

ORIENTATIONS AND IDENTITIES

Images Festival 25

Toronto, Ontario

April 12–21, 2012

The twenty-fifth anniversary of the much-loved Images Festival was remarkable in scale: hundreds of media artists from all over the world showed their work at over twenty venues around Toronto as part of North America's largest celebration of moving image culture. This year's theme, "Radical Otherness," was certainly an apt (albeit broad) characterization of a festival whose mandate directs the display of work that agitates, expands, and rejects the mainstream practices and pedagogies of moving image culture. Two increasingly relevant themes emerged as central preoccupations across a wide variety of screenings, installations, artist talks, and performances. First, a concern with the spatially influenced nature of identity and culture was foregrounded in works about landscape, the nation-state, and built infrastructure. Second, a related interrogation of the technologically mediated relationships we experience with the aforementioned surroundings was enacted through experimental film and video's long-standing concern with their materialities.

The festival's opening night featured John Akomfrah's *The Nine Muses* (2011), whose examination of contemporary issues in global migration and cultural adaptation was filtered through rich, slow-moving pans of a snow-covered mountainous landscape in Alaska intercut with archival footage of mid-century immigration to the U.K. (tenement neighborhoods, migrant laborers, the arrival of passenger boats, etc.). Accompanied by readings from James Joyce, John Milton, and William Shakespeare, among others, the question arises whether this work unproblematically reasserts the dominance of the Western literary canon or engages with it to question the narrowly defined aesthetics of (Western) cultural history. Ultimately, Akomfrah's methodical and lush landscape film, whose mysterious protagonist always wanders the icy milieu with his back to the camera, highlights the ephemerality of cultural identity. As an unnamed man in the archival footage points out, one thinks a new cultural milieu is strange until one acclimatizes oneself to it, thereby also becoming strange.

The kind of haunting spatial disorientation created by Akomfrah's barren landscape is echoed in other works, such as the shorts *Depart* (2011) by Blake Williams and *Wall of Death* (2011) by Adam Rosen and John Creson. *Depart* uses geospatial positioning software to destabilize the illusory mastery of viewership. As a handheld camera wobbles while shooting a lizard, the software leaves a digital trace of the lizard's slightly moving eyeball in the form of a lingering white line. Relinquishing control of the viewer's perception by so overtly prioritizing the camera's movements and traces is a disarming experience for the audience, and the work underscores the ruthless automation of positioning software. *Wall of Death*



shows indiscernible footage of a careening carnival ride at night. Lights flash while thrilled attendees shriek with delight, and yet, much like in *Depart*, the viewer's destabilized position engenders a disturbing and uncomfortable sense of dizziness. In this context, the delighted shrieks we hear begin to seem ominous, even terrifying. *Wall of Death* was shot on July 22, 2011, as a response to the horrifying act of mass murder committed that same day in Norway by a racist far-right extremist. How do we understand our own viewing experience—terrified, disoriented, and confused, as a sympathetic reflection of the experience of those who have fallen victim to the unyielding certainty of violently racist acts of cultural warfare?

In Johann Lurf's short *Kreis Wr. Neustadt (A to A)* (2011), the filmmaker circles roundabouts in the rural-industrial landscape of Austria on a Vespa, his camera pointed at each roundabout's center. Like the aforementioned works, the initial feeling here is one of disorientation. Lurf's work, however, transitions into a kind of hypnotic magic trick, as absurd pieces of public art and advertisement begin to appear in the centers of roundabouts. The soothing sound of Lurf's Vespa accompanies the increasing strangeness of the statues (a fork and knife, a fighter jet poised for take-off, a giant flower). To anyone familiar with the abundance of roundabouts in European road systems (and the ambiguous, useless circular space they offer in their middles), the film is a comforting marker of cultural identity through recognizable landscape; to others, it is entirely absurd and fascinating.

Simone Rapisarda Casanova's feature *El árbol de las fresas* (*The Strawberry Tree*, 2011) and Adam Gutch and Chu-Li Shewring's short *Hoof, Tooth & Claw* (2011) are two documentaries that depict peaceful and lush, yet ultimately embattled, landscapes. *The Strawberry Tree* tracks the agrarian life of a small fishing village in Cuba; shortly after the film was shot, a hurricane destroyed the entire village and displaced its inhabitants. *Hoof, Tooth & Claw* follows elderly farmer Betty French as she tends to the animals and infrastructure on her dilapidated farm; it is heartbreakingly clear that she is no longer capable of adequate farm maintenance, and the Ministry of Agriculture must eventually intervene. Both of these films end on a note of finality for their protagonists. A landscape once verdant becomes unmanageable, wild, and, in the case of *The Strawberry Tree*, utterly destructive. The silent watchfulness of the camera is foregrounded in both cases; while

it can record, it cannot prevent the ends to which the figures at the mercy of their landscapes succumb. In particular, *The Strawberry Tree*'s shots are deliberate, slow, still, and long, thereby accentuating the simultaneous feelings of pleasure and frustration in observing people in their (doomed) landscape.

The highly personal and personalized nature of space and place is eloquently explored by shorts such as Rizki Resa Utama's *Sidewalk Stories* (2010) and Andrew Norman Wilson's *Workers Leaving the Googleplex* (2010). Utama's film narrates the cultural transition of an Indonesian immigrant in Germany; after the initial stories of cultural strangeness are presented in white text on a black screen accompanied by voiceover, the strangeness at hand is marked by still shots of found items (bottle caps, euro coins, a hair tie, etc.) labeled with the public places in which they were found and recovered (bus stations, sidewalks, park benches, etc.). The work is a charmingly scientific and methodical account of a strange place for a newcomer, and the poles of alienation and



familiarity between which he lives. *Workers Leaving the Googleplex* grew out of the filmmaker's employment period at Google, during which he noticed a sequestered group of employees barred from enjoying the perks offered by Google to other workers (the reason why these workers don't enjoy the same advantages is never made clear, but the filmmaker hints that it is a classic case of the exploitation of labor through inadequate compensation of a racialized population). Intent on documenting the racial, class, and labor issues so obviously present in this situation, Wilson's own employment was eventually terminated as a result of his curiosity. Both Wilson's and Utama's approaches are highly empirical, abiding by the truth-seeking impetus of the documentary tradition. But both explicitly reveal the filmmaker's personal investment in the subject under investigation, through first-person narration and the revelation of the personal experiences, investments, and perceptions of the filmmakers.

Above

Workers Leaving the Googleplex (2011) by Andrew Norman Wilson; courtesy the artist

Facing Page

El árbol de las fresas (The Strawberry Tree, 2011) by Simone Rapisarda Casanova; courtesy the artist

The larger issues of culture, migration, and spatial situatedness are no doubt present in these works, but we are guided through them by the impassioned heart of the artist.

These and related issues of cultural identity and tech-mediated spatial situatedness abound in the hundreds of films screened during the festival. Accolades are merited by Hope Tucker's short *Puhelinkoppi (1882-2007)* (2010), which eulogizes the telephone booth as concrete urbane locale; Kevin Jerome Everson's short *Century* (2012), a brutal and funny portrait of the junkyard destruction of an old car; and Kerry Tribe's eloquent and informative artist talk, which accompanied the screening of a recorded performance of *Critical Mass* (2010-11), Tribe's re-enactment of Hollis Frampton's 1971 structuralist film of the same title. A stand-out piece in the festival was Antoine Bourges's *East Hastings Pharmacy* (2011), a semi-scripted forty-six-minute "collaborative improvisation" with residents of Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, best known for the concentration of people dealing with addiction and poverty who call the neighborhood home. An actress plays the Plexiglas-housed pharmacist who dispenses daily methadone doses to eligible addicts while making incidental chitchat. The "real" (yet consciously filmed) pharmacy visitors complicate the notion of documentary, often "performing" their struggles with actual issues they face in their daily lives. The film is a poetic, stoic, and faithfully complex portrait of an oft-ignored population.

In addition to the wealth of excellent work consistently shown at Images, the festival is remarkable for its unending commitment to critical politics and the fostering of a collegial atmosphere for artists, critics, scholars, and art lovers in which competition (usually the basis for film festivals) is far from the central concern. Here's to twenty-five more years.

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