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SLEEK

David Claerbout On His Time Based 'Olympia' Installation



"Olympia," 2016

Berlin's recently opened KINDL – Centre for Contemporary Art, a former brewery in Neukölln, is hosting the latest exhibition by award-winning Belgian multimedia artist David Claerbout. Best known for large-scale installations, in his latest project he's turned his attention to one of history's darkest chapters. Titled "Olympia (The real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years)", the project features a real time projection of the arena commissioned by Hitler for the 1936 Summer Olympic Games. A play on the title of the Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl's critically revered – and ideologically reviled – film, it examines the legacy of World War II on contemporary society, as well as the relationship between aesthetics and politics. With this in mind, SLEEK spoke to the artist.

SLEEK: So what is the film about?

David Claerbout: The film's subject is based on supposedly "utopian" systems that offer parallel modes of duration and time. At the beginning they seem very attractive but they're very difficult to deliver. It's very easy, for example, to imagine a Third Reich that lasts 1,000 years, but much harder to follow up on. Whether it's a Thousand-Year Reich or a piece of software, they both hold an ephemeral promise of eternity.

Will your film really continue to exist for another 1,000 years?

Not at all, I'm counting on its disintegration. And besides, I'm only contractually committed to it for the next 25.

Even 25 years is a long time for a work based on code, given how fast technology changes. Are you thinking ahead?

I see the piece as a living organism that needs to be fed. Certain things can be planned for, like the weather and the seasons. But other things need to be checked daily so that they can be updated, and we can change our approach if necessary.

David Claerbout, photographed by Neven Allgeier

It sounds like you just had a child!

Exactly, and now I find myself waking up to the idea that this piece will be with me until I die. Which is a very uncomfortable feeling, because even if I would like to kill the project I couldn't without upsetting people. I realise that is going to be part of my legacy, and possibly one of my most 'spot-on' works, at least I hope so.

Are you concerned by the film's potential to be interpreted as a celebration of the stadium and its creator, Nazi architect Albert Speer?

While it's true that the work doesn't contain any direct remarks or criticism of the Third Reich, I am in fact deconstructing the building, turning it over to time, radically. Yes, you could argue that there is a collaborative aspect in the aesthetics: I keep my camera in the same track as Leni Riefenstahl would have kept it, as if the camera could have gone on forever. And I'm only deconstructing it and turning it around radically over time. The only real tool in every piece of my work is duration, it is duration that does the real job of vengeance.

Inspired by the remnants of ancient Greece and Rome, Speer designed the stadium, and indeed many other buildings, with the idea that it would one day become a ruin, so that its character and significance could be preserved. In a sense, doesn't your film fulfil his ambition?

No, the particularity of the *Ruinenwert* (ruin value) from Speer and Hitler is that they managed to project a future spectator that looked back on the past glory, a person that never existed. Under Nazi rule, art and architecture were used for propaganda, as a tool of conversion. They must have known that whatever they built was going to be short-lived, because what was built was cheaply made. It looked as if it would stand a 1,000 years, like the Roman Empire, but it would never have lasted more than 50. The same goes for the Olympic stadium, it is very fragile and almost purely decorative. Its creators were busy with the production of the past rather than the production of the future.



David Claerbout, photographed by Neven Allgeier