

SEAN KELLY

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David Claerbout: 'I sculpt in duration'



David Claerbout is a Belgian artist practising at the intersections of photography, film, video and digital technology, whose work often takes shape as large-scale, video-based installations. Through his multifaceted practice, Claerbout (b1969) interrogates notions of duration, place and history. By manipulating moving and still images, and collaging video-game scenarios and aesthetics into real-life situations, he constructs uniquely atemporal and philosophically jarring compositions that present profound situations that exist between and amid common perceptions of time, reality, memory, truth and fiction.

A Will Brown: I would like to discuss your work more broadly, in terms of strategies and formal decisions, before delving into specific works. In many of your video works, you have a distinct way of making a final composition that combines photography, drawing and various digital editing tools, and film. How did you come to work in this way? Was there one specific project or idea that necessitated this, or was it a slower evolution through many works and ideas?

David Claerbout: I like to think of the process from idea to work not as a production process but as an archaeological discovery site that starts with a guess, or an estimate that something of interest might lie beneath the surface. The planning and execution, even if it can be extraordinarily elaborate – [and take] several years – is tentative, hesitant. This may sound strange, but it is also important not to read too much on the subject matter, just enough. Carefully excavating an idea is closer to how I see things, rather than building from the ground up, despite hi-tech production methods that require careful planning. This method of encounter implies that ideas are lying around, hidden, waiting to be found. I was a skilled draughtsman at the age of 10, so it was to be expected, I guess, that, at 25, I suddenly stopped "production" and started living off what the cultural land gave me. I retired. I see this now as the best stage of my formation: doing nothing. I was perhaps building momentum, but I was certainly not aware of it. At 25, I was simply ready to retire.

Then, as I started to miss work, drawing was what I was best at for putting ideas on paper: I picked it up and have stuck to that ever since. When I trained at art school, the system was deficient, out of time and out of place, but that seems necessary to become an artist, if not a craftsman. Today, with the Bologna Process [an education model aimed at ensuring a "comparable, compatible and coherent" system of higher education in Europe] in effect, a bureaucratic model is in place to make education purpose-oriented – no more voids allowed – making it impossible to observe time broadly, because every instant has to be filled in with something.

AWB: Throughout the works presented as videos, there is an incredible sense of duration, whether or not the subject is historic in nature. It seems that every detail, whether it is the image of Elvis in KING (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 portrait of a young man named Elvis Presley) from 2015-16 or the arcades of the Berlin Olympic stadium in Olympia (the real time disintegration into ruins of the Berlin Olympic stadium over the course of a thousand years) from 2016, is layered with innumerable seconds,

minutes and hours of both artistic labour and a kind of lifespan duration. Can you talk about the importance of this duration and how it affects your final outcome?

DC: I sculpt in duration. The definition of duration is different from that of time: duration is not an independent state like time, but an in between state. Duration is a unique temporality, which is sustained until it is replaced by another type of temporality. I am interested in how a single scene can develop into another by the presence of the spectator and a bit of time. I don't focus on the historical information of a picture as the current "realism" in art dictates; instead, I focus on the surface of the picture and the natural phenomena I am reminded of – anything that can be a way out of sequential storytelling. It is this sequential logic itself that I try to resist, which, in its haptic succession of events, represents the dominant model of time, of our time. Life is not a collection of events, life is a scene.

AWB: For me, this sense of duration also brings up the idea of weight, of gravity, which is a kind of physical time space. But whereas the works have such an intense relationship with time, from looking at them to understanding the concept and compositional elements, the figures in KING seem, in some way, to be simultaneously permanent and solid, like boulders or land formations, yet mutable, almost hovering, without tension and real gravity to their stances, muscles, expressions and postures. This produces an amazing tension that I'm curious to hear your response to.

DC: There are few photographs being taken with the intention of resisting ageing. There are few truly technical photographs. On the contrary, most photos are taken with a future past in mind. The further back in time, the more a photograph becomes an object that it never intended to be; the people that populate a photograph turn into objects to be cut out, pasted, abused or taken into care. In other words, the ageing process of a photograph (that of losing its urgency) is a process from evidence that an object once existed to becoming an object or, more precisely, of becoming a surface. This process exists entirely in the head of the person who looks at the picture through changing fashions, details and evolutions in the medium. The contingencies and shock in a contemporary photograph are inevitably bound to become familiar, used and finally can appear as parts of a staged life.

It shows that solidity itself, mutation, and indeed the gravity of a photograph are unstable mechanisms that change with time. It also shows how much we observe from memory and knowledge. So instead of reading the history of a picture, I try to read all manner of signals from the photograph except its factual history. I try to find surface, phenomena such as reflections, skin, shadows and the softness of a carpet. The early stardom system coming into place in the 1950s introduced fixation, awe. It produced awe, similar to what early photography did, producing proximity and sense of possession. In the case of KING, I gathered hundreds of pieces of skin taken from Elvis's half-naked torso in any published matter I could find and digitally made a new skin, then pasted it on to the body of an Elvis lookalike, whom I had previously scanned in my studio in Antwerp.

AWB: How did you become interested in, and start working with, the digital technologies that you do, including video games and virtual reality?

DC: From the mid-90s on, I loved renting video games (yes, physically going to the shop and renting a game console) and then leaving the console on standby in the midst of action for several days. At night when I came home, I somehow expected that the main character should have made up his own mind, and stopped my standby abuse. I was most interested in the edges of the scene, where the immersed gamer could fall off the "world". Since it emerged, much of the so-called new media art has been informed by an excitement with intervening in technology, creating an involuntary technological positivism, while it may have been intended critically. A generation later, this art may make people smile for the wrong reason. Therefore, I am not certain that retrospectives of Nam June Paik's work, for example, make a lot of sense. I always intended my work to be seen as if it was technologically flawed, with part of the "machinery" that did not work. I achieve this by transferring the field of action from the work to the spectator. The work itself doesn't change much – it is the spectator's own biological time that does most of the work.

AWB: For your exhibition at Sean Kelly LIGHT/WORK, what are some of the more important and interesting juxtapositions between the drawings and film / video works?

DC: It would not be entirely true to say that the drawings are studies for films only. I have made too many that had nothing to do with my film and video works. The drawings mean continuity for me: they have always had more or less the same format. They are there to give me certitude that I can still put my thoughts on paper. They often appear fast and sketchy, as opposed to the elaborate processes in making a video work. Even in museum exhibitions I have never shown them together with video works, so I don't know yet what to think of combining them. However, I experience secret pleasure in giving away the drawings catalogue, recently produced by Sean. It is just about time that the recipes or the kitchen methods used can be given away.

AWB: I imagine that you normally show one, maybe two, of these filmic / video works at a time for an exhibition. What is it like to have this many up together, and does it change your thinking to see them so close to one another?

DC: Ever since I began my first piece, I feared the second piece, and I feared the third and fourth piece even more because it would start generating punctum – or worse, editing (that story that the works don't intend to tell, but which tells a lot about the artist). You are right in suggesting that having several pieces up together requires a letting go of each individual piece, giving it up to scenography. I have no idea what the sum of these works in a gallery exhibition really amounts to. During planning of the show, I try to develop the scenography as a way of talking indirectly to the spectator. At Sean Kelly, this is about the availability of duration, lightness of space v the traditional black box. I also tried to compose the spectator as an elegant appearance instead of a consumer of the films. As such, the message in the scenography says that there might not be some specific reason or purpose for the visit, and that maybe it is all wasted time. That is a good beginning for looking at the work.

AWB: In watching both the filmic works and the installation videos of them in the space, thinking in particular about the moments when visitors are visible, the figures and spaces depicted in the films become monumental in scale, and, as I mentioned earlier, present with a tremendous amount of physical weight. How were you thinking about the scale and monumentality of the places and figures when making the work?

DC: There is a lot of stretch in how large or small the projections can be. In the Sean Kelly Gallery, it was clear that a smallish approach was not going to work. Sean wanted a proper introduction of the recent work to a New York public, so we went looking into how we could give each piece its space without building black boxes, which I nicknamed a “social problem”. Black boxes are manifestations of the difficulty of living together in an extremely individualised world of experiences. So, instead, Sean and I chose to work with the trusted semi-transparent scrims instead of walls. They help in perceiving projector light as sunlight, not as a torchlight in a dark cave.

AWB: What are you working on in the studio that you can tell me about? Anything drastically different? Are there any other forthcoming exhibitions you would like to talk about?

DC: There is something drastically different ... a few years ago, I was working on a piece with a wolf, a deer and a person sleeping in a tent in a forest, all peacefully unaware of one another with exception of ... the spectator. The spectator was going to be the only spot where tension lies. The screen all calm. That project ran into a dead end, which often is the beginning of a new idea, even if I am unaware of it at first. By then, I had amassed hours of footage of animals sleeping in animal parks and zoos. One of the wolves I was studying inside the cage reminded me of the 1967 animated film of The Jungle Book and, boom, there was a new idea. I was going to professionally redo the entire animation, carefully erasing the anthropomorphic qualities (such as singing, dancing, speech, standing upright) of the original and give back basic animal life to the bear, panther and the other Jungle Book characters. In other words, Baloo and Bagheera lose their human souls and seem to be utterly unaware of a movie unfolding in which they used to be the main characters. Naturally, Mowgli does not appear in my version. The resulting movie is one from which you remember every scene when you see my version, but the response of the animals is not there, so they feel numb, and you are left interrogating your own memory of the events in the original. Because that original is so dynamic, my version hopefully amplifies the silence or non-communicativeness between the spectator and the animal.

AWB: I'm always interested in what artists are looking at. What exhibitions, artists, spaces or art projects have you found to be worth noting recently? Is there anyone in particular that you see emerging?

DC: When I travel somewhere, I usually try to see historical exhibitions, such as the Vilhelm Hammershøi exhibition in New York at Scandinavia House [Painting Tranquility: Masterworks] or an exhibition on the influence of Eugène Delacroix at the National Gallery in London [Delacroix and the Rise of Modern Art]. When there is time left, I go to see contemporary art, with a clear preference for solo exhibitions. Since curating contemporary art became a profession, the list of young curator artists has become endless, and I have been surprised to see the most marvellous exhibitions curated by artists. I am a little more mature now at age 47, convinced that a lot has changed in the global media market, most notably a convenient lack of memory among the new people. Hoping to avoid any melancholia, I would say that the "production" of new artists has evaporated chances for newness in contemporary art. That said, I discover new things all the time. In order for art in our time to emerge, there needs to be some resistance, or ascetic stubbornness, as was the case in modernity. Today, this is difficult in a time of arts' pre-corporation in a salon system that has no memory to start with.





