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Afterall

David Claerbout's
Indecisive Moments

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

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.

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]

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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 Seymour 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.

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* (2003).

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]

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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 orginal.
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.

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.

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

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.