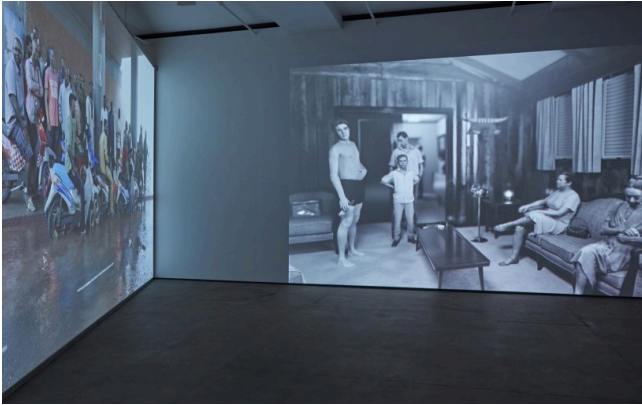


SEAN KELLY

“Interview with Video Artist David Claerbout,” *Aesthetica*, March 24, 2016.

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.

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.

Credits

1. Installation views of David Claerbout's LIGHT/WORK. Courtesy of Sean Kelly Gallery and Jason Wyche.

