

Mignon, Olivier. "Review: Johan Grimonprez," *Artforum*, February 2012.

ARTFORUM

GHENT, BELGIUM

Johan Grimonprez

SMAK

One traversed "It's a Poor Sort of Memory that Only Works Backwards"—the first large-scale retrospective of Belgian artist Johan Grimonprez in his native country—a bit as one might move through an unfamiliar archive: going from confusion to a certain order, from the perception of fragments to the awareness a common mentality, from the multiplicity of words to the emergence of a discourse. The imposing first gallery immersed us in a profusion of sounds, images, and texts that became clarified and coordinated in the progressively smaller galleries that followed; the contributions of several invited artists (Roy Villevoye, Jan Dietvorst, and Adam Curtis) first seemed distracting before demonstrating their coherence; and the diversity of the artist's subjects gradually allowed an obsession, or at least a dominant theme, to emerge—airspace.

In certain ways, the sky occupies a place in Grimonprez's thinking similar to the sea in that of Allan Sekula, who shares much of the Belgian artist's poetic and critical approach. For these artists, sky and sea are canvases on which man has always projected his mystical aspirations, his political and economic struggles, and his poetic imaginings. They are abstract spaces into which the very real histories of contemporary societies are woven. But if the sea represents, as Sekula has shown, what goes unthought by global capitalism and what is outside the sphere of the media, the sky, on the contrary, has for several decades been a focus of attention, and even more so since a certain September 11. Hence, if Sekula's task is to give visibility to a suppressed space, Grimonprez's, on the contrary, consists in clearing away the images and information with which the media has saturated the imaginary canvas of the air, occluding or deforming the reality of the aspirations and struggles played out there.

Kobarweng or Where Is Your Helicopter?, 1992, is an early work attesting to the ideological breadth of airspace: In this piece, one discovers how the helicopter landing of a group of anthropologists amid a New Guinea tribe forever disrupted the history and the representations of this indigenous population, in a blatant clash with the Western aspiration to scientific neutrality. *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, 1997, the work that intro-

duced the artist at Documenta X that year, deconstructs the figure of the skyjacker as both the ambiguous revealer of geopolitical issues and the romantic icon given as a pretext for a media reappropriation, a seductive *détournement*.

The seduction factor that's built into media imagery is exploited by Grimonprez in a subtle manner. His films play off an aesthetic of disaster and terror and use the virtues of channel surfing in order to plunge the viewer into a state



Johan Grimonprez, *Dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y*, 1997, still from a color video, 68 minutes.

of genuine fascination. But the critical dimension of his work follows close behind: Through processes of repetition and delay, he displays on second glance—hence the title of one of his recent feature-length films, *Double Take*, 2009—the state of confusion in which we are kept by the media machine. Grimonprez does not harangue us with denunciations but rather suggests that we reconsider the short circuits of this machine, of which we briefly catch glimpses.

—Olivier Mignon

Translated from French by Molly Stevens.