

Ward, Ossian. "David Claerbout Extrasensorial," *Art in America*, June/July 2009.

Art in America

DAVID CLAEARBOUT EXTRASENSORIAL

Having made his reputation with lengthy videos that challenge viewer endurance, Claerbout now manipulates the experience of light and sound to test the very limits of comprehension.

BY OSSIAN WARD

ANY DISCUSSION OF THE ATMOSPHERIC and engrossing work of 40-year-old Belgian artist David Claerbout inevitably begins with time, although there is much more to his practice than mere clock watching. Claerbout's videos and photography contend with cinematic time and time spent looking, as well as time past and time immemorial. Partly this has to do with his conflation of mechanized, analog and digital media. In *Vietnam, 1967, near Duc Pho (Reconstruction after Hiroshima Mine)*, 2001, a still photograph of a fighter plane being shot down midair is montaged onto a landscape that Claerbout has subtly animated in stop-frames to strange effect, so that branches sway and leaves shake. For *Four Persons Standing* (1999) and *Rocking Chair* (2003), he slows his digitized video down to such a crawl that its motion appears inexorably stalled. The photographic moment is prolonged and the momentum of film all but stopped in its tracks.

Essays about Claerbout and shows featuring him—numerous and international since 1997—bear such titles as "Background Time," "Visible Time," "The Shape of Time," "Unreal Time Video," and so on. The average length of his single-channel works

ranges from less than 10 minutes to an unwatchable 13 hours 43 minutes. "The sense that there's a lack of time to observe these pieces is as important as the missionary standpoint of trying to keep people in front of the work for as long as possible," said the artist from his production studio in Antwerp. "The idea that there is not enough time (for looking at art, living, loving or anything else) is perhaps Claerbout's fundamental point in stretching duration to its limits: 'I'm mostly trying to articulate time as something that is bigger than us, or maybe broader. I like to describe it in more formal, panoramic terms than we would normally. So if you look back at earlier pieces, the main qualities were that the frame would remain in itself and not evolve and would therefore handicap the traditional expectations we have of movement.'"

Certainly, Claerbout's use and abuse of time is inherently formal and structural, never more so than in his two 13-hour-long epics, *Bordeaux Piece* (2004) and *White House* (2006). These are almost identically constructed from 70 or so takes of near-indistinguishable footage, the only difference in each iteration being the time of day in which it was shot (0800h, 0810h, etc.). Both films present a seemingly endless loop of repetitive, increasingly mundane 10-minute tableaux, in which the respective plots soon prove irrelevant, having been painstakingly re-enacted over a whole day's worth of shifting shadows and light effects, from morning till night. *Bordeaux Piece*, Claerbout's first foray into scriptwriting, revolves around three actors reprising

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

Three videos, *Riverside*, *Sunrise* and *The American Room (1st movement)*, all 2009—in David Claerbout's show at Hauser & Wirth, London, through Aug. 1.



David Claerbout: Vietnam, 1967, near Duc Pho (Reconstruction after Hiroshimi Mine), 2001, single-channel video projection, 3½ minutes. All photos courtesy Hauser & Wirth Zurich London.

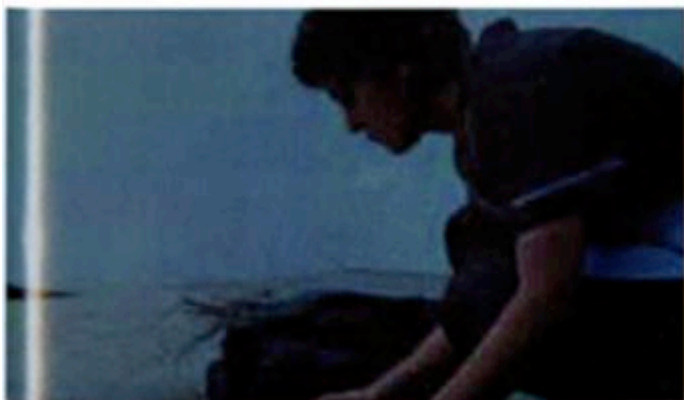
ing the love triangle from Jean-Luc Godard's 1963 film *Le Mépris* (Contempt), except instead of a movie mogul, a screenwriter and the screenwriter's wife, there's a father who steals away the lover of his son. The slow and languid feel of *Bordeaux Piece* stands in stark contrast to the frenetic violence in *White House*, featuring two men, one Senegalese and the other African-American, locked in an ever-repeating argument followed by a brutal fight. It culminates in a harrowing scene outdoors, within the portico of a house, where one of the men bludgeons the other to death with a stone.

The difficult experience of watching these films, at times a Herculean act of endurance, might lead a viewer to judge them impossibly arrogant. "I sometimes find that spectators think I expect them to stay much longer than they can," Claerbout admits. But there are other possible responses a viewer can have, as the artist asks what it means nowadays to really engage with something. When did we stop observing and start browsing, surfing or skimming instead? Was it mechanical reproduction and its fallout (the photograph, the television, the Internet) that killed the "long look" associated with art appreciation and the hushed, studious museum environment? How much time should you spend in front of a work of art, anyway? Six minutes? Or six months, as T.J. Clark did for his obsessive account of a pair of paintings by Poussin, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (2006)?

Despite the relevance of these questions, other artists and filmmakers who draw out cinematic time to near breaking point are not examined on as narrow an idiomatic basis as Claerbout tends to be. Chantal Akerman's three-and-a-half-hour masterpiece, *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), for example, is fêted as more than simply a slow-moving study of domesticity with the longest potato-peeling scene in film history, while Douglas Gordon's most famous work, the time-stretched *24 Hour Psycho* (1993) is not at all the yardstick by which the rest of his career is judged.

"The first five to seven years of my work were focused on that simple presence of a person in front of a static frame, and how that frame would confront you with your own indecisiveness or your own change of perception," acknowledges Claerbout. But perhaps his work calls for a reappraisal in terms other than time: namely with regard to his use of light, landscape and, most recently, sound. Light conditions, for example, have been important to Claerbout since his first experiment with low-lit galleries for the installation of his series "Venice Lightboxes" in 2000. His grisaille Cibachromes of the watery city, taken across





Sixteen stills from *Sunrise*,
2009, single-channel video
projection, 18 minutes.

"I'M MOSTLY TRYING TO ARTICULATE TIME," SAYS CLAERBOUT, "AS SOMETHING THAT IS BIGGER THAN US, OR MAYBE BROADER. I LIKE TO DESCRIBE IT IN MORE FORMAL, PANORAMIC TERMS."

the lagoons between 4:00 and 6:00 AM, glow so dimly that spectators only just discern the ethereal images after their eyes have adjusted to the almost pitch-black ambient gloom, a condition that Claerbout has re-employed for his recent video work, the 18-minute *Sunrise* (2009).

Unlike the static, backlit scenes of Venice, *Sunrise*, likewise presented in almost complete darkness, is forward-projected onto a gray surface to accentuate the murky tones of the early morning shoot. The first 15 or 16 minutes are spent in this filmic fog, scrutinizing the choreographed movements of a housemaid carrying out predawn chores in a starkly modernist bungalow, a glorious example of the international style. (It is in fact a private home called Skywood, located in the outskirts of London and designed by Graham Phillips, a protégé of Norman Foster.) The maid brings in fuel for the fire and cleans the bathroom, all while the wealthy owners lie asleep in the half-light before daybreak. As with *Bordeaux Piece*, which Claerbout set in a signature house by Rem Koolhaas, the architecture itself provides the framing device for routine and inconsequential actions. "It's a very suffocating way of composing the woman over and over again," says the artist, "which is why I was looking for an architecture reminiscent of hardcore modernism. It's basically filmed architectural photography, one could say."

After this prolonged, tenebrous sequence, the maid leaves on her bicycle and rides into a pseudo-romantic landscape. All of a sudden a few bars of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise* strike up, and a bright burst of sunlight—the first piercing rays of the day—outlines her head and temporarily dazzles the audience. As Claerbout explains, "That last minute-and-a-half throws the notion of the modern and the composition upside down and replaces them with a simple notion of that woman's world. What I had in my mind as a paradox is that the end feels like a beginning and the beginning feels like something that is lifeless and dead."

After the long haul of the opening scene, this transcendent, redemptive light strips away the film's carefully constructed formal qualities, turning *Sunrise* into an almost traditionally beautiful, elegiac work of art in the mode of Caspar David Friedrich or J.M.W. Turner. To say that this character—according to the artist, an immigrant worker from Eastern Europe—has been freed from her domestic imprisonment might be to load the piece with too much sociopolitical freight. Similarly, Claerbout plays down the neocolonial undertow in the ethnic scuffle and punning title of *White House*, instead emphasizing his directorial control over the proceedings. "The whole narrative is like a wall," he says, "that is put up in the foreground. The actors are merely occupants; they're not the conductors of the story."

Whereas music provides one of the cruxes for the finale of *Sunrise*, the split-screen installation *Riverside* (2009) toys with sonic balance and stereophony in a soundtrack played in dedicated headsets, one for the left projection and one for the right. The two 25-minute projections, running concurrently side by side, depict the converging tales of a young man, on the left, and a young woman, on the right. The man's arc begins with a close-up of his bloodied ear, metonymically sug-

gesting the aural nature of what is about to happen. Claerbout calls this "a cheap cinematographer's trick," but it is one that has been used prodigiously in film. Apart from images by Hitchcock (the screaming mouth and dead eye as drain in *Psycho*) and Buñuel (the slicing of the eye in *Un Chien Andalou*), there is the shocking moving-image sequence of a woman's fluttering eyelids in Chris Marker's stop-motion classic of 1962, *La Jetée*. When the injured man in *Riverside* comes to, evidently after a nasty cycling accident, a high-pitched ringing in his ears fades in and out and the sound eventually passes solely into the left earphone, mirroring his experience. He gets up and sets off on foot into the countryside with this phonic deficiency, seemingly searching for something.

In the other projection, the female protagonist is seen driving through the same sort of lush, green landscape (French *paysage*, as it turns out), listening to her car radio as it begins to cut out and splutter into mono. She's then stuck with only the right-hand audio channel, as are we. "It's as if you've temporarily lost hearing on one side, or there is a technical defect in the headphones. But at the very end, if anyone sticks with it, there is a moment when both characters geographically arrive at the same spot, sitting on this log, when the stereo gradually comes back." The camera pans overhead at this point, with the fallen tree trunk momentarily bridging the split screen and providing a visual cue for the final alignment of the dual audios. "On first impression," elaborates Claerbout, "it may seem like a very clear narrative about how those two worlds never meet, but the triggering of these little odysseys is an almost unnoticeable sensorial quality through which I try and say something about the lack of unity in perception and the separation of those two films."

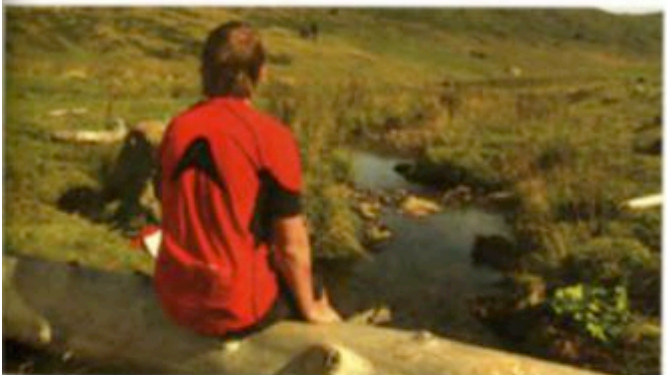
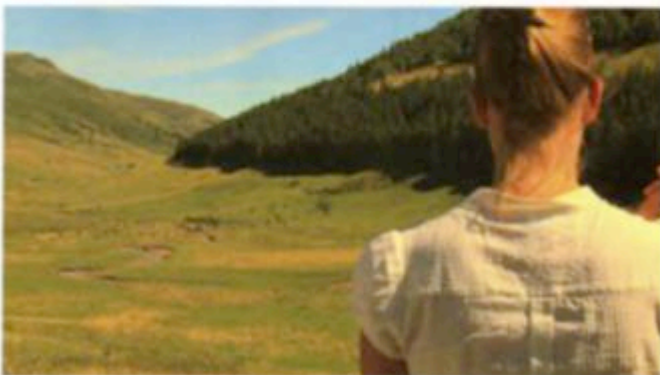
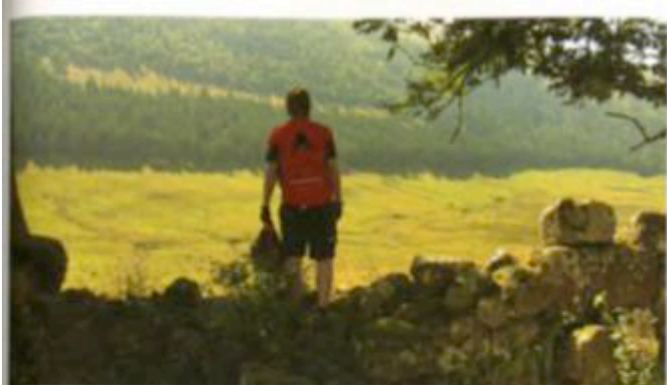
By means of the protracted near-blind sequences that linger through the darkened minutes of *Sunrise*, and the disruptions of full sound in *Riverside*, Claerbout diverts the attention of his audience. He explains, "The real actor in *Riverside* is that little stream, somewhere in central France," adding that the search for the right location took him years. Foregrounding the background and relegating character action to rote film conventions, Claerbout constructs an earthly idyll—similar to what one finds in the very best landscape paintings. Immediacy is undermined and everything seems far away, geographically as well as temporally.

Which brings us around to time again—or to the unreal broadening of time into a molasses-coated slow motion that Claerbout describes as an "almost formal or sculptural element" of the work. Claerbout's latest installations suggest an ontological alternative—something akin to the revelatory moment of light experienced in *Sunrise*. There's a choice to be made about how we observe or interact with our surroundings and, ultimately, about how we lead our lives, but it doesn't have to be between diametric opposites: fast or slow, light or dark, photography or film. Instead, this way of seeing—entering into the "long look" of painting, or a prolonged appreciation of anything, for that matter—involves a search for something ungraspable in the gray areas and interstices. It's the quest for a moment of brilliant morning light or the redemptive trickle of a calming stream. As the artist says: "I'm usually looking to counter or thwart the

single, narrow rhetoric of an image and to put in several potential directions in which the story line might go. So I'm a bit of a peacekeeper in that way, constantly negotiating between conflicting sentiments. My work is usually an exercise in diplomacy between conclusions." □

*All quotes come from an interview by the author, conducted on April 3, 2009.

OSSIAN WARD is a London-based art writer.



Eight stills from *Riverside*,
2009, two-channel video
projection, 25 minutes.