

## **Vortex: Witnessing phenomena of the moving image in *The Last Blue Sky***

A wind blows through mother's tankstation. It rushes from under a falling cardboard box, whipping along a flag to fly up and coax along the listless clouds, stretching to shake the curtains hanging at the window. It vibrates through yearning vocal chords, activating the reeds of a harmonica, settling gently over the calm dawn tide before tipping a sole snowflake that starts an avalanche. You will not feel the wind on your skin. But you will see it, spiralling around you: time is circular here, looped, swept up, casting the illusion of the eternal present. 'The Last Blue Sky' clusters around the moving image, housing together a set of artists whose work inhabits that perpetuation. While the gusty movement of air is one common, invisible element in the content of the pieces presented, there are more rooted similarities in their common formal structure, a series of non-narrative glimpses that focus on seemingly minor occurrences, which employ the aesthetic of a fixed camera position – even when no camera has been used. These works grow sideways, expanding rhizomatically to intertwine and insinuate into the walls of the tankstation itself.

The walls repetitively shake with the growing roar of Elodie Pong's *Plan For Victory*, a short video that depicts a mountainside avalanche. Written in pink graffiti on the snow are the title's words, as boulders begin to fall, trees topple and finally an overwhelming cascade of snow blankets the entire scene. The human inscription is effaced, the landscape re-made by natural disaster, though the spectacle remains ambiguous as to whether the landslide is a disruption or fulfilment of the brightly-labelled 'plan'. The suggested environmental contrast of human and nature is also masterfully commandeered, the entire scene a meticulous miniature construction. Highlighting the apocalyptic possibility of the 'last blue sky', this simulated blockbuster event knowingly chains the eye with its relentless re-occurrence, while also crying 'wolf' on any illusion of cause and effect in the filmic event. Its showy bravado lies in direct contrast with the measured serenity of the rest of the show, but *Plan For Victory*'s auto-undermining hits a note that carries through the exhibition.

Thorsten Brinkmann sits in a corner of the white room. Surrounded by furniture, office supplies, packing materials, and other daily paraphernalia, it's as if we've reached another stage of evolution. These are our tools, these are our modified appendages with which we survive in this world. His video *Gut Ding will es so* provides a montage of over twenty-five mini episodes where the artist takes on a catalogue of implements and objects, presenting them in front of the camera to thoroughly reassess their use. After breaking a large piece of styrofoam over his head, Brinkmann squeezes himself through the space between the seat- and arm-holds of a desk chair, pushing himself around in a circle on his hands and knees, some newly formed species of office turtle. Though set up like an instructional video, these explorations don't lead to any conclusions and don't presume to offer any educational insights, but more suggest an ongoing testing ground. The slapstick quality and sped-up projection speed of the piece recall pre-World War Two film comedies, but if Brinkmann is channelling Charlie Chaplin, as we see him take on cupboards, car tyres, garden chairs and window blinds, there is also the curious mix of Charles Darwin, Martha Stewart and Evel Knievel. *Gut Ding* is the only piece in 'The

Last Blue Sky' to be set indoors, using the white cube as a space to explore objects stripped of their everyday assumed practicalities, in so doing investigating the potentially renewed relationship of these objects to the movements of the body.

Nevin Aladag's *Voice Over* shares a similar montage structure, but while Brinkmann's piece is – if even ironically – utilitarian, *Voice Over* juxtaposes footage of close-up portraits of young Germans of Turkish background singing traditional elegies with drums being hit by raindrops from a sunny shower and a harmonica being held out of a moving car, the wind sounding its open notes. The body, in this case, is not physically but sonically active, its relationship to objects like that to different members in a chorus. Though obviously taken from different times and settings, the singers, drums and harmonica are placed in a set of eleven intercut scenes, emphasising the shared enunciative properties of each. This transfers the qualities of each sound among each scene, making the pattering drum and abundant harmonica both fiercely independent and heartfully mournful, while also suggesting that the sounds produced by all three are motivated or played by the same natural force.

As we turn the corner more voices are heard, footsteps, a couple's plates and dishes clinking, chairs shuffling. This is not unusual – the tankstation is a gallery, studio, and domestic space. One wall, though, has been converted; onto it a pair of windows projected life-size. The left window is open, a screen just beneath a curtain that moves with the breeze, at times lifting like a playful flirt, at others suctioned to the screen with an iron certainty. Occasionally it lifts high enough for us to see the yard outside momentarily: a pile of firewood, a table with a solar panel on it, then luscious green trees as the sun rises behind the right curtain, contrasting with the *thwack!* of its impact with the screen, recalling the claustrophobic violence of Bruce Nauman's *Rats and Bats* (1988), with its punching bag being repeatedly hit with a baseball bat.

The owners of the voices never appear, their ghostly presence a setting for the curtain's dance, but also for our own movements. Renowned filmmaker Michael Snow's *Solar Breath (Northern Caryatids)* uses distinct audio and visual narratives, positioning the viewer between the two so that the sounds and goings-on within the entire architectural space become part of the breakfast ritual. The piece meditatively focuses on the windows for an hour, the curtain beating an uneven rhythm that in turn draws together the morning meal, rising sun and seasonal rhythms that contribute to this manifestation of endured time. The curtain makes visual the movement of the breeze, and as the title of the work points out, ascribes to it both anthropomorphic and structural qualities. The wind's material embodiment both shows it 'breathing', imposing human understanding on ecological occurrence, but also suggests its reverse – that human life might be understood from an ecological perspective in our own seasons and climates, a sort of 'geopomorphism'.

Cliona Harmeey's *Seneca* shares a similar concern for the endurance of the image: an elevated birdhouse stands imposingly dead centre of the frame, small sparrows sporadically coming and going in the twilight, as we hear gently splashing water and the occasional chirp. The video's length, however, is determined by the passing of a distant

airplane, the contrail slowly curving its way from the bottom to the left of the image. Grace Weir further comments on this visible determination, filming a passing cloud in *Forgetting (the vanishing point)*. Positioned over a doorway, the viewer literally looking skywards, it depicts a clear blue sky where a single cloud travels slowly from left to right, dissipating to translucence before reaching the edge of the frame. What remains is the appearance of the infinite, the seemingly endless blue caused by the refraction of shorter lightwave particles off the atmosphere's gasses.

The light from *Forgetting* casts down onto Hendrikje Kuhne's and Beat Klein's armada of around two hundred cardboard planes, stuck nose-first into the gallery wall. *Schwarmerei* (meaning a sort of overzealous enthusiasm) casts the sun as the elliptical projector for its moving image, the sundial of each plane a monument to its ongoing communal collision. A Terry Gilliam-style homage to commercial air travel, this cut-out set of images derived from airline advertisements relays the viewer's multiple perspectives and the moving shadow cast by light sources, where the gallery is both a dead end as well as the screen for this enacted halt. In the short January days once the sun has gone, however, it is *Forgetting* that perpetuates the swarm's shadows, binding the two works together in some form of puppetry in its blend of sculpture and theatricality, the dispersing cloud as a slowly rotating panoramic background providing the appearance of movement to the static aircraft.

Another stage is set in the middle of the exhibition space: a fan placed on a shelf at about head height, a live-feed camera, and a large flat-screen television gathered around a small decorated pin that pricks out of the wall. What we see on the screen is a stark Antarctic landscape, beyond the snowdrift a flag resembling the American stripes waving in the wind, the sole presence as the snow stretches to the dark horizon. Ian Burns combines a magician's theatrics with the voyeuristic complicity of reality television, building miniature sets that mediate through video to both present the illusion and reveal its own making. *Colony Cam* stakes into the tankstation, its white walls the snowy expanse, its ceiling the grey sky, as the space conquered and claimed by the artist, though it appears newly claimed, long deserted, or simply uninhabitable. The viewer is cast as witness to the construction and infinite perpetuation of this ambiguous colony, leaving us to tread the fine balance it creates between image making and image breaking. The occurrence or event depicted in *Colony Cam* is not the image itself, but the recognition and navigation of that balance.

'The Last Blue Sky' presents us with an ironic, interactive awareness of the setting and displacement of the moving image. These works present various simulations of 'natural' occurrence, with a sensitivity to the cyclic manifestations of light and movement involved in their creation and our experience of them as performative images. The unresolved ambiguities of the show, however, stay with us, circling round, blowing with us out the door into the sky above.

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Text appears courtesy of mother's tankstation