

DAVID CLAERBOUT

DAVID GREEN



Above and right: *American Car*, 2004. Courtesy: Lenbachhaus/Kunstbau, Munich

ONE of the two screens that comprise David Claerbout's recent video installation *American Car* (2004) shows a scene filmed in the interior of a parked car, in which two men sit and gaze at something that is never revealed to us. While rain pours down the windscreen obscuring the view beyond, the men occasionally adjust their position while perhaps straining to see something outside, but neither speaks, nor is there any indication of their purpose in being here.

The scene would appear to allude to cinema in both a generic and specific sense. At one level the interior of the car duplicates the cinema auditorium. It is represented as a place from which to look, an enclosed and darkened space that accommodates a voyeuristic gaze and where the bleached-out windscreen might be likened to the illuminated frame of the cinema screen. Less metaphorically, the scene references cinema more directly. Indeed,

it could be said to be something of a cliché of classical narrative film, one that is entirely familiar to us from countless detective movies involving scenarios of surveillance, in which characters wait patiently for someone to appear or something to happen. Yet beyond this, any resemblance to the conventions of Hollywood cinema ends. Usually the 'stake out' is the prelude to dramatic action; someone will appear, something will happen. In *American Car*, however, there will be no release from this moment of narrative hiatus; the two men will sit endlessly waiting and watching, and we as viewers will be obliged to do the same.

Like much of Claerbout's work with video, *American Car* crucially revolves around the relationship between visually marking a passage of time within an event that unfolds on the screen, and the viewer's intense awareness of that



time as he or she directly experiences it. Neither entirely given over to the time of the projected image, nor capable of being solely conceptualized in terms of the immediacy of the 'here and now', Claerbout's work fashions a form of 'presence' and a sense of real space-time that cannot be apprehended as independent of its mediation by a particular system of representation and its technologies. What this depends upon is the fact of video's inherent proclivity for duration.

While other video artists have often deployed techniques of freeze-framing, looping or decelerating the image as a means of drawing attention to the medium's ability to play with time, Claerbout's work has most consistently made use of a sense of time as pure duration. In *The Stack* (2002), for instance, the trajectory of the late afternoon sun is mapped by the gradual progression

of the spreading shadows cast by the concrete columns that support a large motorway interchange. For the viewer, time here seems to be slowed down, since whatever movement there is within the image is virtually imperceptible. The use of the single, unedited shot of a static object in which the passage of time is marked only by a diurnal cycle obviously recalls Warhol's *Empire* (1964). But the strategy here seems less concerned with countering the expectations of narrative filmmaking than with an exploration of the contemplative space afforded by the comparable stasis of painting.

It is, however, through a group of works in which the still and moving image are brought together in an uncanny conjuncture that Claerbout most directly draws on the possibilities of the viewer's sense of a kind of endless duration. In *Vietnam 1967, near Duc Pho* (reconstruction after Hiramishi Mine)



Above and right: *The Stack* (installation view), 2002. Courtesy: Ienbachhaus/Kunsthau, Mních. Photo: Ernst Jank.



Vietnam, 1967, near Da: Phò (Reconstruction after Hanoi's Mine), 2001. Courtesy: Galerie Micheline Sevaux, Antwerp.



(2001) the shattered fragments of an American fighter plane shot down by 'friendly fire' are caught suspended in mid-air, frozen at a precise instant in space and time, traceable to the momentary opening of a camera shutter nearly four decades ago. The image seems to epitomize our understanding of photographic instantaneity and a technology that has historically been wedded to the idea of stopping time. Indeed, initially the viewer might be forgiven for thinking that this is a projected photograph. It is only slowly – with the growing awareness of the gentle shifting patterns of sunlight and shadow across the landscape – that we realize that parts of the image are in continual movement. We are therefore confronted with something that confounds our expectations of the absolute distinctions between photography and video, and between the different temporalities of the still and moving image. Neither singly reconcilable to either the 'there and then' of the photographic, nor the 'here and now' of the

filmic, the image is perpetually coming into being, a presence continually caught in the process of constituting itself in the present.

To say that a time-based medium such as video takes time – by which it is usually meant that it simply occupies time – conceals the more interesting and significant aspect which is that video employs time to represent time. With video, time is used rather than simply used up, or, perhaps more precisely, in its expenditure of time, video turns time itself into one of its primary concerns. What Claerbout's work demonstrates, among other things, is that video – once thought to be entirely intransigent to any modernist notion of the medium – has proven itself entirely capable of fulfilling a desire for a certain kind of self-reflexivity.

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Above and right: *The Bordeaux Piece*, 2004. Courtesy: Lenbachhaus/Kunstbau, Munich