



David Claerbout, *Shadow Piece*, 2005, black-and-white video projection, 31-minute loop.

## DAVID CLAERBOUT AKADEMIE DER KÜNSTE

Belgian artist David Claerbout illuminated the relative and shifting nature of perceptual time—geological, historical, episodic, linear, emotionally and culturally mediated—in his striking exhibition “Background Time.” Together the dynamically changing city of Berlin, with its transparent historical strata, and the Akademie der Künste, seemingly frozen in time among other modernist icons of the Hansaviertel district, made an uncanny setting for this ensemble of six works. The gallery’s expansive layout also provided an effective time sequence between the two-part video installation *American Car*, 2002–2004. In the first large-screen projection we seem to be witnessing a stakeout in the pouring rain by two undercover agents out of some ’70s thriller, evoking all the attendant stereotypes and suspense. But in the next room, at the end of a long, narrow hallway, a vast rural landscape clearing after a heavy rain provokes the realization that perhaps these men were just travelers waiting out a storm along a highway.

*The Stack*, 2002, an enormous, painterly, nearly still image, also undermines its ultimate subject: Daylight moving gradually under a highway overpass eventually reveals a sleeping homeless man. A video monitor lent a quotidian embodiment to *Cat and Bird in Peace*, 1996, in which two of the artist’s pets sit calmly next to each other without the anticipated consequences—a still life filmed in real time that conjures the temporal relativity created by the emotional perception of such highly charged moments. In *Kindergarten Antonio Sant’Elia*, 1932, 1997, Claerbout integrates two different

media—a black-and-white image of a playground designed by Giuseppe Terragni is digitally merged with film footage of trees moving subtly in the breeze—to convey the layering of historical time with fleeting human events. The archival photo from Fascist Italy, with its sun-drenched imagery of well-behaved children in starched white uniforms, reflects a now-poignant sense of hope and perfect order. In Claerbout’s latest work, the video *Shadow Piece*, 2005, an empty marble, steel, and glass building entryway—taken from a found photograph—is approached by various people who, when they find that it is inaccessible, look longingly inside, reflecting perhaps a futile yearning for the past.

The most elaborate work in the exhibition was *The Bordeaux Piece*, 2004, a series of sixty-nine twelve-minute films of a single scene of love and betrayal whose setting, a house designed by Rem Koolhaas, was shot to resemble a modernist building. The story repeats through the course of a day, conveying the sensation of time proceeding in a linear fashion—as the sun circles the earth—while the human drama becomes increasingly banal, even absurd. The visual effect of repetitive action contrasted with the continually changing light of real time is reinforced by two completely separate sound tracks—the ambient sounds of nature at varying times of day are broadcast from speakers on the floor, but the dialogue is heard only through headphones—delineating two distinct temporal worlds. The narrative references Godard’s *Contempt* (1963), a film that satirizes the medium and also features an iconic building, the famous Casa Malaparte, further emphasizing the repetitiveness of human events. Thus the scene becomes less and less credible, yet we con-

tinue to watch—fascinated with our own folly—waiting for the climax that will never come. Ultimately, Claerbout’s evocative investigation takes us outside of time.

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