

# SEANKELLY

Sansom, Anna. "Countering the Classic: Cheeky David Claerbout," *Damn magazine*, December, 2016.

# DAMN°

## COUNTERING THE CLASSIC

*CHEEKY DAVID CLAERBOUT*



Die reine Notwendigkeit, 2016 Exhibition view B+W animation Duration: 60 min  
Courtesy of the artist and Esther Schipper, Berlin

With an uncanny knack for clashing the familiar with the unfamiliar in a thoroughly meticulous way, David Claerbout explores the conceptual impact of the passage of time. In manipulating both moving and still imagery, he creates an ethereal quality in his work, suggestive of another plane of existence, one that moves seamlessly between past and present within an undefined space; the result is at once evocative, enchanting, and perturbing. The images the artist creates are mere frameworks in which another image is suspended. DAMN° caught up with Claerbout, to delve into the meaning and method behind the marvellous madness.

David Claerbout admits that premiering two new works at the same time, one in Berlin, one in Frankfurt, is "a bit of a competition". For an artist whose practice questions notions of duration, place, and history, the coinciding of his exhibitions is a chosen paradox. Comparison between the pieces – *Die reine Notwendigkeit* at the Städel Museum in Frankfurt, and *Olympia* at the KINDL Centre for Contemporary Art in Berlin – is inevitable, as is searching for commonality. As he says, "What I'm happy about is that they look radically different from one another on the surface, but the shared point between the two is a certain day-to-day, banal reality." The Belgian artist, who explores the intersections between moving image, photography, and digital technology, often tackles political ideologies. In his latest works, the themes he draws upon and the modes of construction differ. Yet, his interrogations, both enveloped in deliberate slowness, invite the visitor on a journey of failed utopias and the purpose of image making.

We are meeting at the museum in Frankfurt where his exhibition, the name of which translates as *Pure Necessity*, an adaptation of *The Jungle Book* (1967), is displayed in the garden. The one-hour looped film

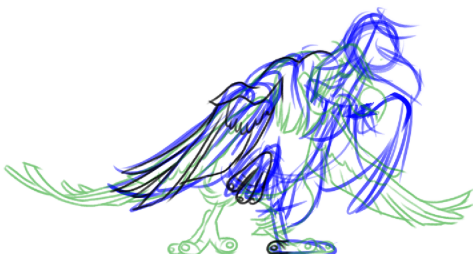
upturns Walt Disney's classic animation musical about a young boy called Mowgli and many humanoid animals, based on Rudyard Kipling's collection of stories. Claerbout has dispensed with the saturation of colour, narration, and singing and dancing. In the black-and-white, hand-drawn frames, Mowgli has vanished and the animals, stripped of all characterisation, are reduced to a portrayal of their species: a panther climbing a tree, a snake slithering over a tree trunk, a bear staring at his reflection in the river, a pack of wolves relaxing in an enclave, and a herd of elephants standing by the water. Their inertness is set against the painstakingly drawn lushness of the moving landscape. The mood is melancholic, while the animals appear indolent, roaming disinterestedly as if inhabiting an enclosure. The film ends with the young girl singing about having to fetch water for a future husband, her destiny – an out-dated perspective by today's standards.



Die reine Notwendigkeit, 2016 Production images Photos © David Claerbout

**INAPPROPRIATENESS** “I was working on something else that never crystallised but for which I shot a lot of footage in zoos”, explains Claerbout. “During that research, I saw an excerpt of the girl singing on YouTube. I hadn't seen the film for 40 years – I saw it with my parents at the age of six. They were volunteers in the Scouts and The Jungle Book was a template. When I heard the song again, it felt uncannily close, as if it had never left my brain. The lyrics were politically correct in the 1960s but when you recontextualise the song, it sounds rather wrong.” Taking this as a starting point, Claerbout set about transforming the movie. “Everything had to be drawn again, frame-by-frame, and the scenes were adapted ever so slightly”, he continues. “The panther, instead of jumping energetically over trees, becomes a panther with no purpose. It's a kind of revenge on a form of modern utopia. I made the animals into hybrid, domesticated creatures who might pretend to be in the body of The Jungle Book but are actually living in captivity, not engaging in any action whatsoever.” Although Claerbout does not have any children himself, he adds, “I wonder how children will look at it, because I probably made it for them.”

His method of extracting these anthropomorphic qualities was labour-intensive. He hired 12 animators to work on the project, culminating in 90,000 hand-drawn frames. “Animation drawing is a sort of religion – giving energy to lines and making them appear vivid”, he says. “So what I was asking these animators to do was diametrically opposed to what they were trained to do. Several people came and went, because they didn't agree or didn't understand or were afraid of being considered thieves by making something that resembled the original movie.” The project took a year to get going and then three-and-a-half years to complete. “It was a difficult birth, as we had to imagine everything from scratch”, he recounts. “It drained all my resources and I wasn't even sure if I was going to be able to show it to the public due to copyright problems.” Claerbout consulted lawyers who evaluated how much of it was appropriation versus new artistic input. “They came to the conclusion that while I would certainly win the case [if Walt Disney were to file a lawsuit], I could never afford to pay the lawyers”, he chuckles. “But it was one of those projects that you knew you had to do. Otherwise you'd always think: I wish I had done it.”



Die reine Notwendigkeit, 2016 Production images Photos © David Claerbout

**MAKING IT LAST** Claerbout says that he “sculpts in duration” and tends to “replace narrative with duration”. This idea is at the heart of his film *Olympia* (*The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years*), currently being shown in the former brewery that is home to the newly opened contemporary art centre in Berlin’s Neukölln district. The starting point was the city’s Olympic Stadium that hosted the 1936 Olympics (the site was renovated after the unification of Germany). Claerbout has digitally reconstructed the original building to show its disintegration over the subsequent 1,000 years. The work references the concept of the Thousand-Year Reich, Nazi architect Albert Speer’s aspiration for architecture to be designed with its future appearance (i.e. in 1,000 years’ time) in mind, the Colosseum in Rome being his prime example. The only building on the Olympic site that is included is Corbusierhaus, Le Corbusier’s *Unité d’Habitation* high-rise (1956-1958). “I left it in because I trust that it will disintegrate even faster than the [virtual] Olympic Stadium”, says Claerbout. This virtual reconstruction relies on Google Earth’s real-time data on weather conditions, making the piece a hybrid of computer-generated images and real-time duration. “It’s a computer program that lasts a total of 25 years and – hypothetically – will run for a thousand years”, he proclaims. “This is a piece that I will spend the rest of my life working on.”

**SOPHISTICATED REVENGE** Claerbout, who is based in Kortrijk but comes from the countryside (cue his interest in nature), worked with an architect, a biologist, and various other experts on the piece. “If you have a wet summer season, it has an effect on plant growth over the coming months”, he informs. The piece moves imperceptibly, as if one is merely observing the architecture and that which surrounds it, from a distance. “One could say it’s a techno hippie piece about weeds growing and trees falling down, naturally overtaking the building in a number of years. After the first 25, the real cracks will start to appear.” Claerbout based his anticipation of the site’s disintegration on the Ukrainian city of Pripyat, where the Chernobyl nuclear disaster occurred in 1986. He’s going to be visiting Pripyat, to generate a clearer understanding of the way nature takes hold.



Die reine Notwendigkeit, 2016 Production images Photos © David Claerbout



Die reine Notwendigkeit, 2016 Production images Photos © David Claerbout

As with the Frankfurt piece, *Olympia* encompasses a form of payback. “It’s a form of sweet revenge on the grand ideologies of modernity: communism, fascism, ... and it focuses on modernisation as a phenomenon”, Claerbout explains. “I became fascinated with the idea that Hitler and Speer were considering the spectator in a thousand years’ time, anticipating their own magnificence and genius in a fully utopian way.” The making of the

work addresses the paradoxes inherent in the necessity to harness technology. “You need virtual reality in order to try and sculpt something that looks like eternity”, he asserts. Indeed, somebody who has not read the press release might be fooled into thinking that the building is real. “I am trying to be a high-level spy; that’s maybe a cheap answer to criticism about my work being technologically sophisticated”, Claerbout admits, laughing. The fact that the software needs to be frequently updated gives the piece biological significance. “It’s precisely because I’m using software to simulate something, that the piece is truly biological”, he declares. “That’s the triangle: software, modern utopia, biological reality.”

**A GAME OF CATCH-UP** Claerbout is also working on real-time in his forthcoming piece, *Sections of a Tragic Moment*. It follows on from *Sections of a Happy Moment* (2007), about a Chinese family, and from *The Algiers’ Sections of a Happy Moment* (2008), about Algerians. *Sections of a Tragic Moment* takes place at the Lebanese-Israeli border around Nakba Day on 15 May, when Palestinians commemorate the 1948 Palestinian exodus after the creation of Israel. “Every year there’s a festival at the border, where the Palestinians go to mourn their country”, informs Claerbout, who has visited the Israeli side. The piece fuses two of his fascinations: Palestinian-ness and the zombie. “The zombie is the quintessential modern figure that loses his purpose and roams, brainlessly, across the planet, searching for nothing whatsoever. You can shoot him down 20 times and he’ll stand up again and continue on, which is a metaphor for working-class people, canned-in figures who do exactly what they’re trained to do.”

In *Sections of a Tragic Moment*, the Palestinian diaspora finds personification in the zombie. “Around the 15th of May, you’ll see zombies filling the landscape”, Claerbout says. Their bloodied appearance refers to how 11 Palestinian refugees were killed during Nakba in 2011. “People took photos on their cellphones – there are hundreds of images of what happened. From those, I’ve selected a single image, and each year my camera will go back to that photograph and show it in 3D for a moment. It will look very distant, as if there were surveillance cameras. After that, the image will retreat and spend the rest of the year floating around the landscape. You could say it’s an overtly political piece, but the irony is that (most of the time) you’ll never see anything happening other than weather passing over the terrain. So it will be endlessly frustrating for the people who want me to illustrate something! It’s like biological reality catching up with virtual reality.”

The second piece that Claerbout is working on concerns his “mid-air fascination with confetti when everything looks fine”. It is the falseness of the cliché situation that interests the artist. “Confetti is always about a celebration, a baroque phenomenon”, he says. “I’m trying to confront that with the harsh reality of white, Anglo-Saxon people celebrating a graduation on a Sunday afternoon. And there’s going to be a small black boy in the picture who’ll be the centre of the work.” Without expanding further, Claerbout says, “It would seem as if any action needs some kind of justification – social or aesthetical or ecological – and I’m opposed to that in my work. I don’t function in a very essayistic manner.” Yet every piece by the artist is subtly political, tugging at the visitor to consider not just societal issues but the meaning of photography and the moving image.