designed for just that, removed from political ideology, repurposed by an art space — and still just as effective.



David Claerbout, “Olympia” (2016), real-time projection at KINDL’s Boiler House

Now it’s up to the team at KINDL, led by curator Andreas Fiedler, to suggest a new vision for the old brewery’s glamorously creepy, industrially sized spaces. The center plans on hosting solo and group exhibitions and site-specific commissions, as well as an educational and events program, a café, and, appropriately, a beer garden. One of its biggest challenges will be to make the monumental spaces seem appropriate not only for site-specific art, but also for visitors and for residents in this culturally mixed, quickly gentrifying neighborhood.

Olympia (The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years) continues at KINDL Center for Contemporary Art (Am Sudhaus 3, 12053, Neukölln, Berlin) through May 28, 2017.

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David Claerbout
**The Silence of
the Lens**

01/07

Photography is currently undergoing the sort of transformation that music went through roughly fifteen years ago. This transition was a major shift for musicians but was generally considered positive by the listeners. For those young photographers keen on knowing how their profession will evolve, I would suggest they look at the music industry of today, fifteen years later, to get a glimpse of the changes to come.

In the short term, these changes may seem merely technical: simply a strange melting together of image-making and image-seeing, of production and perception. It will be sometime before this process will be complete, if it ever is. Then there will be a disappearance of photography as we know it. Instead of choosing how we want to see the world, we will see the world the way it wants to be seen by us. There will be a perfect equivalence between our gaze onto the world and the signals emanating from it, with no gap between the two where we might locate definitively the specificity of our own contribution. The emancipatory, modern, human point of view – which includes lovers of contingency and the mythical magic of photography – will hate this terminus, because it so resembles what we understand to be utter and total madness. The problem, as we will see, is that it is in the nature of the phenomenon that the subject cannot possibly know when this moment has arrived.

I first started noticing this strange condition on the horizon five years ago when I started an intense practice working in pictorial 3-D animation. I spent fifteen years of my early life as a draughtsman and lithographer – I will leave painting out of this. My second interest in life was photography, a phenomenon without which the more traditional forms of art today would not be practiced. Photography saved magic in modernity, and thereby probably saved modernity as a whole.

Vilém Flusser explains that those moments in history when the balance between representation and linear thinking gets disturbed are moments of great danger. Especially when the varieties of linear thinking, like linear writing or the production of history, weigh heavier in the balance. Such a moment occurred during modernity. I understand from Flusser that photography and its apparatus allowed for a semi-automated production of contingency, and magic, prohibiting and preventing radical, fundamentalist ideas from maturing unchecked. The magic of photography produces a possibility of another, uncontrollable situation, restoring the nevertheless explosive balance between representation and linear thinking.

I should add that I never particularly liked psychological realism in cinema and film

e-flux journal #73 — may 2016 David Claerbout
The Silence of the Lens

05.10.16 / 19:24:29 EDT

David Claerbout: The Silence of the Lens
E-FLUX, May 10, 2016

montage, because it falls rather too quickly into the grip of narrative, an influence that has affected all forms of art and which is already part of this strange phenomenon taking shape on the horizon. Narrative is this annoying big head with a voice hanging over the scene, which is part of my headache here because of the way it coaches perception.¹

Ultimately, I appropriated some cinematographic skills, until my studio – populated by old-timers of the camera and traditional arts – rebooted itself as an animation studio and thus, once again, began to resemble a painting studio with lots of pupils and “easels.”

Pictorial 3-D produces images generated with the help of geometric shapes, polygons that are subsequently textured, their surfaces structured and lit by virtual light sources which mimic real-world lighting in ways that are astonishing. As a traditionally trained painter and draughtsman who later studied film technique on his own, I was stunned by the intense overlap between Western historical painting and cinematic techniques, which were applied as if the modern rift had never occurred. I am, in other words, stunned by the radical conservatism of 3-D. I would never have expected that so many sciences would come

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together to form a mighty bastion of pictorial, “realistic” conservatism. Even the most radical undertaking is in one way or another pre-corporated. Maybe our current situation is the result of decades of web-thinking, of dwelling within an infinitely expanded horizontal web or network and the lack of a sense of topos this produces.

The new way of image-making is all-encompassing and includes methods that date as far back as the Renaissance, requiring the artist to master all of the traditional skills of painting, cinematography, and sculpture, *and* to have a degree in computer science. In big production studios tasks are broken down into numerous specialties which perhaps make it appear abstract, but in my studio, where a few people manage “everything,” the enormity of it rises right in front of our eyes and leaves me, at least, perplexed.

When working in pictorial 3-D, an artist is working in a finite, disenchanted world. Whatever is to be created will be created from memory, after the fact, based on documents. The visual language is one where the smallest detail in the image is premeditated, and if, by chance, such a detail were forgotten or omitted the result would confront us with that shortcoming in the picture.



This production still shows one of the subjects of David Claerbout's *Oil Workers* (from the *Shell Company of Nigeria*) *Returning Home from Work, Caught in Torrential Rain*, 2013. All images below are production images of the same work.

For example, grass and flowers require choices to be made about the season and geographical area, and whether the grass it is to be wild or cut, which itself requires specifying its proximity to instituted culture. Because if it is cut, who cuts it? And so on. In lens-based photography an image can be produced without deciding these questions authoritatively. Instead, there is a tradition of mutual authentication between who is behind the camera and what is in front of the lens. The photographer and her subject coproduce one another, simultaneously. In pictorial 3-D one must answer for everything, and so every produced image exposes its own ideological motivations. It is in essence no different from tableau painting, about which the most important thing to remember is that it is the opposite of modernist asceticism. Every image becomes an accumulation of decisions, responsibilities, and therefore relies heavily on the known codes of memory and morality. Every image becomes potentially baroque, overflowing with the results of endless discussions and deliberations.

We are no longer in a world of contingency, of possibilities created by the collaboration of lens and world – that magical environment – but have become makers of everything down to the

03/07

smallest detail. We are playing God, and by god, not even God had time to think of all these elements. No. God is a shortcut here: an assumption that further betrays the ideals of which we are unaware but according to which we nonetheless think and observe. This total fabrication implies that we are “observing from memory” and brings with it a sense of nostalgia and a feeling of loss, of having given up on a naive perception that supposedly happened spontaneously, without thinking. Such perception is remembered as being happy, because it was *Unbewusst*, unconscious – remember that consciousness, *Bewusstsein*, is unhappy – unencumbered by observing one’s own thinking, as Flusser reminds us in his simple but beautiful elaborations on representation (*Vorstellung*) and consciousness (*Bewusstsein*).

I – like many others – feel that *Vorstellung* better depicts the paradox that in order to see something, you have to put something in front of it. *Bewusstsein* implies stepping out of one’s own subjectivity, standing next to oneself, and observing one’s own situation. I would imagine that for Freud, the lens-based photograph is like the successfully cured patient, who is not turned inwards questioning his own state of happiness, but happily goes about absorbing light



This research image was found in preparation for David Claerbout's *Oil Workers*.

sensitively. Pictorial 3-D would then be a living person gone blind, spending days compulsively retracing what lies in the past and reaffirming it into the present.

This gets more worrying with what I call, somewhat simplistically, second-generation 3-D perception, which is born without having seen the world, so to speak, and which does not have living memory to rely upon for pictures. A good example of this is the concept of the scan. Scanning differs from photography in that a scan literally moves like a mole in the dark. It does not need daylight to record, while photography is by definition a medium of hope because light is its essential condition.

Scanning records only what we could hit or what could hit us in the dark. It reduces the world to a collection of obstacles. Scanning is a logic of avoiding, while photography follows the logic of encountering. Scanning is oriented towards security, towards determining what is close, or perhaps too close for comfort. We scan for threats.

The scan would not have been developed without American defense systems, both military and personal (sometimes I see no difference). At the risk of going too far astray: unlike the photograph, a scan defines individual, personal

space around "me" – a scanner is the scared individual who has sensors around him.

Sometimes I feel that we are moving back to the nineteenth century, and have arrived at a place before the modern revolutions, back again to feudalism. This becomes obvious with the well-organized increase of inequality, the new conservatism, and a return of the tableau.

By referencing the tableau and the return of the masterpiece I am trying to draw attention to who is in control and who produces images. Image culture is the fruit of a centuries-long process that rendered the proletariat or the structurally illiterate "verbal," allowing them to produce a language that would be faster and more compact than linear writing, which until then held all the tools of power and put history on paper. I am not suggesting that image culture is the result of an organized revolution by the illiterate, but only indicating the brilliant and frankly moving appropriation of the speed and power of communication previously held by those with political power.

The masterpiece-conclusion can be seen as a sad note, as the return of the master and the end of emancipation. Modern artists were mainly working from a sense of ascetic exclusion. They would rather have "all that was" broken than to

04/07



A depth pass rendering allows for a view of each of the subjects' distance to the virtual 3-D camera.

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continue in a sphere of inclusion, or more accurately: incorporation. To listen to a master, to pay rent, to be incorporated in the sphere of power is unavoidable today, it would seem. The production of tableau is, in this respect and as I understand it, the opposite of the photographic apparatus and its semi-conscious production of images.

If photography came and eradicated the tableau, well, the tableau is back, this time not merely as a picture but as a masterpiece.² The tableau returns alive and well as ideology, waving a definite goodbye to the sensitivity of that modern invention, photography, and its thick glass window on the world, in a renewed attempt to impose order on our thoughts.

I call this the world of pure ideologies, where striving towards something is no longer needed because satisfaction is immediate, because the outgoing and the incoming perceptions are instantaneous and equal in strength. This is similar, in some ways, to what Baudrillard once described as “the ecstasy of communication,” wherein “all secrets, spaces and scenes [are] abolished in a single dimension of information.” This condition relegated the pathologies of hysteria and paranoia to the past and instead inaugurated an era of generalized schizophrenia, which is characterized by “the absolute proximity, the total instantaneousness

of things ... It is the end of interiority and intimacy, the over-exposure and transparency of the world which traverses us without obstacle.”³

Some time ago I tried to explain to an acquaintance what I meant by pure ideologies. It was in vain, until the next day when she described taking a magnificent picture with her iPad as she was watching the sun come up on the horizon. She showed the picture to me. It was indeed one of those images we would all like to see upon waking. Incredible colors, the sun perfectly placed, and below, an undulating countryside where animals and people are peacefully asleep.

I asked her how much of the picture she thought she had taken herself. The vantage point is indicated by the IP address of the device. So is the weather, season, and time of day. Actually, algorithmic processes can “guess” the ideal moment for photographing such a wonderful daybreak, so as to raise the mood of the average person. There was nothing of herself in what she showed me, beyond the coincidence of technology with itself.

In fact, the image was so wonderful to her because it corresponded exactly with the splendor that resides in her memory. We often feel deeply happy, don't we, when we encounter a situation that is also seated warmly inside our memory. We are gratified when observing exists

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An early render displays the environment of *Oil Workers* (2013).

in sync with remembering, holding no nasty surprises, but being an affective revisiting of an old situation as if it were an old friend.

It is said that a person who has gone mad sees things that are not there. We call these things “projections.” Abnormal psychology distinguishes three types of pathology: anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and personality disorders. The first are unhealthy emotional responses to external stimuli. The second are emotional cycles that take place entirely irrespective of anything outside the self. And the third involve the breakdown of self-identity, as with schizophrenia. If the schizophrenic could take a step back, out of the affected self, they would understand their delusions to be delusions, at which point these delusions would vanish, and self-understanding would return. It is precisely this action of stepping out of the image that enables us to make a *Vorstellung* – to put an image in front of the thing, or to make a representation from memory. The German word, which translates literally as “in-front position,” suggests that such constructs obscure the sight of the real.

When images internal to the psyche “appear” or surface on the retina and are projected back inwards before making contact

with the world, they generate looping pulses that turn the mind into a continuously repeating mental prison.

This happens, for example, when the affective link with the world is broken, or heartbroken, and in order to handle the grief one has to enter into the isolation I am trying to describe. We may think of this as a terrible thing to happen – and it is – but it also describes a larger social project collectively taking shape. My friend’s photograph of the sunset is a document of madness not because it is a delusion, but because it suggests that she had a role in producing it, and this is the delusion. Unlike Baudrillard’s schizophrenic, who cannot locate the borders of the self in the world of mass media, the world of pure ideologies perpetually projects borders onto the self that in fact do not exist, deluding us into thinking we produce some particular view on the world, when we do not. The lens was a machine for producing not only images, but authors and worlds as well. But now it has fallen silent. In the past, one had to believe that one was really a long-dead king or an alien from outer space to suffer from delusions of grandeur. Tomorrow it will be enough to consider oneself a photographer.

x

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David Claerbout, *Oil Workers (from the Shell Company of Nigeria) Returning Home from Work, Caught in Torrential Rain*, 2013. Single channel color projection, silent.

Aesthetica

Interview with Video Artist David Claerbout



Belgian artist David Claerbout (b.1969) explores the conceptual impact of the passage of time through his use of video and digital photography. His oeuvre manipulates both moving and still imagery, evoking an ethereal quality that is suggestive of another plane of existence. Within this undefined space, the artist moves between past and present, whilst adhering to a meticulous attention to details. We catch up with him about his exhibition LIGHT/WORK at Sean Kelly Gallery and the imaginative processes behind his work.

A: Working within moving images utilises a fixed, transient image and pushes it into an animated medium. In this sense, time is played with and distorted; how far is it an interest of yours to consider how time affects artwork and gives it resonance?

DC: My images are mere frameworks in which another image is suspended, they never show what it is about. More important are the silent transformations that happen by the passage of time. I have sometimes said that I sculpt in duration, using collectively known phenomena such as light, shadows and wind, surfaces such as water, ice, oil or anything that can reside in memory, and that can be summoned back from memory. I avoid text. I avoid sound – since it can only manifest itself in the here and now. I think it is important to allow the viewer time to settle in the exhibition space, which is, since the inception of the bourgeois museum, a place into which you stumble and stroll. You are not called there by duty. Following that initial settling in I like to 'lose' my visitor, this is easily achieved by lack of events or spectacle within my images. Only when I have lost his attention, can the viewer set his mind on something else than that of a movie-goer. That is when my pictures begin.

A: The movement of the images undeniably gives them a mesmerising quality; what is it about this shifting in a photograph that fascinates you as an aesthetic tool?

DC: In a moving image you cannot ponder. that would be like trying to stay afloat on one spot in a mountain river, you are carried away and succumb to its temporality. The movement always wins from your observation skills and soon you stare in awe at something moving like an 'infantile'. in that sense films never provide me with new ideas, while photographs engender entire films. It is a personal affinity with the photograph, a past event of which one can 'take care' and prevent it from ageing or becoming picturesque.. a moving image (filmrol, video etc) is always a new event, a photograph always an former event. Opting to think in terms of movement from photographs onwards was an ascetic decision, not an aesthetic decision as some mistakingly think of my work.

Interview with Video Artist David Claerbout

Aesthetica Magazine, March 24, 2016

A: *Oil Workers'* features men stuck under a shelter in torrential rain, and the focus moves from one perspective to the next; is it important to you to consider the psychological state of every person featured in your work, or the collective state of a community?

DC: There are actually two identical groups on each side under the bridge. If you retrace the camera movement, the only conclusion can be that in both directions we see the same people. I thought this was an interesting model for the lack of future or direction I was looking for.

They are stuck in a picture. I chose to scan the men, individual by individual, and then texture them, which is almost the opposite of the photographic portrait, intended to experience from inside -outwards, letting the soul surface on the picture, so to speak. From there I realised that my figures were in effect zombies (many of the men portrayed do not even have eyes). I am fascinated by these figures as the radically incorporated workers in capitalist society. From the un-dead in fiction to the real fear of leading a life without consequences, it has to be said that throughout modernity the zombie has been walking along with the individual as his shadow. As the projection unfolds, the very materiality of skin, clothes, water, humidity and oil (in the title) transforms without having to touch anything. All the elements of the picture just start to infect one another, and make water seem oily, oil synthetic and then entirely artificial.

KING has an element of façade in that it is a digital reconstruction of a well-known figure. Could you talk about how your processes have evolved, and your inspiration for such a contemporary response to retro-culture?

I had come across the picture (by Alfred Wertheimer) that served as the basis for **KING** many years ago. Elvis was portrayed off-centre as if he didn't matter to the picture, his pose was weak and the centre of the composition empty. Interesting! In 1954, a star icon was a friendly thing, unlike the perfect puritan requirements for stars today. I felt Elvis was accessible. I started gathering bits and pieces of skin found on photographs of him around that period. I found a lookalike and scanned his body, after which I applied Elvis' skin onto that body. Then, his face was modelled from scratch, based on the assumption that his face is engraved in collective memory just like for example the Mona Lisa. I was quit wrong. Nevertheless, the outcome is a confrontation between the 'hardcore vivisections' of hundreds of pieces of his skin, nails, and a pre-stardom casualness that served as the model. King gave me the opportunity to say goodbye to several concepts of analogue photography. Funny enough, today we think of analogue as unencumbered and digital as burdened with responsibilities because of all the fabrications. Although I am sceptical about this, I found myself choosing to work with the skin of Elvis because one can 'kiss' the surface of analogue photographs, which is a skin too. In a virtual world however, you will never kiss again.

A: How far do you think that your art in some way attempts to be a restoration of humanity?

DC: Since the beginning of my career I have been suspicious of a particular image production by words and which informs much art from Tuymans to Taryn Simon, to mention a few. I have always felt when images are informed by text we are in an education department. Later when that artist gets softer his work may well enter the tourism department. It worries me to see visitors spent most of the time reading and then take a few steps back from the art in abandonment because synthesis has occurred during reading, making observation illustrative only. The phenomenon is fascinating and brings back the tensions between blindness and insight. Linear writing, and linear historical thinking has been predominant in the darkest times. This is not a coincidence. The lightning fast language of images was the cleverest emancipatory move the 'illiterate' have ever made to take power. It took hundreds of years but it was a marvellous plot by those who did not have the word, and therefore not the power. Today we are governed by an explosive cocktail of historical thinking and synthesize thinking (the faster power, that of images) Our humanity depends on their balancing.

A: *Olympia* is a replica of the Olympic stadium in Berlin, devoid of human intervention and left to naturally disintegrate. This construction built purely to decompose, is one that invokes a certain type of cycle: creation to dissolution to rebuilding. Although the human element has been taken away, it still seems to haunt the piece due to the parallels to our own life cycles. How far do you think that architecture can become a symbol for human life, where nature eventually ages the structure?

DC: In *Olympia* I attempt to measure biological time (for example the timespan of one human life) against ideological time. Buildings are carriers of ideological time, sometimes to the annoyance of future generations, who, after the wars stopped erasing edifices, forgivingly take the old buildings in their midst or as city landmarks. The waiting for the decay in *Olympia* is too long for any human to stand, besides, the main actors taking up the tasks of decaying the stadium are...weeds. Chernobyl stood as an example for the uninterrupted conquest of stones by weeds, plants and finally trees. still the certainty that you will die before the film is out (in one thousand years) is important. it puts your own biological time into perspective. Hardware such as architecture has been replaced by software. Software, ironically, is the current carrier of ideological time. We perfectly know it needs constant updating but it does incorporate infinity. That is why *Olympia* is a real-time computer program.

David Claerbout, *LIGHT/WORK* is at Sean Kelly Gallery until 30 April.

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David Claerbout

Marabouparken, Stockholm 9 October – 14 February

“Time is out of joint”: it is off the hinges assigned to it by behaviour in the world, but also by movements of world.’ Gilles Deleuze’s quotation from *Hamlet in Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (1985) describes how, since modernity, time no longer functions as a measure for movement or actions, but rather begins to appear for and by itself. Similarly, the six videos on show here, spanning some 15 years of David Claerbout’s production, turn time tactile, almost sculptural; and while duration is not their subject matter, they render it phenomenologically perceptible. As in previous presentations, such as at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 2007, the works are shown in proximity to each other, projected onto the walls and a translucent sheet of white fabric that spans the space diagonally.

Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain (2013) depicts a group of men seeking shelter under a bridge. Some are en route on motorbikes, some on foot, with a large puddle of muddy water visible in the foreground of the almost painterly composition. The camera appears tenaciously to rotate around the men in three-dimensional space, while the picture

itself remains still. At the end of the sequence, the focus turns to the subtly animated water, then reemerges and repeats the rotation in an elliptical movement. Claerbout constructed the image using 3D technology, after a JPEG file found on the Internet carrying the tagline that lends the work its title. The workers seem to be waiting – for the rain to pass, or for better days. Time passes slower when we wait, and waiting is economically unproductive and hence unpaid. The specific temporality of the piece and that of the ‘actual’ world surrounding it in the exhibition space are conflated as distinct durations that coexist within a single event.

In contrast to those waiting moments, time speeds up when we enjoy ourselves. In *The Algiers’ Sections of a Happy Moment* (2008), 600 projected photographs capture an instant of a recreational football game on the rooftop of a building in the casbah, when a man stops to feed a seagull. The still images are accompanied by light Arab guitar music and shown in a sequence unfolding the single moment over a period of time. The work both *presents* a moment in time, and concurrently *represents* time through the montage of shots that surpass the empirical timespan they depict. Conflating

techniques of photography and cinematographic montage, Claerbout creates a hybrid between what Deleuze calls ‘time-image’, a direct presentation of time rather than its representation through movement, and ‘movement-image’, an image of time diverging from the ‘actual’ durational period of the depicted. With its multiple perspectives upon the same moment stretched in time, the work reminds us of the impossibility of subjective certainty and epistemological conclusions.

The translucent projection surface dividing the space at Marabouparken lets the six works seep through one another. The room is not darkened in black-box manner, and so allows the viewer’s time-space to entangle with that of the exhibition, reminiscent of what Henri Bergson describes as the real being reflected in the virtual. With time the denominator of the show, the confluence of disjointed visual content is partly diverting, yet also points to the simultaneity of realities, filmic and otherwise mediated. The exhibition demands time and patience. Considering today’s superfluous media-created imagery and accelerated time perception, paying (durational) attention to a single moment seems like a pertinent attitude. *Stefanie Hessler*



The Algiers’ Sections of a Happy Moment, 2008, single-channel video projection, b&w, stereo audio, 37 min and 12 sec loop.

Courtesy Kunstmuseum St. Gallen and Schenkung Senn BPM AG

RAY 2015

Interview mit David Claerbout



[Hinterlasse einen Kommentar](#)

(<https://mmknotes.files.wordpress.com/2015/06/claerbout.jpg>)

Interview with David Claerbout

RAY 2015 – IMAGINE REALITY

“Reality, for me is socially conformed madness.” (David Claerbout)

The MMK will once again serve as a key partner to the Photography Triennial RAY Fotografieprojekte Frankfurt/RheinMain. Together with the Museum Angewandte Kunst and the Fotografie Forum Frankfurt the MMK will present the central exhibition IMAGINE REALITY. The photographic approaches featured in this show will above all focus on the boundaries between documentary, photo-journalistic, applied and artistic photography. RAY 2015 will show how photography not only reproduces our reality, but also creates new realities.

In context of this project we will interview artists who are represented in the main exhibition. The prelude is done by the Belgian artist David Claerbout (born 1969, Kortrijk, Belgium), who is working in the media of photography, video, sound, drawing and digital arts. His work is situated at the crossroads between photography and film. In the interview he talks to us about two works, he will be showing in the exhibition IMAGINE REALITY – the work “Travel” and “Radio Piece (Hong Kong)”, which was co-produced by RAY 2015. The artist shared his thoughts about finding ideas and selecting the right media.

RAY/MMK: You mostly work as a video artist. Which significance/meaning does the medium of photography have in your practice?

DC: I grew up as a painter long before I took up photography. Cinema and photography came later and cinema is not my world at all. I think cinema is an ideology and I refuse ideologies as much as possible. In a library or in a bookshop they still ask in which section my books should be included – among filmmakers, artists or photographers? I guess my works are a kind of photography impregnated with a sense of painting.



I'm always trying to repeat that our relation to photography is disappearing forever. We are looking at the image but that image has a certain origin in the camera. It's about the relation of the lens and subject; this relation is disappearing. People do not trust their eyes any more. Photography is and was always manipulation.

The end line will be, that we will no longer perceive what's happening in front of us, but we will perceive ideas. When we have no more power to perceive the reality we are very commercial and then the real estate in our head can be commercialised. People will think, that they perceive, but they actually look with the same eyes that the mechanism wants them to. Someone or something is taking over our perception.

RAY/MMK: Can you tell us about your new work "Radio Piece", which has been commissioned for the exhibition IMAGINE REALITY?

DC: The first concept of the work "Radio Piece" started five years ago. My ideas usually don't survive at the beginning because I'm always very self-critical. The new work is actually a piece about space and especially about the availability of living space. I always knew that I wanted it to be set in Hong Kong, because Hong Kong can be looked at as the definition of an overloaded space, where living space is so expensive so that people live in – what we would say –inhumane conditions. Then I came across a documentary of the district Kowloon, which was at that time a kind of isolated legal system, where you could go in hiding and the police wouldn't be able to follow you. That city was destroyed in the 1980s and replaced by the new Kowloon. Until then, the city was essentially full of houses – one atop of another. They built as high as they could go, until there was a real risk of collapsing.

The reason why I was interested in the idea of "less space" was because I had already made a piece about the space between the two ears in an almost ironic way. I made this connection of real space or real estate and the space between your two ears as a kind of metaphor.

This space between the two ears is still free, undiscovered and available to occupy. From there came the idea to work with headsets because when you wear a headset, you have the illusion to be in another place, but it is just the place between your two ears. This way "Radio Piece" became an audio-visual piece with an audio-chapter and a vision-chapter.

RAY/MMK: How do you select the medium, or technique for your new piece? Why did you decide to use the "uninterrupted backtracking camera"?

DC: I wanted the vision-chapter in my work to look very coherent. And how much more coherent could it be then to put it in one single camera track without interruption and montage. So the idea grew up slowly – actually visually – to compose several places that don't belong together, but are somehow united by a single camera movement. I'm not the first who has done that, it has been done very often. But it is the combination with the sound; the sound itself actually sounds coherent with the space that we see in the film.

The use of the binaural recording is a method of recording sound that uses two microphones, arranged with the intent to create a 3D stereo sound sensation for the listener of actually being in the room with another person. When you put on the headset you feel like you are in the space with another person. It's like mixing two worlds with each other – it's an illusion world. So footsteps in that room come across as the footsteps in the real room you are sitting in. Actually, I was starting to play with the idea of mixing illusion sounds and real sounds in the exhibition together.

The essential story of the film is about two young men listening to a piece of experimental music with a lot of high and low pitches mixed together. Important in the film is the value of real estate, real space and especially mental space. The film is intended to confuse the viewer. It starts with a picture of a Zen Garden. As the camera zooms out, the picture of the garden turns out to be a poster on a wall inside a room; the two young men are sitting in front of it discussing the music. A little bit later it becomes that huge outside view of a Kowloon Building. At the end the viewer doesn't now what he was actually watching and listening to.

The scene of the garden is rebuilt in 3D. It is a very accurate rebuilding because everything is the same as in the original – colour, structure, even the ear condition.

RAY/MMK: Why is your new work called “Radio Piece”?

DC: It actually started with a few inspirations. I had the vision in my mind of an Indian or Chinese or Bangladeshi low-wage worker in a shop listening to a radio, which is in the middle of the room. So the radio is disrupting the sound in the space. I wanted to work with this situation; the idea was there but the production was a little bit complicated. There was 3D work, the replica of a room and live filming to do.

My work is meant to have a rupture. So in the middle of the film there is that person that puts his headset off and because it's binaural sound playing on the headset of the viewer, it's like someone is actually taking of his headset. Then the visitor is somehow liberated, the sound is completely gone, only pure silence. Simultaneously, the camera zooms out of the window into the city and away from the room. And there is a kind of uncanny silence for some minutes as you are sitting there and waiting for something to happen.

RAY/MMK: In your work “Travel”, synthesizer sounds from a composition of stress-reducing therapeutic music accompanies the viewer through an idyllic forest pasture. Could you also tell us about this work, currently on show at the Museum Angewandte Kunst?

DC: The idea for “Travel” goes back to 1996 before I was working with video. I was studying at the academy in Amsterdam and it was a little bit a difficult period because they had just announced to me that I couldn't stay. Then I had an idea, while I was doing some work in a forest. At that time I collected kitsch music and elevator music, music that people use to relax and I got fascinated because they provoked images in my head – not only in my head, in general. They produce clear images in my mind of a deep and dark forest and a kind of relaxation that helps you fall asleep and feel safe. I was fascinated with the fact that these images in my mind were very real. Each time I was listening to these sounds I understood the music even though I didn't like it too much. I was able to see by the images they produced clearly. I wanted to put these two things together, the predictable music and the predictable image – “Travel” is nothing more than that.



It's a definition about space. You can't recognize which forest exactly the film has been made in because it begins with a park and then transforms into a kind of European forest, and later into a large monumental forest and ends with the moment the music goes up. Here you wake up to realize that it's just a shitty little forest in the middle of huge fields. It's much smaller than it seemed. I think I was really always intrigued about how disappointment and pleasure can go together.

Usually when you watch films you usually get one message, at the end there is a certain resolution or end. But in my work you have a bigger feeling; you think that you have only seen the beginning of the action. I wanted to deliver big emotions, which at the same time make you doubt about what you have seen. So it is very simple in fact.

The reason why I hesitated so long to make it – exactly 17 years – was because I was a little bit afraid that people wouldn't understand it, I thought they won't understand why I used that kitsch music.

At one point I had some money but no ideas – usually that is a point where artists should stop. But I had this old idea in mind and I presented it to my team. I wanted to make it as an animation not as a film. I planned an illusionary place, that's not specifically anywhere. So I travelled around Germany and visited forests that have been untouched by the human hand. Then we developed an animation that is based on photographs. Now it's a forest that's in everyone's head.

Interview mit David Claerbout

MMK Notes, June, 2015

RAY/MMK: Does the work „Travel“ represent a utopian, idealised world, while „Radio Piece“ is rather a depiction of a dystopian future of urban life?

DC: The landscape in “Travel” and the dystopian space in “Radio Piece” are a sort of identity passport of it. But what it is really about – the real identity of those works is about defining space. Do you not often have the feeling when you travel around the world that old Europe, as we know it, really still celebrates the sense of the quality of space? But when you go to Asia or Hong Kong, people are quite happy with living in a definition of space that for us would be completely intolerable.

And what you have is a mixed idea of the quality of living space. Both of these works are about that. They are about things that look coherent but we maybe do not speak about the same thing when we are watching something. My works are complete mental spaces, they don’t exist, but they give you that illusion.

RAY/MMK: „Travel“ is based on an idea you had in 1996, but you didn’t have the technical possibility to realize the project until recently. Which new possibilities do digital processes offer for photography? What standing does analogue photography have for you today?

I’m for analogue ideas.

It is a very amazing confused world because digital processes, on the one hand, bring opportunities and, on the other hand, takes them away. In the middle of that you have artists who refuse to work digitally; they do not realise that the analogue interface is just another interface.

RAY/MMK: In how far is your work “Radio Piece” and “Travel” part of an “imagined reality”? What does it mean for you to imagine a reality?

DC: What is reality? Is it the “I woke up in the morning” reality thing? I think it’s everything in the universe we know and that we can speak about; also social orders are reality. But you could also hold this microphone in front of a dog and ask him this question. Reality, for me is socially conformed madness.

David Claerbout *The video, performed*



As a beginner artist, I had a vague idea of the storm that had shortly before ripped the art market apart. It was the spring of 1993.

In secondhand bookstores, stacks of remaindered monographs on artists about whom I was never to hear again gave me an idea of what had happened. 'They got what they deserved.' These were large-format works that fed an increasingly volatile and speculative market, until it crashed, marking the end of what many now see as an era of greed. Growing up in that 'end' time was good, in the sense that at least I knew what I did not want.

Since then, I – like many others – have been expecting the resurrected 1980s art investor, along with the obliging artist, to resurface like a fungus to cover the old fundament of collecting.

Today's return to a simplistic art market (and simplistic exhibition titles!) is not that resurrection... although other markets may be unprofitable compared to the art market. Gallery programmes that were organised around artists are now reformatted for collectors; artists illustrate the gallery programme instead of making it; and so on... The longer the uncertainty surrounding investment in other markets remains, the more unashamedly the certitude of investment in art shows.

The medium most associated with my work has no fixed physical appearance, it is mainly composed of light and shadow coming from hardware that has no sculptural value. It is not

an exaggeration to say that the people buying my works are exceptional, in the sense that they can let go of the physical object of art; a real hurdle in a simplistic art market, and almost impossible on the secondary market.

Given that I grew up at the end of the 1980s boom years, and given the nature of my work, I never really had to worry about art investors until recently, when, for the first time in my career, a video piece titled *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment* (2008) came up for auction.

The work in question had been acquired a

Gallery programmes that were organised around artists are now reformatted for collectors; artists illustrate the gallery programme instead of making it; and so on...

few years earlier by an investor in art, wearing the collector's cloak allowing direct access to art. Usually, the gallery is there to protect artists from this phenomenon, but it seems that information is sometimes conveniently overlooked.

The piece sold well, it put up a modest record for my work and that's the end of that.

However, it made me think about video installation's blurry status as something that is

either an original work of art or a limited edition, but might eventually end up as a post on the Internet. The infantile discussions one overhears about the size and distribution of digital video point to a video culture too young to be pre-occupied with anything other than the utilitarian digital 'video'.

Admittedly, it took me years to understand and feel the difference between a large Barnett Newman and the walls of my old apartment (before I moved into it)...

Of course, painting has meant pigment applied to a surface since forever, but ultimately its political and utilitarian life died. But the genetic code of painting died rich. In the West at least, no artist is born without it.

Until the moving image ceases to be deployed in the everyday battles of politics and ideology on all levels of life, there is no chance for a clear and decisive theory of how to understand, 'own' or trade it.

Structurally, the code of digital video remains invisible and inaccessible to most of us, even when it appears as an image. Such invisible effect is also at work in software, for example, therefore no less real in what it does to us.

When we cannot grasp the code or structure (like we think we do with painting), we tend to speak of 'content' (soul) instead of a 'piece' (body). Simply put: a news item online is 'content' to an equal extent as a film on YouTube. Content may be available online and in the cloud, which

are themselves metaphors for information that remains invisible and elusive.

However, it is possible to discern one crucial difference with the so-called art 'piece'. When it comes to content, the content of an artwork is only as widely distributed as the device on which it is shown. When it comes to digital video today, this last is often a tablet with an Internet connection, the ubiquity of which contributes to a sense of effortlessness and ease of access. In other words: content is not only soft or soul, but also something that can be widely distributed and is quasi gratis.

The influence of 'content culture' on exhibitions has been dramatic: these exhibition spaces now have to 'contain content' under the form of linked topics that are in constant flux, similar to linked Internet pages.

Within content culture, opinions are taboo – the curator restrains him or herself to establishing links. And if that is still too much of a totalitarian intervention, it can suffice to make an inventory of everything. (One star curator is famous for this.)

Under such circumstances, government over an exhibition is reduced to the max, similar to – sorry for the nasty remark – the free-flowing liberal market economy that sees government as a hindrance.

An exhibition then becomes an occasional full-scale illustration of... content! Precious enough to be temporarily expanded in a room

where it is granted monumental standstill.

The digital video file, the YouTube video and the installed video are themselves the offspring of the late capitalist logic of free flow, of never standing still. Standing still was something for socialists (collectivity), but, it seems to me, also for exhibition-making.

So there it is, the problem with the video installation: an elusive, liberal, uncontrollable free-flow entering into a space that wants to halt it.

The infantile discussions one overhears about the size and distribution of digital video point to a video culture too young to be preoccupied with anything other than the utilitarian digital 'video'

The digital video file no longer listens to the set of rules introduced with the age of mechanical reproduction (Walter Benjamin), which recognised a perfect original among the copies. Benjamin said that the aura gets lost when the copy is as perfect as the original, a reversal effectively happening in the video installation; or to be more precise, in the digital file being performed.

The performed video is therefore never a copy, it is always an original, interpreted in pretty much the same way the musical score is being

performed. There is on one hand the score (installation instructions/certificate), and on the other a conductor (the specialist curator) and the classic orchestra setup (standard hardware).

Similarly, the right to perform is traded, albeit in a limited edition. Limiting an edition seems to be crucial: swimming against the stream of free flow and distribution, the artist composes her or his own specialised 'orchestra', acknowledging that conducting is not for the first-come.

The performed data file refuses to be minimised as video 'content', nor is it expandable to the old idea of video sculpture. It is a temporary presence that needs to be re-performed each time it is exhibited.

The performed video occupies the exhibition space as if it were a unique object with architectural proportions in front of which the spectator is clearly positioned, and who finds himself perhaps helpless before the 'piece's' and his own use of time. The spectator wants to move, he wants to do so since he is still 'inside the white cube', only now it is dark with lit-up surfaces. He is visiting a museum, not a cinema. Inside the video installation he finds himself caught in a very strange performance indeed.

I don't remember if Marshall McLuhan defined an exhibition as cool media, but I would think so, because the spectator decides when he wants to move. So the media in an exhibition have to adapt to the spectator: they have to perform their presence.



above and facing page *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment*, 2008.
single-channel video projection, b/w, stereo sound, 37 min.
Courtesy the artist

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esse *Magazine*, September, 2014
Thierry Davila

TITRE FR

Donner du temps: à propos de *Shadow Piece* de David Claerbout

Thierry Davila

Giving Away Time: On David Claerbout's *Shadow Piece*

Publié d'abord en Allemagne puis dans toute l'Europe en 1814, *Peter Schlemihl*, un court récit écrit par Adalbert von Chamisso, connu dès sa parution un succès foudroyant : pas moins de quatre-vingts éditions allemandes de l'ouvrage furent proposées entre 1814 et 1919 et à la première édition française succédèrent trente-trois rééditions. Le livre conte l'étrange histoire de Peter Schlemihl, personnage qui a cédé son ombre à un homme gris, image même du diable, en échange d'une fortune sans limites. Mais ne plus avoir d'ombre ne va pas sans tourments : mis à l'écart des hommes du fait de cette absence exceptionnelle, de cette singulière solitude qui produit de la solitude, ne pouvant sortir que la nuit pour ne pas exposer aux yeux de tous ce qui est devenu une infirmité, voire une tare, une malédiction, Schlemihl incarne tragiquement le malheur de l'ombre perdue, une sorte de déshumanisation sans recours qui guette celui qui ne laisse rien derrière lui, qui ne retient rien dans son sillage, et qui a l'impression, si ce n'est fasciné pendant des décennies, nombre de lecteurs.

L. Adalbert von Chamisso, *Peter Schlemihl*, préface de « L'ombre et la vitesse » de Pierre Péju, Paris, Babel Coll., 1994.

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David Claerbout, *Shadow Piece*, coprasse vidéo (vidéomille), 2009.
Photo: permission de l'œuvre d'art et galerie Yves Lambert, Micheline Szwajca, Johann Galerie, and Rüdiger Schütte

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Une telle infirmité ne saurait frapper les figures qui peuplent les œuvres de l'artiste belge David Claerbout, car il est chez lui une évidence qui se laisse explorer de film en film avec une remarquable constance, celle de l'absolue solidarité entre le corps de ses personnages et leur ombre portée, comme si l'un et l'autre ne pouvaient que se lier dans la loi de leur commune apparition – de leur commune présence, de leur indissociable existence –, lumineuse et nocturne à la fois. Une œuvre de 2005 au titre programmatique, *Shadow Piece*, expose cette condition d'une manière directe. À l'origine de cette vidéo en noir et blanc d'une trentaine de minutes, il y a une photo d'archive anonyme trouvée par Claerbout et prise depuis un escalier à l'intérieur d'un immeuble, exemple possible de cette architecture de verre célébrée par Paul Scheerbarth². Elle montre l'entrée du bâtiment fermée par une série de portes en verre. Dans la vidéo, plusieurs personnes défilent derrière cette barrière transparente pour tenter de l'ouvrir, mais elles n'y parviennent pas. La source de lumière située dans leurs dos projette à l'intérieur de la structure construite leur ombre, seule forme et finalement seule matière – ténébreuse – capable de pénétrer cette manière de boîte transparente. Ces taches de grisaille donnent aux personnages qui se succèdent toute leur présence, ils en sont comme la signature fluide et impalpable, mais suffisamment réelle aussi, suffisamment matérielle, pour briser les frontières de l'espace. Si la partie supérieure de la projection accueille le mouvement ininterrompu des figures qui semblent directement sortir d'un film américain des années 1950, la partie inférieure est statique, strictement photographique. On peut regarder cette œuvre à tout moment, l'observer et la quitter pour revenir ensuite, quand on le souhaite, la fixer du regard : cela n'a aucune importance, car cette vidéo, comme nombre de travaux de Claerbout, n'a ni début ni fin, elle est une pure expérience visuelle et temporelle qui expose une scène et non pas une histoire, un récit. Que nous montre cette « pièce d'ombre » ? Elle confirme d'abord que l'identité des figures est inséparable de la présence active de leur projection plane et ténébreuse dans l'espace, qu'il n'y a pas de vivant, même inventé par l'artiste, qui puisse se dispenser de la trace visible et spectrale de son double ombré, si bien que le personnage de Peter Schlemihl apparaît ici plus incongru encore, plus impossible, que dans la réalité elle-même : l'ombre est ce qui participe de plain-pied et sans exception à ce qui fait que le sujet est un sujet, à ce qui fait d'un corps un corps, y compris lorsque la scène de son exposition est construite de toute pièce. Elle donne aux êtres humains une présence pleine et entière dans l'image et elle donne à cette dernière son poids de réalité et de matérialité, elle conditionne la manifestation de sa durée plastique. Ainsi nombre de figures centrales dans les œuvres de David Claerbout sont-elles *ombrageuses*, voire quasiment nocturnes. Dans *Rocking Chair* (2003), par exemple, une femme assoupie dans une chaise bercante est visible sur les deux écrans de la projection vidéo. Elle se tient dans l'ombre d'une pergola qui masque la partie supérieure de son visage tandis que, de dos, son ombre portée dessine au sol une flaque grise qui pose le décor face à nous. Dans *Sections of a Happy Moment* (2007), les six personnages (deux enfants et quatre adultes) qui composent la scène, captée moins en noir et blanc qu'en grisaille, ont des ombres qui les suivent fidèlement. Dans *Study for a Portrait (Violetta)* (2001), le visage d'une femme filmée en buste est sculpté par les ombres qui résultent d'une lumière venant de la droite de l'image. Dans *Kindergarten Antonio Sant'Elia, 1932* (1998), tous les enfants qui jouent dans le jardin de leur école voient leurs ombres très allongées projetées au sol dans une lumière froide et quasiment crépusculaire. Et dans *Bordeaux Piece* (2004), un film qui dure près de quatorze heures, les ombres des trois personnages suivent la répétition d'une seule et même scène tout au long d'une journée, c'est-à-dire du lever au coucher du soleil. L'œuvre se compose en effet de plusieurs séquences tournées avec les mêmes acteurs selon un scénario unique. Chaque séquence se déroule à l'extérieur et à l'intérieur d'une maison

2. Paul Scheerbarth, *L'Architecture de verre*, précédé de « La sobriété "barbare" de Paul Scheerbarth » de Daniel Payot, Paris, Circé, 1995.

Published first in Germany and then throughout Europe in 1814, *Peter Schlemihl*, a novella by Adalbert von Chamisso,¹ was an immediate and spectacular success: no fewer than eighty German editions of the work were available between 1814 and 1919, and the first French version went through thirty-three editions. The book recounts the strange tale of Peter Schlemihl, who gives his shadow away to a suspicious-looking figure bearing a striking resemblance to the devil, in exchange for an inexhaustible fortune. But to be without a shadow is not to be free of torment: Schlemihl is cut off from others by this singular absence, this unparalleled solitude that only deepens, and is forced to go out only at night to prevent others from seeing what has quickly become an infirmity—indeed, a flaw and a curse. The tragic embodiment of the misfortune of the lost shadow, a sort of inexorable dehumanization that lies in wait for the person who leaves nothing behind in his wake, Schlemihl has impressed, if not fascinated, numerous readers over many years.

Such an affliction could never strike the figures that populate the works of Belgian artist David Claerbout because of one remarkably constant feature that is clearly visible in all of his films: the absolute solidarity that exists between the bodies of his subjects and the shadows that they cast. It is as if each could connect only under the aegis of their joint appearance, their simultaneous presence and indissociable existence, luminous and nocturnal at the same time. A 2005 work with the programmatic title *Shadow Piece* directly foregrounds this condition. The impetus for this thirty-minute black-and-white video was an archival photograph that Claerbout chanced upon; it was taken from an interior stairway of a building that could conceivably serve as an exemplar for the kind of glass architecture extolled by Paul Scheerbarth.² The film shows the building entrance closed off by a series of glass doors. Various people walk up to this transparent barrier and take turns trying to open the doors, but to no avail. A light source located behind them casts their shadows inside. These shadows are the only form and, ultimately, the only shadowy matter capable of penetrating what amounts to a transparent box. The figures who file by owe whatever presence and singularity they possess to these grey puddles, which serve as fluid and impalpable signatures that are nonetheless real and material enough to pierce the borders of the space. While the upper section of the video image plays host to the continuous movement of the figures, who seem straight out of some 1950s American film noir, the lower half is static and strictly photographic in nature. We can begin viewing this work at any point, walk away from it at any time, and come back to it whenever we feel like it—none of this makes the slightest difference because, like many of Claerbout's works, it has no beginning or end. It is a purely visual and temporal experience that shows a scene, but has no story or narrative. What does this "shadow play"³ say to us, what does it show? Mainly, it confirms that these figures' identities are inseparable from the active presence of their flat, dark projections in space, that no living creature filmed by the artist—and this applies also

1. Adalbert von Chamisso, *Peter Schlemihl*, trans. H. von Chamisso, rev. by the author; preface by Pierre Péju, "L'ombre et la vitesse" (Paris: José Corti, 1994).

2. Paul Scheerbarth, *L'Architecture de verre*, trans. P. Galissaire, preface by Daniel Payot, "La sobriété 'barbare' de Paul Scheerbarth" (Paris: Circé, 1995).

3. Translator's note: The French word *pièce* can also mean "play," and the author avails himself of this dual meaning to expand on the ramifications of the title.

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David Claerbout, *Shadow Piece*,
vue d'installation | installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, 2012.
Photo : Elad Sarig
permission de | courtesy of the artist and galleries Yvon Lambert,
Micheline Sz wajcer, Johnen Galerie, and Rüdiger Schöttle

à des moments différents du jour, si bien que les ombres des acteurs accompagnent visuellement le passage de la lumière, car celles-ci sont, comme dans un cadran solaire, des marqueurs temporels (« ... le véritable enjeu de *The Bordeaux Piece* [...] est de donner une forme à la durée au moyen de la lumière naturelle », explique l'artiste³). Ainsi le lien chaque fois affirmé entre un corps et sa projection ombrée est-il pour Claerbout un des moyens qui contribuent à donner à la plupart de ses films une tonalité visuelle générale, une facture – une identité tout en grisaille que l'on pourrait aussi qualifier de graphique –, mais également à faire de ses œuvres de véritables objets temporels, et cela même si le temps y est parfois figé, même si tout semble s'y passer, comme dans *Shadow Piece*, dans une durée immobile. Car dans cette œuvre, comme Claerbout lui-même le dit, « les actions se succèdent, mais les ombres indiquent un temps qui ne passe pas », qui est là, visuellement palpable, comme dans un éternel surplacé : « ... c'est une composition numérique figée, une image photographique autonome. Là-dedans, les ombres apparaissent comme le squelette fixe de la composition, à l'opposé de leur statut d'indice du passage du temps », ajoute-t-il⁴. Et si Pamela M. Lee a pu diagnostiquer une phobie du temps dans l'art occidental des années 1960⁵, la prégnance de l'ombre dans le travail de Claerbout est aussi une façon parmi d'autres, pour lui, à la différence donc d'une partie de l'art

to those of his own invention—can dispense with the visible and spectral trace of its dark double. Consequently, the character of Peter Schlemihl appears more incongruous and impossible here than in reality itself: the shadow participates fully and without exception in whatever makes the subject a subject and the body a body, and this includes those moments when the scene in which the subject appears is wholly invented. It makes human beings fully and wholly present in the image, imbues that image with the weight of material reality, and sets the parameters within which its duration as a work of art is manifested.

Hence, many of the central figures in Claerbout's works are *shadowy* and, indeed, almost nocturnal. *Rocking Chair* (2003), for example, shows a woman dozing in a rocking chair on a large screen; she appears cloaked in the shadow of a pergola that masks the upper part of her face. Seen from the other side of the screen, from behind, her shadow casts a grey shape onto the floor space of the staged landscape visible around her outline. In *Sections of a Happy Moment* (2007), the six characters (two children and four adults) who make up the scene, which is shot more in tones of grey than in black and white, have shadows that follow them faithfully. *Study for a Portrait (Violetta)* (2001) gives us a filmed bust of a woman whose face is sculpted by shadows cast by a light coming from the right side of the image. In *Kindergarten Antonio Sant'Elia, 1932* (1998), the children playing in their school's garden see elongated shadows of themselves on ground bathed in a cold, almost crepuscular light. And in *Bordeaux Piece* (2004), a film that runs for nearly fourteen hours, the shadows of three characters follow the actions of a scene that is played out repeatedly throughout a single day, from dawn to dusk. The work is composed, in effect, of many

3. Marie Muracciole, « Le bruit des images. Conversation avec David Claerbout », *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, n° 94 (hiver 2005/2006), p. 126.

4. Ibid., p. 134-135.

5. Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia. On Time in the Art of the 1960s*, Cambridge (Mass.) et Londres, MIT Press, 2006.

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David Claerbout, *Bordeaux Piece & The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment*, vue d'installation | installation view, Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, 2012.

Photo : Elad Sarig

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produit par ses aînés quelques décennies plus tôt (Jean Tinguely, Lygia Clark, Bridget Riley...), d'exprimer une passion pour le temps et ses manifestations visuelles, une passion pour la durée pure visible comme telle, fût-elle, comme dans *Shadow Piece*, immobile.

Cette « pièce d'ombre », et toutes les œuvres *ombrageuses* avec elle, renvoient aussi à l'histoire de l'art dans sa version mythique et fondatrice, celle élaborée par Pline l'Ancien au premier siècle de notre ère, dans sa fameuse et monumentale *Histoire naturelle*. On sait que l'historien situait, dans le livre XXXV de cette somme, l'apparition de l'art dans la transcription directe, exécutée par la fille d'un potier sur un support rigide, des contours de l'ombre produite par la projection du profil de son amant sur ce même support. L'ombre est ainsi une forme première puisqu'elle est ce qui a rendu possible, selon Pline toujours, l'apparition de la peinture et de la sculpture, lesquelles seraient par conséquent issues aussi d'une projection. Mais elle est également première parce qu'elle est ce que produit de fait tout corps, ce qu'il porte toujours avec lui dès qu'il existe, tel un double consubstantiel à sa singularité dont on ne peut faire, n'en déplaise à Adalbert von Chamisso, l'économie. Bref, l'ombre est une configuration originaire du point de vue de l'histoire de l'art, de sa chronologie, et elle est une forme phénoménologiquement originaire du point de vue des lois de l'apparition, des lois de la visibilité. C'est une forme archaïque, c'est-à-dire principielle, si l'on entend dans *archaïque* le terme grec *arché* qui en est la source étymologique, lequel signifie « principe » ou plus précisément, si l'on suit à la lettre la définition qu'en donne Aristote dans sa *Métaphysique*, « ce qui commence et ce qui commande ». Mettre une ombre dans une image est ainsi, d'une certaine

sequences that were shot using the same actors, who worked with an unchanging script. The sequences take place either inside or outside a house at different times of the day; the actors' shadows follow the sun's trajectory somewhat in the manner of hands marking time on a sundial. The artist has said, "... the real point of *Bordeaux Piece* ... is to give a form to duration using natural light."⁴ The consistently reaffirmed connection between the body and its shadow projection is therefore one of the means that Claerbout uses to give his films a single overall visual tone, a single look—an identity entirely in a grisaille that could be described as graphic. And it is also what makes his works truly temporal objects, even when time in them is stopped and everything seems to happen, as it does in *Shadow Piece*, in the form of immobile duration. For in this work, as Claerbout himself has said, "Actions succeed one another, although the shadows point to a time that does not pass"—that is there, visually tangible, as if perennially suspended: "It's a fixed digital composition, an autonomous photographic image. In it, shadows appear like the frozen skeleton of the composition and act in ways that run counter to their status as clues to the passage of time."⁵ If Pamela M. Lee was able to detect a fear of time in 1960s Western art,⁶ the fullness of shadows in Claerbout's work is also one of the ways in which he expresses—albeit in a manner different from some of the works produced a few decades earlier by such forebears as Jean Tinguely, Lygia

4. Marie Muracciole, "Le bruit des images: Conversation avec David Claerbout," *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, no. 94 (Winter 2005/2006), 126 (our translation).

5. *Ibid.*, 134—35 (our translation).

6. Pamela M. Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press, 2006).

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manière et jusqu'à un certain point, *archaïser* cette dernière, lui donner un caractère originaire et principal, natif et archéologiquement chargé, doté par conséquent d'une mémoire ancienne et active, activée. Et même si les technologies numériques sont utilisées par Claerbout, son œuvre n'en demeure pas moins traversée par des formes qui font de l'image un objet anachronique, d'une certaine manière.

Il faut, par ailleurs, resituer cette *Shadow Piece* dans la trame historique qui est celle de l'art occidental des 20^e et 21^e siècles. De Duchamp à Kara Walker, en passant par Christian Boltanski ou Hans-Peter Feldmann, l'ombre occupe, en effet, une place majeure dans cette chronologie, preuve sans doute que sa capacité à doubler *platement* le volume des êtres et des choses exerce, toutes époques confondues, une action permanente sur les esprits et les regards. Duchamp, par exemple, a conçu, on le sait, nombre d'œuvres avec des ombres : dans *Tu m'*, sa dernière peinture conventionnelle réalisée en 1918 pour la bibliothèque de Katherine Dreier, on observe la présence de plusieurs ombres de readymades (la *Roue de bicyclette* et le *Porte-chapeau*) mêlées à celle d'un énigmatique tirebouchon. Une photo de ses readymades prise dans son atelier new-yorkais montre aussi les ombres de ces derniers qui sont partie intégrante de leur identité, tandis que son *Autoportrait de profil* (1958) est la découpe de son profil sur une feuille de papier, tel le tracé d'une ombre projetée directement issu de l'*Histoire naturelle* de Plaine. Duchamp a donné un statut à ces ombres : elles participent de ce qu'il a qualifié d'inframance, car l'artiste est semblable à ces « porteurs d'ombre [...] qui travaillent dans l'inframance⁶ ». Autrement dit, ces formes projetées sont l'autre nom possible de « l'à peine perceptible », l'inframance disant l'apparition tout juste affirmée, l'imperceptibilité des phénomènes ou l'imperceptible dans les phénomènes : l'ombre serait ainsi plus proche de « l'inapparence » que de la manifestation appuyée. Tout autre est l'univers ombré de Christian Boltanski ou de Hans-Peter Feldmann : chez eux, l'on a affaire à d'authentiques théâtres d'ombres (voir par exemple le *Théâtre d'ombres*, 1984-1997, du premier et l'installation titrée *Jeu d'ombres* du second montrée à la Biennale de Venise en 1999) qui accompagnent la vie des objets et des formes tangibles. Ici, des configurations en grisaille projetées sur des murs exagèrent la réalité, lui donnent plus d'envergure encore, la spectacularisent pour la rendre tour à tour monumentale, fantastique et inquiétante. L'œuvre de Claerbout ne se situe ni du côté de la manifestation inframance des phénomènes ombrés ni de celui de leur théâtralisation. Elle explore, par contre, une manière d'inflexion temporelle dont l'ombre est porteuse et qui va de pair avec une sorte de matérialité graphique à elle accordée : l'ombre est une forme concrète du temps précisément dessinée tout autant que projetée, et *Shadow Piece* tire son impact visuel de ce défilé d'ombres dont le déroulement immobile *prend du temps*, prend le temps avec lui.

Cette « pièce d'ombre » nous dit aussi que l'œuvre est l'alliance sur une même surface, sur un même écran, du mouvement et de l'immobilité, du mouvement comme immobilité, et cela au moins pour deux raisons. La première concerne la façon dont le film lui-même est techniquement construit. On l'a dit, la partie supérieure de l'œuvre est mobile : des personnages et leurs ombres défilent en boucle pour tenter d'ouvrir des portes en verre, et ils ont été numériquement introduits dans la photographie d'une architecture moderniste ; la partie inférieure est statique : il s'agit tout simplement de la même photographie non retravaillée par le mouvement, non traitée filmiquement. Le résultat est une manière d'objet flottant qui ne ressemble ni *absolument* à un film, ni *absolument* à une photo, et dans cet entredeux se glisse la vie de l'image. La seconde concerne ce temps immobile dont parle l'artiste lui-même à propos de cette pièce et qui en est l'indéniable substrat : rien ne se passe dans cette projection sans début ni fin, dans ce film statique aussi pour cette raison, lui qui ne cesse pourtant pas d'être animé. Ce non-événement

Clark, and Bridget Riley—a passion for time and its visual manifestations, for exhibiting duration, for pure duration visible as such, even when it is immobile, as in *Shadow Piece*.

This "shadow play," like all *shadowy* works, harks back to art history and its mythic origins as expounded by Pliny the Elder in the first century CE. In Book XXXV of his celebrated and monumental *Natural History*, the author located the first appearance of art in a tracing, made by a potter's daughter, of her departing lover's profile on a wall. The shadow is therefore a foundational form because, again according to Pliny, it set the stage for the appearance of both painting and sculpture, which would also emerge via projections. But the shadow is also foundational because it is a de facto product of all bodies, something they carry with them from the first moment of their existence. It is, as it were, a double that is consubstantial with the body's singularity, one that we cannot dispense with—with all due respect to Adalbert von Chamisso. In short, the shadow is the original point on the timeline of art history and, phenomenologically speaking, a foundational form when viewed from the standpoint of the laws governing its appearance, the laws of visibility. It is an archaic form—in other words, a first principle—so long as we can hear in "archaic" the Greek term *arche*, its etymological root, which signifies "principle" or, more precisely—if we take Aristotle's definition of it in the *Metaphysics* literally—that which gives rise to and orders, that is, determines. To put a shadow into an image is therefore, in a certain way and up to a certain point, to make it *archaic*, to give it the character of an origin and first principle. It amounts to rendering it as inherently and archaeologically charged, endowed with an ancient and active (as well as activated) memory. And even though Claerbout uses digital technology, this does not prevent his work from being permeated by forms that make the image anachronistic after its own fashion.

One must, moreover, restore *Shadow Piece* to the historical continuum of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Western art. From Duchamp to Kara Walker by way of Christian Boltanski and Hans-Peter Feldmann, the shadow plays a key role in this chronology and has undoubtedly proven its ability to double—in planar terms—the volumes of beings and objects, and to exert, whatever the epoch, a permanent influence on the mind and the gaze. It is well known, for example, that Duchamp created works that featured shadows: in *Tu m'*, the last of his conventional paintings (executed in 1918 for the library of Katherine Dreier), one can observe several shadows of readymades (the *Bicycle Wheel* and the *Hat Rack*) in conjunction with that of an enigmatic corkscrew. A photograph of these readymades taken in his New York studio also shows their shadows, which are an integral part of their identity, whereas his *Self-Portrait in Profile* (1958) consists of his silhouette on a sheet of paper, like the tracing of a shadow directly out of Pliny's *Natural History*. Duchamp conferred a certain status on these shadows: to him, they partook of what he called the "infrathin" because the artist is like those "shadow bearers... who work within the infrathin."⁷ In other words, these projected forms are another possible name for the barely perceptible, with the infrathin announcing whatever has just appeared—the imperceptibility of phenomena, or the imperceptible in phenomena. Shadows are therefore closer to the invisible than they are to clear manifestations. The shadow worlds of Boltanski and Feldmann are, on the other hand, completely different: in their works we are dealing with authentic shadow theatres that accompany the lives of objects and tangible forms. See, for example, Boltanski's *Shadow Theatre* (1984–97) and Feldmann's installation *Play of Shadows*, shown at the 1999 Venice Biennale. Here, grisaille configurations projected on walls heighten reality and give it even greater scope, making it spectacular and monumental in order to render it by turns fantastic and troubling. Claerbout's work is akin neither to infrathin manifestations of shadowy phenomena nor to their theatricalization. Rather, the artist explores a kind of temporal deviation

7. Marcel Duchamp, *Notes*, foreword by Paul Matisse, preface by Pontus Hulten (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 24 (our translation). On the subject of the infrathin, I shall take the liberty of referring the reader to my book *De l'inframance: Brève histoire de l'imperceptible de Marcel Duchamp à nos jours* (Paris: Regard, 2010).

6. Marcel Duchamp, *Notes*, Paris, Flammarion, 1999, p. 24. Sur l'inframance, nous nous permettons de renvoyer à notre ouvrage *De l'inframance. Brève histoire de l'imperceptible de Marcel Duchamp à nos jours*, Paris, Éditions du Regard, 2010.

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David Claerbout, *Bordeaux Piece*,
captures vidéo | videostills, 2004.
Photos : permission de | courtesy of the artist and galleries Yvon
Lambert, Micheline Sz wajcer, Johnen Galerie, and Rüdiger Schöttle

nous laisse, encore une fois, devant le pur et simple déroulement de la durée, une exposition du temps, de son flux, qui transcende l'anecdote pour occuper toute la surface de l'écran. Dans cette disparition de l'histoire, de la classique narration au profit d'une scène non spectaculaire, sans emphase, c'est donc le réel pur – la durée seule et pour elle-même, son exposition – qui atteint le spectateur.

L'ombre est par conséquent tout sauf une forme mineure, comme a pu la désigner à moment donné Roberto Casati dans son étude consacrée à la *Découverte de l'ombre*⁷. Elle est ce qui permet notamment de rendre visible une prise de temps et un don de durée (en ce sens, les ombres qui rythment le travail de David Claerbout ne sont pas ces « brèves ombres » dont parle quelque part Walter Benjamin, celles qui, apparaissant à midi, « ne sont plus que de fines bordures noires auprès des choses, prêtes à se retirer sans bruit, brusquement, dans leur tanière, dans leur mystère⁸ » mais, bien au contraire, des formes qui s'étendent durablement sur le réel, des ombres crépusculaires qui semblent pouvoir annexer à leur obscurité la totalité du monde, de ses êtres et de ses choses). Claerbout a choisi d'exposer cette saisie et cette offrande à travers un format plastique que l'on a pu qualifier en Europe, à partir des années 1990, de « cinéma d'exposition ». Car aucune de ses œuvres n'est diffusée en salle, dans des cinémas : c'est bien chaque fois l'espace d'exposition qui est le cadre de projection de ses films. Dans cet investissement plasticien de la galerie ou du musée, c'est encore un autre rapport à la durée qui se joue. Car là, transformé en flâneur, le visiteur s'abandonne à une visibilité non statique, à une rencontre en mouvement de l'image en mouvement. Ce qui est une autre façon, pour lui, d'habiter la durée, de *prendre son temps*.

that is borne by the shadow and that goes hand in hand with the sort of graphic materiality granted to it: the shadow is a concrete form of time, precisely drawn and projected, and *Shadow Piece* owes its visual impact to an immobile procession of shadows that *takes time*, taking time along with it.

This "shadow play" also informs us that the work consists of an alliance, on the same surface or screen, of movement and immobility, of movement as immobility. And it does so in two ways. The first has to do with the technical construction of the film itself. As stated earlier, the upper section of *Shadow Piece* is mobile: characters and their shadows file by repeatedly and attempt to open the glass doors; they have been digitally placed inside a photographic depiction of modernist architecture. Meanwhile, the lower section of the screen is static and consists simply of the same photograph, but it has not been reworked either through the addition of movement or by being treated cinematically. The result is a type of floating object that *absolutely does not resemble* either a film or a photograph, and the space between the two is precisely where the life of the image slips in. The second way concerns the immobile time that the artist talks about in relation to the piece, and that is its undeniable substrate: nothing happens in this projection that has no beginning or end, in this film that is static for this very reason yet nonetheless continues to contain movement. This non-event places us once again before the pure and simple unfolding of duration, before a display of time's flux that transcends the anecdotal to take up the entire surface of the screen. In this disappearance of history, of classic narration, a disappearance enacted to make room for an ordinary, undramatic scene, it is the purely real—duration alone, shown for itself alone—that catches the viewer's eye.

The shadow is consequently anything but the minor form that Roberto Casati sought to make it in his book *Découverte de l'ombre*.⁸ The shadow is what makes it possible to show how time can be taken away and duration given. In this respect, the shadows that punctuate Claerbout's work are not those "short shadows" that Walter Benjamin talks about,

7. Roberto Casati, *La Découverte de l'ombre*, Paris, Le Livre de Poche, 2003.

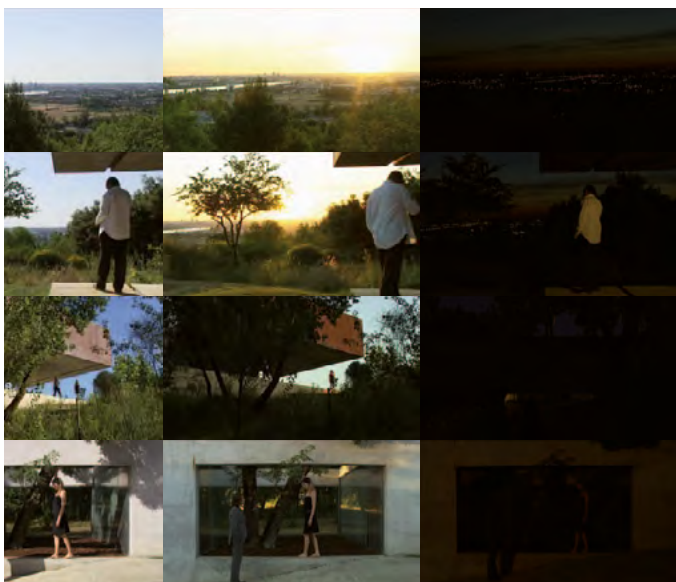
8. Walter Benjamin, « Brèves ombres », *Œuvres II*, Paris, Gallimard, 2000, p. 354.

8. Roberto Casati, *La Découverte de l'ombre* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2003).

Giving Away Time: On David Claerbout's "Shadow Piece"

esse Magazine, September, 2014

Thierry Davila



TITRE EN

those shadows that, appearing at noon, "are no more than the sharp, black edges at the feet of things, preparing to retreat silently, unnoticed, into their burrow, into their secret."⁹ On the contrary, they are forms that stretch at length over the real, are crepuscular shadows that seem capable of drawing the entire world, with everything it contains, animate and inanimate, into their darkness. Claerbout has opted to show this seizure and offering of time using an artistic form that became known, in Europe in the 1990s, as "exhibition cinema." None of his works have been shown in movie theatres, but exhibition spaces have given them a home. In this artistic effort made with galleries and museums in mind, a different relationship with duration comes into play. For it is in such places that visitors, henceforth transformed into *flâneurs*, give themselves over to a non-static visibility, to a dynamic and moving encounter with the moving image. And this becomes another way for them to dwell within duration, to *take their time*.

[Translated from the French by Donald McGrath]

Thierry Davila est conservateur au Mamco de Genève. Il prépare une rétrospective de David Claerbout qui ouvrira au Mamco en juin 2015. À paraître en 2014 aux éditions du Mamco, *Gordon Matta-Clark : Open House* (en collaboration avec Sophie Costes et Lydia Yee).

⁹ Walter Benjamin, "Short Shadows," in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1934*, ed. by Michael J. Jennings, Gary Smith; and Howard Eiland; trans. by Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2005), 202.

Thierry Davila is a curator at the Musée d'art moderne et contemporain (MAMCO) in Geneva. He is currently preparing a retrospective on Claerbout's work that will open at MAMCO in June 2015. In 2014, Éditions du Mamco will publish *Gordon Matta-Clark: Open House*, written by the author with Sophie Costes and Lydia Yee.

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David Claerbout,
*The Algiers' Sections
of a Happy Moment*,
2008, single-channel
video projection,
black and white,
stereo audio, 37min,
stills

Previous spread:
*Sections of a Happy
Moment*, 2007,
single-channel
video projection,
black and white,
stereo audio, 25min
57sec, still. All
images courtesy
the artist and
Hauser & Wirth,
London, Zürich
and New York

David Claerbout's Indecisive Moments

– Erika Balsom

I

On an improvised football pitch atop a roof in Algiers, a smiling man holds his arm aloft to offer a seagull a piece of food. The gull hovers above him, its wings pushed forward. Their gazes seem to meet. A look of wonder has spread across the man's face. Neighbourhood boys hang around behind the encounter. One looks away; another tries to pull himself up to sit on the ledge; and two more cast their eyes towards the sky. Henri Cartier-Bresson wrote that everything in the world has its decisive moment, and for this bird and this man, this might be it.¹ The photograph has captured a fleeting instant the human eye could never apprehend with such precision, and has inscribed it as an enduring representation.

Erika Balsom considers the imaginary moments created by David Claerbout's digital manipulations of photographs, finding in the artist's return to pictorialism a deep-seated desire to represent time past.

The notion of the decisive moment would provide an excellent way of understanding the temporality and affective pull of the image of man and bird if only it were a single, still photograph snapped from reality. Instead, as a part of David Claerbout's *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment* (2008), it is one of 180 digitally composited images that are integrated into a timed sequence of images and exhibited as a 29-minute video projection. A solo electric guitar slowly

plays a North African air as each black-and-white image dissolves into the next. An even, warm grey pervades the successive views of neighbourhood boys looking on at the scene. As this series of perspectives on the rooftop and its occupants unfolds, all the while the man's arm remains extended above him in precisely the same position. Despite the forward progression of the sequence, all its images inhabit the same instant, with the camera roaming through space while time remains frozen. It is a scene at once quotidian and extraordinary. A moment – often taken to be an indivisible unit of time – is here exploded to reveal the enormous potentiality that resides within it. Siegfried Kracauer believed that the cinematic close-up was capable of magnifying our environment so as to 'blast the prison of conventional reality, opening up expanses which we have explored at best in dreams before'.² Claerbout has here accomplished this same simultaneous dilation and contraction, but in time instead of space.

The work is one of a series in this form, beginning with *Sections of a Happy Moment* (2007) and continuing through *Arena* (2007), *The Algiers' Sections* and, most recently, *The Quiet Shore* (2011).³ While the mobilisation of a timed sequence of still photographs might invite comparisons to James Coleman's slide shows or Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), Claerbout's focus on the instant differentiates it from the extension of narrative time one finds in both Coleman and Marker. Nor does Claerbout organise his stills according to a vague adherence to the principles of continuity editing, as one finds in *La Jetée*. Rather, in its panoptic comprehensiveness, *The Algiers' Sections* seeks to exhaust every

- 1 Henri Cartier-Bresson, quoted in Clément Chéroux, *Henri Cartier-Bresson*, London: Thames and Hudson, 2008, p.96.
- 2 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960, p.48.
- 3 *The American Room* (2009–10) is related to this cycle but was created using a different and more complex technical process that simulates panning camera movement around still figures. For a description of this process, see David Claerbout, 'Wie haben Sie das gemacht, David Claerbout?', *Monopol*, July 2010, p.22.

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corner of the visible. It provides a radically unhuman way of seeing that happens to coincide with a deep human desire: the re-materialisation of the past in all its detail. But for all that is offered by the work, the decisiveness of the moment between man and bird is lost twice over. Its exceptional status gradually fades with the addition of numerous other details and points of view, before being undone entirely by the realisation that this moment never did – never could – exist as it is represented here. After all, how could 180 cameras take photographs at once without appearing in each other's lines of sight? We are in a cut-and-pasted world. This instant is not real, let alone decisive, so what is it?

II

The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment is part of a practice marked by a constitutive impurity, negotiating between photography and cinema, stillness and movement, past and present. Throughout, an interrogation of time stands as an abiding concern.

Claerbout remains closely associated with early works such as *Ruurlo*, *Bocurloscheweg*, 1910 (1997) that bring new media methods to bear on archival photographs. For this piece, the artist appropriated a postcard of a Dutch landscape featuring a windmill and village in the background, and a large tree and several onlookers in the foreground. Most of the image remains still – and from a distance the viewer might mistake the entirety of the twelve-square-metre projection as such – but the leaves of the tree have been digitally animated to gently rustle in the breeze. Claerbout brings the liveliness of cinema to the deathliness of the photograph. The co-presence of stasis and flow elicits an eerie fascination, one that is similarly explored in projections such as *Kindergarten Antonio Sant'Elia*, 1932 (1998) and *Vietnam, 1967, near Duc Pho (Reconstruction after Hiromichi Mine)* (2001). The possibly apocryphal 'wind in the trees' that reportedly so enthralled the earliest film spectators is here updated for our own fin de siècle.⁴

David Claerbout,
Ruurlo,
Bocurloscheweg, 1910,
1997, single-channel
video projection,
black and white,
silent, 10min loop,
still

⁴ Of Louis Lumière's *L'Arroseur arrosé* (*The Sprinkler Sprinkled*, 1895), Georges Sadoul wrote, 'In the background, in the garden, the leaves quivered in the sun, a detail that a spectator of today would have to make an effort to distinguish, but that filled the crowds of 1896 with enthusiasm.' G. Sadoul, *Histoire générale du cinéma: Tome 1, L'Invention du cinéma, 1832–1897*, Paris: Denoël, 1946, p.247. Unless otherwise stated, all translations the author's.

Ruurlo, Bocurloscheweg, 1910 presents a vision of the land drawn not from nature but from pictures of it. A debt to Dutch landscape painting is discernible in the low horizon line, tiny figures, windmill and 'heroic tree' that dwarfs all else.⁵ Claerbout is one of a number of contemporary artists working in video who, contrary to most of their forerunners, actively cultivate the pictorial capacity of the video image and pursue its alliance with figurative painting. Bill Viola, Sam Taylor-Wood and Eve Sussman, amongst others, have turned to the Old Masters in video works that take up temporality as a key concern.⁶ Many others have avoided specific citation while nonetheless embracing compositional strategies and genres drawn from the history of painting, such as landscape or portraiture: one might think of Willem de Rooij and Jeroen de Rijke's near-static views of Jakarta, *Bantar Gebang* (2000) and *Untitled* (2001), or of Fiona Tan's *Correction* series (2004), comprised of some three hundred three-quarter video portraits of prisoners and guards from US prisons. The *mise en scène* of cinema, too, has been embraced by artists as diverse as Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Doug Aitken and Omer Fast. This is all to suggest that the video of the last twenty years has been marked by an interest in the very kinds of representational strategies it once avoided — in short, it has become fascinated by picture-making.

This interest in pictorialism represents a tremendous shift away from the initial concerns of video art, which tended to privilege the material actuality of the viewer's phenomenological encounter with the medium over any interest in the screen as a virtual window. Nancy Holt and Richard Serra's *Boomerang* (1974) or Bruce Nauman's *Live-Taped Video Corridor* (1970), for example, do not offer the viewer a world to inhabit, but instead manifest a concern with liveness

and feedback loops. To some degree this change is a result of advances in technology, particularly the increase in scale and image quality afforded by projection. But for Claerbout, the interest in pictorialism in general and the history of painting in particular must also be understood as inextricable from the desire to confront what happens to the specificity and autonomy of a single medium in an age of digital convergence. The hybridity of Claerbout's practice recalls Raymond Bellour's notion of the *entre-images*, or 'between-images', which names an inter-media contamination of formerly distinct image regimes. To be between-images is, in Bellour's words, a matter of 'drawing lines of flight in a universe in fusion', of thinking through what happens to medium specificity when seamless re-mediation and transcoding are the norm.⁷ In *Ruurlo*, the scale and movement of cinema mingle with the stillness of photography and the iconography of painting to create something that both reflects upon and extends the traditions of all three.

Some see video's new pictorialism as an unfortunate relinquishment of the concerns with phenomenology and materiality that marked the 1970s. In conversation with Anthony McCall, Hal Foster remarked:

There's a rampant pictorialism, which is also a rampant virtualism, that the sculptural and spatial interests of your generation, Anthony, wanted to challenge, or at least to probe. The pictorialism of projected images today often doesn't seem to care much about the actual space. Sometimes it doesn't matter when you walk in, or even whether you do. It's as if the work doesn't care whether you're there or not. This is beyond disembodiment: it's habituating us to a kind of condition of post-subjectivity.⁸

5 On the 'heroic tree', see Seymore Slive, *Dutch Painting: 1600—1800*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, p.190.

6 See, for example, Sam Taylor-Wood's *Pietà* (2001), *Still Life* (2001) and *A Little Death* (2002); Bill Viola's *The Greeting* (1995) and *The Quintet of the Astonished* (2000); and Eve Sussman's *89 Seconds at Alcázar* (2004) and *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (2007).

7 Raymond Bellour, *L'Entre-images: photo, cinéma, vidéo*, Paris: La Différence, 2002, p.9.

8 Hal Foster, in George Baker, Matthew Buckingham, H. Foster, Chrissie Iles, Anthony McCall and Malcolm Turvey, 'Round Table: The Projected Image in Contemporary Art', *October*, vol.104, Spring 2003, p.75. Foster's position is very different than that of 1970s film theory, despite sharing its critique of illusionism. For theorists such as Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry, the cinema's lack of acknowledgement of the spectator did not deny him or her the status of subject but on the contrary set up a transcendental subject position offering the impression that the on-screen world unfolded not just in front of but in fact for him or her. See J.-L. Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus' (trans. Alan Williams), *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (ed. Philip Rosen), New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp.286—98; C. Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti), Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1982.

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The implication is that video's new pictorialism constitutes a regressive instance of art succumbing to the ideological mystification and banality of mass media spectacle and the subject positions one finds within it. In not 'car[ing] much about the actual space', moving image art becomes more like illusionistic, supposedly passive entertainment – in particular, it becomes more like the cinema. According to Foster, pictorialist video is unavoidably a kind of perceptual training ground for life under advanced capitalism. His contention further assumes that a critically active spectator must be a physically active spectator, one who completes the work through interaction rather than simply gazing at it.

Foster's argument relies on a spurious collapse of the notions of physical and mental activity and a remarkably circumscribed notion of interactivity to dismiss an extremely broad category of work.⁹ Against this, I would argue one needs to take account of precisely how strategies of pictorialism and/or virtualism

operate on a case-by-case basis, rather than engaging in an iconophobic condemnation of video's turn to representation. The critical valance of artists such as McCall is in large part tied to a rigorous interrogation of the medium, something that remains forcefully present in Claerbout's practice and that is inextricable from his interest in pictorialism. In particular, one finds a direct engagement with how the photographic image has been transformed by digitisation. As the computer-assisted manipulations of *Ruurlo* and *The Algiers' Sections* suggest, Claerbout demonstrates little investment in the testimonial value of the image and instead insists on it as fabrication, as icon rather than index. Though Claerbout never dispenses with profilmic reference entirely – his works continue to rely on photographic capture and are never wholly computer-generated – he does mitigate any notion of the photograph as an immediate trace. As with painting, one finds an image that is human-made, one in which the human hand intervenes, albeit through the proxy

⁹ Most of Claerbout's work could be included in this broad category, though the artist has produced several installations using motion sensors that marry his interest in pictorialism with the kind of interactivity Foster prizes. These include *Untitled (Carl and Julie)* (2000), *Man Under Arches* (2000) and *Rocking Chair* (2005).

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Above and left:
David Claerbout,
*Sections of a Happy
Moment*, 2007,
single-channel
video projection,
black and white,
stereo audio, 25min
57sec, stills

of a computer mouse. Claerbout fastens onto the ability of digital media to composite heterogeneous material into a whole lacking an antecedent reality. Such composite worlds might recall the CGI universes of summer blockbusters, but his images differ from their cinematic counterparts in an important respect: the worlds they create are never seamless, nor do they aim to be. Despite the strong investment in illusionism, Claerbout consistently gestures to the constructed nature of images, whether it is the impossible coexistence of temporalities in *Ruurlo* or the impossible invisibility of the 180 cameras in the single moment of *The Algiers' Sections*.

The ubiquity of post-production effects in contemporary film-making has caused some to speak of a crisis of referentiality. David Rodowick, for example, has claimed that the digital will never be able to communicate duration due to its attenuated connection to the real and the possibility of pixel-by-pixel tampering; it abandons quality for quantity.¹⁰ Tacita

Dean has made similar claims about the temporal specificity of analogue film and its superiority over the 'deadness' of digital time.¹¹ Such arguments often implicitly pit a digital Goliath, backed by big business and big studios, against an analogue David, fighting the good fight. Digital time is deemed not simply different but inferior to analogue time. Claerbout, however, conceives of this battle between old and new media in quite another manner. Rather than mourning the end of the thickness of analogue time and taking up arms against the betrayal of the real, Claerbout embraces techniques proper to digital media — compositing, re-mediation, manipulation — and puts them in the service of creating a new kind of time, one the artist has described as 'broader' and 'more omni-directional' than standard, linear time.¹² He insists on the specificity of digital temporality, embracing it for what it can achieve rather than chastising it for what it is not, even as he continues to make use of older image regimes.

¹⁰ See David Norman Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, p.163.

¹¹ Tacita Dean, 'Artist Questionnaire: 21 Responses', *October*, vol.100, Spring 2002, p.26.

¹² Christine van Assche, 'Interview', *David Claerbout: The Shape of Time* (ed. C. Van Assche), Zürich: Ringier, 2008, p.9.

III

If Claerbout's early work took the coexistence of stillness and movement as its primary temporal preoccupation, the recent slide shows have interrogated the category of the instant. The slide shows provide none of the direct reference to the history of painting that one finds in *Ruurlo*, yet remain connected to that medium through an insistence on the iconicity of the image and the idea of time advanced. In his foundational treatise on medium specificity, *Laocoön: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing characterised the ideality of the painted moment as such: 'Painting, in its coexistent compositions, can use but a single moment of an action, and must therefore choose the most pregnant one, the most suggestive of what has gone before and what is to follow.'¹³ The pregnant moment is not the culmination of the action, for this would leave nothing for the spectator to imagine. Rather, it is the moment of highest tension, a symbolised, dramatic instant. It is an imaginary moment, diametrically opposed to the any-instant-whatever of the regularised sampling rate of film and the decisive, singular instant of the photographic snapshot, both of which remain anchored in the real.¹⁴ The pregnant moment secures its meaningfulness at the price of its authenticity. As Mary Ann Doane has written, 'One cannot effectively join instantaneity (or the authenticity of the event, the real) with an immediacy and fullness of meaning, for "meaning has no place in the real".'¹⁵ The significance of the painted instant is determined in advance, with the image crafted to communicate it. Photographic and filmic instants, by contrast, are wedded to contingency, which 'presupposes a certain originary evacuation of meaning'.¹⁶ They have no predetermined significance, but may gain one after the fact.

In the slide shows, Claerbout offers the pregnant moment of painting achieved through a hybrid form that straddles the domains of digital cinema and photography. The artist photographs each participant individually against a chromakey backdrop — a screen that enables foreground/background compositing — and then assembles figure and ground into a single image that will become one slide among many. In so doing, he forges a composite instant, laden with significance but estranged from the real. Chance is subordinated to a fastidious *mise en scène*. The process might be inferred by paying close attention to the slide works, but is fully revealed in the mixed-media studies Claerbout produces as a part of the planning stage and which later become ancillary artworks.¹⁷

Video of the last twenty years has been marked by an interest in the very kinds of representational strategies it once avoided — in short, it has become fascinated by picture-making.

The instant of *The Algiers' Sections* and Claerbout's other slide works is, then, an ideal instant that leapfrogs back over the idiosyncratic instant of the photographic snapshot to revive the temporal specificity and legible significance of painting. Despite inhabiting polar positions on the spectrum of old and new, painting and digital media both offer a plasticity of time that is here exploited to maximal effect.

The pregnant moment traditionally provided a way of unifying the picture plane through dramatic tension; Claerbout uses it to unify a diegetic world made up of dozens of composite photographs. This strategy is deployed in *Arena*, which takes place at a basketball game just as the ball is about to go through the hoop (or not). This central event serves as a

13 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay Upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766, trans. Ellen Frothingham), Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1880, p.92.

14 The term 'any-instant-whatever' is drawn from Gilles Deleuze, who describes it as 'the instant which is equidistant to another'. He writes: 'The modern scientific revolution has consisted in relating movement not to privileged instants, but to any-instant-whatever. Although movement was still recomposed, it was no longer recomposed from formal transcendental elements (poses), but from immanent material elements (sections).' See G. Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam), London: Continuum, 2005, pp.4, 6. Emphasis original.

15 Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002, p.181.

16 *Ibid.*

17 Though these works have often been included in Claerbout's catalogues, to date they have not been exhibited alongside his videos.

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David Claerbout,
The Quiet Shore, 2011,
single-channel video
projection, black and
white, silent, still

magnetic force that draws together the many fragments of the instant. Such a centripetal pull also characterises Claerbout's first foray into the slide show, *Sections of a Happy Moment*, in which a small child, standing amidst a group of people in the courtyard of an apartment building, has thrown a ball into the air. However, it is with *The Algiers' Sections* that Claerbout begins to pursue the logical outcome of endowing the instant with such a multi-perspectival extension: its already tenuous univocality begins to give way. While still maintaining a degree of coherence, the singularity of the frozen moment begins to disperse as it unfolds over time. It is perhaps not a happy moment for all on the rooftop. The joy of the man feeding the bird is matched by unease on the face of another. While nothing as firm as a story emerges, multiple hints at narrativity are offered to the viewer who chooses to spend time with the piece. To use a term deployed too loosely and too often since Roland Barthes introduced it, *The Algiers' Sections* is truly a writerly text.¹⁸ It is riddled with gaps that call upon the spectator to speculate, summoning the imagination precisely as Lessing said the pregnant moment must. The decisiveness of the instant, of any instant, is revealed to be a fiction. By endowing his pregnant moments with

duration, Claerbout risks compromising their pregnancy.

This inherent indecisiveness of the instant is the central preoccupation of Claerbout's most recent slide work, *The Quiet Shore*. In the 37-minute-long video, the dispersal of significance is exacerbated and a blind spot opens where the central event might have taken place. In place of the rules-based grid of sport found in *Arena* and *The Algiers' Sections*, *The Quiet Shore* is set by a shimmering sea that the artist has said reminded him of the silver of photographic emulsion.¹⁹ One does not need to have seen the final shots of François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* (*Les 400 coups*, 1959) to know that the ocean is a site of ambiguity. It is where the stability of the land gives way to the amorphousness of water, where flux replaces permanence. In this work, a group of figures stares out at the horizon, but it is unclear what has caught their attention. Has someone drowned? One of the stills shows a sign warning swimmers about the strong tides. Or are they simply watching a child splashing in the surf? Unlike in the earlier works, here the nucleus of action remains unclear.

As *The Quiet Shore* progresses, the viewer is introduced to the many inhabitants of this cold Brittany beach, each living this instant in his or her own

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (trans. Richard Miller), New York: Hill and Wang, 1974, pp.4–6.

¹⁹ Inka Graeve Ingelmann, 'A Conversation with Inka Graeve Ingelmann' (trans. Christine Rädish and Shaun Samson), in I.G. Ingelmann (ed.), *David Claerbout: Uncertain Eye* (exh. cat.), Munich: Pinakothek der Moderne, 2010, p.23.

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way. There are intimations of contentment, dread, bliss, boredom and romance, all in a landscape that usurps prominence from the figures that inhabit it. The black-and-white images consist primarily of long shots, with the camera observing the figures from a much greater remove than in the previous slide works. The viewer is not invited to penetrate this scene in the same way; pictorial space remains planar rather than broken down into inhabitable quadrants. This sense of exclusion is redoubled by the inability to discern precisely what the importance of this instant might be. Whereas the early slide shows used duration to impregnate the fleeting instant with the fullness of meaning, the instant unfolded in *The Quiet Shore* poses a challenge to stable significance. It becomes paradoxically too full of meaning to yield a single message and reverses into ambiguity. Surfeit is transformed into lack, as the work remains torn amidst a series of unresolved micro-narratives.

The Quiet Shore builds on the gestures of *The Algiers' Sections* to suggest it is ultimately impossible to manage and master a past instant, to fix its meaning once and for all. The desire to grasp hold of time and make it meaningful is a strong one and has informed the slide works from the beginning. But in recent iterations of the form, Claerbout's attitude towards it seems to have changed. While the images of *Arena* congeal to confirm the significance of the moment, *The Algiers' Section* and *The Quiet Shore* are marked by dispersal

and flux. In so doing, they disrupt the pregnancy of painting's instant and delve into the foundational evacuation of meaning that Doane claims is central to the instant of photography and cinema. This gesture functions as an important acknowledgement of the specificity of Claerbout's invented form: again, though the slide shows involve extensive digital manipulation, they do rely on a photographic base and thus retain some hint of the indexical bond, however attenuated. This means that the pregnancy, the meaningfulness, of these instants will always be achieved at a price: the denial of the authenticity and contingency, the triumph of icon over index. This is precisely what occurs in *Arena*, in which the certainty of meaning is entirely shored up. And yet, the retention of indexicality is absolutely crucial to the sense of melancholy that pervades all of Claerbout's slide shows: they depend on photographic capture to summon the pathos of lost time, in order to then assuage this feeling by endowing the instant with an impossible plenitude via computer-assisted manipulation. They would undoubtedly fail if fabricated exclusively from paintings or digital simulations; they would be mere animations, lacking the force of time necessary to their affective resonance. In *The Algiers' Sections* and even more so in *The Quiet Shore* — with its allegory of analogue photography in the figure of the ocean — Claerbout acknowledges the continuing importance of the indexical

David Claerbout's Indecisive Moments

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Above and left:
David Claerbout,
The Quiet Shore, 2011,
single-channel video
projection, black and
white, silent, stills

trace to his imagination of time, its persistence within and through the fabricated worlds of digital compositing.

True to the spirit of the *entre-images*, Claerbout engages in a contamination of media that reflects upon the specificity of constituent parts rather than collapsing them all into the homogeneity of binary code. This interrogation is, however, a means rather than an end. Claerbout's exploration of the medium seems not to stem from a belief that the political and aesthetic task of art is to reflexively turn inwards. Rather, this project appears to emerge from a desire to explore the affective dimensions of the visualisation of time and the changing role of media technologies in this enterprise. These works of 'rampant pictorialism' may not acknowledge the presence of the viewer in the room, but they do acknowledge something else, something that is perhaps much more fundamental: our tortured relationship to the inexorable passage of time and our desire to return to the past, make sense of it and grasp it as a frozen sheet – even while knowing that such a thing is impossible.