BLAKE WILLIAMS

LOOKING FOR FIREFLIES AND THE LONG TAKE
by Dot Tuer

Space is no longer in geography—it's in electronics. Unity is in the terminals. It's in the instantaneous time of command posts, multinational headquarters, control towers, etc. Politics is less in physical space than in the time systems administered by various technologies, from telecommunications to airplanes. There is a movement from geo- to chrono-politics: the distribution of territory becomes the distribution of time.
-Paul Virilio, *Pure War*, 1983.[1]

Any luminous point displacing itself in the visual field leaves behind it a visible wake, the existence of which we can easily ascertain if we make sure to keep our eyes really motionless. The result is that an animated object moving rapidly will become completely invisible.
-Paul Souriau, *Aesthetics of Movement*, 1889.[2]

Reality seen and heard as it happens is *always in the present tense*. The long take, the schematic and primordial element of cinema, is thus in the present time. Cinema therefore reproduces the present.
-Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Observations on the Long Take," 1980.[3]

Blake Williams spent last summer doing research on fireflies. He also looked at structural cinema, most notably Michael Snow's films, most notably *Wavelength*, and at Bruce Nauman's videotaped body-as-sculpture studio experiments from the late 1960s. Although it was too late in the summer to find fireflies to record in "present time," a series of single-take videos that he made in his Spadina Crescent studio in the fall of 2010 alludes to their bioluminescence. In *No Signal*, a video projector's beam casts a barely discernable shadow on the wall between a window and the artist's desk. The words that appear on the wall, "No Signal," alert us to the projector's lack of connection with an electronic terminal, whether computer or DVD playback machine. An eerily

disembodied hand enters the frame and begins to frantically wave, as if trying to bat away or catch the light. Almost disappearing through its flurried motion, the hand disperses the beam from the projector into a spectrum colour band. In *Space Ship*, a sculptural inversion of a Dan Flavin or James Turell neon work is performed. Williams installs a single fluorescent tube in a ceiling fixture and illuminates the darkened studio in incremental jolts to reveal a row of inanimate florescent tubes leaning against the wall. In *Charge*, the static electricity Williams generates through the frenzied rubbing of his sweater produces brief flashes of light from a fluorescent tube. In A *Cold Compress*, a flicker film, the projector is the source of a pulsating iridescence. In *Two Rainbows*, documentation of an installation of two projectors casting white arcs of light on opposite walls of a room transforms a stereoscopic mis-en-scene into dancing colour-band circles through rapid motion camera pans.

While these studio-based experiments share an affinity with those of a previous generation of artists who explored the relation between the body and the durational gaze of the camera, they differ in how Williams chose to privilege the projector's beam and the motion of the camera in a spatial configuration. Whereas Nauman's video documentation of walking and stamping in the studio heightens the artist's presence, Williams recorded the accelerated motions of his body to make the phenomena of light produced by technology's tools the focal point of attention. For his graduate exhibition, Williams has produced single-channel videos that explore the underlying aesthetic and political implications inherent in this shift in agency from the artist to his technological tools. In *Depart* (2011) and *Coorow-Latham Road* (2011), the camera's eye is displaced by motion-tracking software and "present time" is the domain of Internet's infinite circulation of archived quick-time moving images. For

1   Paul Virilio, *Pure War*, (Columbia: Sémiotexte, 1983), 115.
2   Paul Souriau, *Aesthetics of Movement*. Trans. and ed. Manon Souraiu (Amherst; University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), 114. Cited in Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive* (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 83.
3   Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Observations on the Long Take." October 13:3 (1980), 3.

this page and previous page: Depart ; stills from video piece; 7 min. 23 sec.; HD video; 2011

Depart, the computer screen is the terminal that unifies disparate sources of light, including fireflies, as the "visible wake" of electronic media. For *Coorow-Latham Road* (2011), a long take is constructed by merging still images from Google Streetview into an illusion of travelling along a country road.

The opening shot of *Depart* reveals a barely discernable image of a rocket booster firing the STS-124 Space Shuttle into a spinning void beyond the earth's atmosphere. It is followed by a close-up shot of an iguana, whose eye movements become externalized through the dotted line of a tracking cursor tool. The next sequence of shots of a computer screen on which a software-editing program is displayed reveals that it is the computer's tools and not the camera's eye that is "seeing" motion in "present time." At first, only the cursor tool is visible in a black box in the middle of the computer screen, then a video-clip of a view from a plane window of a sunset and the aircraft's wingtip appears. The invisible hand of the artist drags a frame grab across the sunset until it comes to rest on the tip of the plane's wing, whose blinking light is rendered as a red flame in the sidebar toolbox. After the tracking cursor analyses the first ten seconds of the wingtip's motion, the video cuts to three full-screen images of air-control tower flight paths and back to a Cinemascope widescreen image of the plane now smoothly gilding through the clouds. While the toolbox sidebar will not reappear for the duration of the video, we remain witness to its effects. In a close-up shot of the plane's wingtip, a dotted path formed by the cursor resembles the Statue of Liberty holding a flame. In a video clip of a meteor streaking across a city skyline, the cursor tracks the meteor's flight path. In a video clip of children chasing fireflies at dusk, it retraces the illusive presence of the luminous beetles. Then the cursor disappears from view. In the closing sequence of the video, a slow fade to a field reveals the fireflies' presence as almost imperceptible digital light-bits. As the field dissolves into the "present time" of a slow camera pan of Williams' studio space, these digital fireflies animate the empty space.

The intrusion of "present time" into *Depart*'s montage of video-clips retrieved from the Internet and digitally tracked motion paths is registered at one other juncture in the video. After the shot of the meteor streaking through the sky, the video cuts to the harsh glare produced by a camera pointed at a mirror in William's darkened studio. As viewers, we do not see "present time" through the camera's eye, but are disembodied witnesses to the delayed trace of its reflected beam of light. In the final shot of *Depart*, the schism between "present time" and its digital retrieval—between seeing and witnessing — is externalized in the convergence of the studio and the computer screen. The "schematic and primordial element of cinema" of the long take becomes the container for the digital distribution of time as dancing specters of light. In William's subsequent video, *Coorow-Latham Road*, the transformation of physical space into digital time is rendered imperceptible. We travel along an archival road of images as if we were seeing the landscape in real-time motion through the camera's eye. At the end of the video, a 180 degree turn in the camera's perspective positions us as witnesses to a rear-view glimpse of the virtual time and space we have traversed.

Williams's rendering of fireflies as archival traces of light in *Depart* and the rendering of the long take as archival traces of space in *Coorow-Latham Road* leads to the question of what constitutes artistic agency in a digital realm where unity lies in the terminals rather than in the camera's eye. The answer Williams provides rests in merging the structural language of cinema, and the visible wake of the Internet's repository of videotaped images. Through motion-tracking tools and montage editing, he mediates the illusion of space and time created by technology's tools. In so doing, he reflects upon how a geography of electronics shapes our ways of seeing in "present time" by positioning the viewer as witness to its archival residue. ⭕

Coorow–Latham Road ; stills from video piece;
20 min.; HD video; 2011