

Scharrer, Eva. "David Claerbout: Kunstmuseum St. Gallen," *Artforum*, November 2008.

ARTFORUM

David Claerbout

KUNSTMUSEUM ST. GALLEN

What if one could freeze a moment in time—or, more precisely, slow it down until its motion became almost ungraspable? And what if one could then freely move around in space within that frozen moment, so that one could closely observe each detail from all possible angles? This is what David Claerbout seems to visualize in the two works that frame his exhibition "After the Quiet." His first solo museum show in Switzerland, curated by Konrad Bitterli, starts with *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment*, 2008, a digital slide show that develops a principle already probed in the previous *Sections of a Happy Moment*, 2007, not on view here, and *Arena*, 2007, the last work in the show. *The Algiers' Sections* depicts an improvised football field on a rooftop of Algiers's Kasbah with open view to the Mediterranean, where boys, watched by elderly men, gather for a football match. The action is interrupted as one



David Claerbout.
*Sections of a Happy
Moment*, 2007,
still from a
single-channel
black-and-white
video installation,
25 minutes
57 seconds.

man starts feeding the seagulls that flock to the area. For the whole duration of the piece, we see the scene in close-ups and long shots and from various angles in rhythmical alternation—faces near and far and seagulls from above and below. The viewer seems to be flying among the seagulls themselves. The scene is shot in black and white, and an intense light casts long shadows. The poetic beauty of the tableau is accompanied by the subtle sound of Arabic music played on an electric guitar.

In the thirty-eight-minute loop, one moment is extended into eternity; there is no climax or narrative, just a slow leak of time. To create this effect, Claerbout filmed each individual figure separately and then digitally combined the shots. Using a similar technique, *Arena* captures a moment in a basketball game, with the ball hovering over the basket, watched anxiously by players and audience. In contrast, the earlier *Bordeaux Piece*, 2004, is a thirteen-hour loop that tells a brief story about three people—a filmmaker; his girlfriend, an actress; and his father, a producer. The plot—its dead-end mood reminiscent of Godard's *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*, 1963)—takes place in a Rem Koolhaas-designed villa in a magnificent landscape outside Bordeaux. In this spectacular surrounding, the conflicted interactions of the protagonists are framed by dramatic architecture and directed by the light. Light is also the only director in *The Stack*, 2002, a static film capturing the slowly changing lighting conditions and atmosphere underneath an overpass of interweaving highways. Toward the end of the thirty-six-minute loop, a ray of light briefly unveils a sleeping homeless man—social reality subverting an image of abstract beauty, in which the architecture symbolizes mobility and superiority.

"After the Quiet" was installed symmetrically in the form of a semicircle, alternating between works that have different durational or narrative modes and animations made from stills. Each work investigates the paradoxical and relative nature of time and space. Light and architecture give depth to the flatness of the projected image. Claerbout's exhibition likewise tested the boundaries between still and moving images; between analog and digital; and between time, space, and the perception of the viewer.

—Eva Scharrer