"Interview with David Claerbout ★ Teatrino di Palazzo Grassi, Venezia," *ATP Diary*, June 7, 2015.

ATP DIARY

Interview with David Claerbout ★ Teatrino di Palazzo Grassi, Venezia

David Claerbout, Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain, 2013 Pinault Collection Courtesy the artist and Yvon Lambert, Paris © David Claerbout by SIAE 2014

On the 11th of December at Teatrino di Palazzo Grassi in Venice took place the third part of the Art Conversations cycle with a talk between David Claerbout (Kortrijk, 1969), Philippe-Alain Michaud, curator at the Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Pompidou, Paris, and Thierry Davila, curator at the Mamco, Geneva.

Matteo Mottin in conversation with the artist.

Matteo Mottin: When I first saw "Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain", I've got the impression that it was all about a strange kind of coexistence: in it, film and photography coexist just like torrential rains coexist with drought and abundance of oil resources coexists with their exploitation. In between all of this, there's people, motionless, blocked. I'd like to know which was your main concern when you were working on it.

David Claerbout: Before I embarked in making "Oil workers" I was actually working on something different in Liberia, in the South-West of the continent. It was a collaboration between me and a photographer, but it went wrong. Communications went wrong and the photographer thought 'artists are arrogant and lazy and they stay at home, they don't like to go to war like we do'. The approach with the subject of the African continent is always difficult whatever you do, you have to put on silky gloves. Unless of course if you pull the cinematographic card, if you really start narrating then you can get away with it, but I like to construct my images in a slightly more subtle way, by just dealing with a single situation, a single image, so to speak. I decided not to go for that subject anymore until a year or so later when I've found on the internet this particular image with the oil workers. I've found it by chance, and as I so often do I didn't know immediately what I was going to do, I just collect, collect, collect… Like a vacuum cleaner, you know? I don't surf, I broom the internet with my vacuum cleaner (laughs). I was wondering that something strange was going on with that picture because it had a very long title: 'Oil workers of the Shell Company of Nigeria returning home from work caught in torrential rain'. I'm actually not sure

if the 'torrential rain' was there, maybe it was just 'caught in rain', I don't know, but there was a relation between the text and the image which was striking. 'Oil workers from the Shell Company of Nigeria' – that's one thing: oil. There's a very instant, tactile, physicality of the material. And then the second part, 'returning home from work', that made me think about the Lumière brothers and their first film, with workers returning home from the factory [La Sortie de l'usine Lumière]. Old memories started to show up. Then the image itself is all about water, and I thought that, having to do with a picture about Africa, water isn't such a bad idea, because it's not the first thing you think about when you think about the African continent. You think about hunger, poverty, civil conflicts, exploitation, refugees, all this sort of political topics. Then there is this cross-fertilization between oil and water, both in the title and in the image. Oil and water are almost the definition or the index of incompatibility: you cannot mix oil with water, it's impossible. But with the technologies that I use with my work, 3D and new image technologies, the cards are changed, they're no longer so clear. This made me think about a third material, which is neither oil or water, but a material which is only in your head, in your perception. When people look at this piece just for a moment and then they decide to go, the picture they got is completely coherent with that of a photo: 'Ok, this guy works with photography, it's something that's gonna stay still forever'. But when you stay longer, there's a certain development going on, which I define as 'third' kind of material, a sort of virtual material which is neither oil or water, but it's a kind of plastic composite material, like epoxy, something that's not part of both worlds, but becomes a new sort of stuff. I thought 'Ok, this is going to be my narrative, it's going to be about this new sort of material'. That includes also the people in the portrait. When you look at it instantly you think it's a portrait, in coherence with the photograph. When you look at the entire film or you stay there for 20 minutes you no longer know wether these are 3D images or photographic images. What's for sure is they do not belong to any of these worlds. They become like empty envelopes, like empty shells.

MM: Shell Company…

DC: Yes, Shell (laughs). This made me think about the idea of the Zombie. We are all potential zombies, aren't we? We go on strike tomorrow, we walk the streets with our flags. The zombie is a modern definition of the modern worker who's no longer certain why he/she's living for, as if it makes no difference wether you exist or not. It's a sort of very deep sense that all you are is a shell, and inside there's nothing. Of course this metaphor has been translated many times in horror movies, you can kill a zombie many times but it stands up again and again and again… It has no taste, it's blind, it has nothing, but still stands up. 'It doesn't matter what I do, I'm already dead'.

What I realized while I was making all this 3D material for the film is that when I work with scans, when I scan a person, I really work only with the outside of this person, and the eyes disappear completely, there's just two black holes with no life anymore. We have to re-build the eyes.

We all know how they work, it's of course a situation of exploitation. The political narrative of the work in a certain way is instant: you have the Shell Company, the oil workers… but I don't want this to be the energy of the work. The energy of the work should be inside the duration, in the ongoing time that you spend in front of the projection – there should be its energy, not in the title or in the picture. You can only feel it when time becomes sculptural, when it becomes something tactile.

MM: You can manage to mix something as incompatible as oil and water only if you stay there and you pay attention.

DC: Exactly. Then all becomes this third material. I'm always looking for parallel worlds that could never belong together but that have to speak at some point. If you let time do the job you can get a third voice, and this third voice is not possible to define – if I could define it I wouldn't have had to make an artwork out of it.

Teatrino di Palazzo Grassi, Art Conversations with the artist David Claerbout and the curators Philippe-Alain Michaud and Thierry Davila. Ph: © Matteo De Fina

MM: In "Oil workers" we have just one camera movement, which is going from right to left. There's a cinematographic theory that says that Western people perceive everything that's moving from right to left on the screen as something 'peculiar', since we're so used to read and write from left to right. Did you intentionally use this camera movement as a sort of 'hidden signal' for the spectator to draw its attention?

DC: I've never thought about right to left, I just conceived an elliptical movement that ends in a close-up of the water and then starts again coming back out from the water but on the right side of the bridge. It doesn't do a complete elliptical movement. I intended this to be just for the attentive few, and it stands for a situation that's going nowhere. You can see only one side of it, and at the two sides there's exactly the same people. It's a metaphor to say that they're stuck in time. And there's only one guy, when the camera goes out of the water, that's looking straight at you, he picks up the gaze and he looks at you until you look again at the group of people.

This is also why I don't give a duration to the work. It has no duration.

I like the fact that I can escape. I can say that this is a political realistic work about the suffering and exploitation of Nigerian workers from the Shell Company, but I can also say that it's a study about water, oil and a third sort of material. I can in fact pretend to be a sort of Neo-Impressionist. To be speaking about light and about materials, the fascination can never be isolated, as well a fascination about new mediums and new ways of pictorialism in film by working with 3D and scans instead of photographs. But it's also of course a political narrative, I just don't know in which order of importance I would have to put it. It's a simple visual poem on conflictual situations, but made with a very complicated technology.

MM: You trained as a painter, but then you moved to photography and cinema. You moved from that medium to these others because of a concern regarding time. From where does this concern come from and when did it start?

DC: It actually comes from painting and from the status of the tableau, as it stay always there even without you, without the spectator. The painting doesn't need me, it's always there even without me looking at it. This comes from a modern conception of the tableau, historically it's different, the painting used to be an old kind of cinema. I'm profoundly academically trained, I'm trained as a draftsman, lithographer and painter. I did that for 24 years of my life, but I gave it up.

Digital editing became affordable for young artists – it was still expensive, but affordable. For all my life I've been making art, and I hated that. I had my studio full of paintings and litographies and I said to myself 'what can I do with it? I can just light a fire'. There was no market for my work. I was just spending money on equipment for painting… I noticed that all my colleagues were all painting from photographs – and they all do that today. I think they're just a bunch of cowards following a bourgeois esthetic, a manipulative use of political realism. I had enough of that, I just didn't want to touch a paintbrush anymore. For three years I just looked at photographs. I hanged them on the walls of my studio, and there I made a sort of voyage through a lot of different typologies of images, from diagnostic images to tourism ones, kitsch ones… and in this very turbulent period I ended up in a sort very peaceful sea, or lake, and I knew what I wanted to do: I wanted to take care of all this universe of lost images on the internet or in books. I wanted to take care of them and use them as a basis for time sculptures, to make sure that through time these images can be transformed into something else, if possible in a non-spectacular way, in a non-cinematographic way. But I've been never trained as a filmmaker, I'm a totally autodidact. I knew nothing about films, I was fascinated in a way, but I didn't know the language. Like everybody, I underwent it, I went to the cinema, but I've always had and still have an hate/love relationship with cinema – more hate than love: there's a little bit of art in cinema, but most of it is just… paralyzing, you know?

It was great not to produce art for a long time.

MM: But were you still thinking about making art?

DC: No, I thought that was the end, I thought that I was never going to take a paintbrush anymore. And even when I made drawings I felt bad… But nowadays I use drawings to feel good, because it's something I can always do, at any time I'm good in it.

MM: Are you making them only for you?

DC: I never show them. I put them in books sometimes, but never in exhibitions. They are great, though. Very meditative… I learn a lot from them. You see, for "Oil workers" I started with a simple picture from the internet, a very small teeny-tiny picture, and I made this entire production which is very expensive and took one year long to make. At the end of that production I no longer knew what I've been doing: like a forest, it overgrew out of my head, and I had to make drawings to re-discover why I did some things.

I'm open for any image as long as its signal is never complete. Like an archeologist, who finds a little piece and wants to dig it out further. That's the only condition I need to be interested in an image. It's like an incomplete message, or a very coded one.

Of course, painting is always in the background, it's what I did and I'm proud to say that I worked it out in my system and I don't have to pretend to be a painter.

MM: So this work in a certain way is like a "conceptual palette", because you're mixing these two elements, oil and water, as if they were two colors, in order to get a third one? Is it too far to see it in that way?

DC: No, because this work is a pictorial research, in a certain way. We stayed very close to the original picture found on the internet. I sometimes had difficulties in getting the two separated from one and the other because they're look so much alike.

MM: Looking at the artwork, at first glance you cannot really say if it's casual or if it's staged, if you randomly shot that with a very particular camera or if you rebuilt the whole thing in the field. It's really hard to figure out that everything it's actually completely built in studio with CGI technologies.

DC: That's of course the interesting phenomena of spectacular cinema: all this technology is used to amaze you. Of course it's expensive and there's a lot of labour in it. We worked for one year with eight people to build this very simple image, and you can feel the presence of this labour, but still it doesn't look spectacular. The funny thing is that this non-spectacularity is to my benefit. If it was a quick show-off it would belong too much to the language of cinema already as we know it.

MM: Are you working on any new project?

DC: It's going to last for one thousand years (laughs). Actually, it's going to be an interactive game, but not with people. People can't play with it. Time plays with it. Time and weather. The climate changes will play with it, along with time. It's a sort of sweet revenge on pretentious ideologies of the XX Century. You will see why. It has something to do with the Third Reich. That's why it lasts 1000 years. The title is "The real-time disintegration of the Olympiastadion in Berlin over the course of 1000 years".

MM: Is that a reference to Albert Speer's theory of Ruin Value, in which new buildings would have been build in order to become beautiful ruins?

DC: Yes. They designed their architecture backwards, starting from the ruins and then going back. You can see that in the way they built the Olympiastadion: there are the columns, that will remain as ruins, and they've built all the details around them. The building process was the opposite of the decay, and what I'm going to do is let the building decay in real-time. Of course, real-time over 1000 years for our conceptions means forever, our own biological time isn't capable of understanding what that means. In reality, we won't see anything, we will just see a picture of a building, but it is effectively happening. Climate changes, weather and duration are having their effects on the building. It's a game, but also a profound scientific research. My studio is going to make the first 50 years. (laughs). Nobody knows how the world will change, right? I'm going to write a book about the concept of the work. It's a very ironical work, it's a game, it's also a software, so it's not supposed to last long at all.

MM: This is very interesting, but how will the viewer experience it?

DC: He will not. Well, after 20 years he will see weeds, he will see moss growing… At the moment, the best example I can give you is Chernobyl: 25 years without human intervention.

David Claerbout, Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain, 2013 Pinault Collection Courtesy the artist and Yvon Lambert, Paris – Installation view Palazzo Grassi