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Current Shows

David Claerbout

CENTRE POMPIDOU, PARIS, FRANCE

‘What then is time? If no one asks me, I know. If I wish to explain to someone who asks, I no longer know.’ Saint Augustine’s statement, quoted from his *Confessions* (397-98), could introduce David Claerbout’s solo show at Centre Pompidou. Each of the five video installations in this carefully staged exhibition illustrates an attempt to explore a paradox of time: though universally experienced, it is impossible to define. Each work also takes place in an environment symbolising some facet of modernity – among them a corporate building, a modernist home, and a highway overpass – depicting the schizophrenic relations that contemporary society develops with its own time frame.

Projected onto a large, translucent screen that viewers discover from the back upon entering the exhibition, *Shadow Piece* (2005) exemplifies this temporal paradox. The black-and-white video, inspired by an archival photograph from the 1950s, depicts an empty entrance hall filmed from a fixed point of view at the top of a curved metal staircase. Dense sunlight penetrates the hall through the glass façade, creating a series of thin shadows that extend from the doors and windowpanes. In *Shadow Piece*, two temporalities contradict each other: while the shadows, despite the progression of the day, remain perfectly static, a succession of figures who vainly attempt to open the entrance doors illustrate the passage of time. The same contradiction between still and moving images

occurs in *Section of a Happy Moment* (2007), a series of images shot at exactly the same moment from multiple points of view, portraying a Chinese family grouped around a ball that seems to hover in the air. Through a sequence of shots, a still image unfolds in time.

Taking as point of departure an intrigue of betrayal filmed in a modernist house, *Bordeaux Piece* (2004) first seems to be a conventionally looped short film. After a few sequences, however, the work slowly discloses its content. Though the narrative repeats itself again and again, each successive sequence occurs under a slightly different atmospheric light. Each shot was repeated about seventy times by the actors over the duration of a day, from sunrise to sunset, before being edited to compose a thirteen-hour long video. Slowly, the real subject matter becomes the changing light. The background comes to be the foreground while the plot of the film, its narrative and the characters, rapidly turn into a mere motif.

By using a variety of transactions between still and moving images, Claerbout's videos succeed in giving form to duration. Paradoxically, time is never approached as a subject matter. It functions on the contrary as a constitutive element to be experienced. In a similar process, the narratives disappear to leave room for subjective experiences, with all the paradoxes and uncertainties that this term implies. As Claerbout puts it, 'What interests me is what runs underneath speeches and discourses, within images. I try to create the conditions in which, whether one faces a narrative or not, there is no conclusion, no certitude.'^{*}

^{*} Marie Murraciale, 'Le Bruit des images. Conversation avec David Claerbout', in *Les Cahiers du Musée national d'art moderne*, Paris, n°94, winter 2005-2006

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