THE CINEMA EFFECT: ILLUSION, REALITY AND THE MOVING IMAGE
WASHINGTON

The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality and the Moving Image, a two-part survey of the import of the moving image in contemporary art, contrasts the worlds of dreams and reality [Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden]. *Part I: Dreams* provides an historical overview of film, video, and digital media produced from the 1960s to the mid-1990s [February 14—May 11, 2008], whereas *Part II: Realisms* focuses on the past decade [June 19—September 7, 2008]. Despite the distinction and complexity of each entity, this dyadic project puts forth a balanced overview.

Approaching Douglas Gordon's *Off Screen*, 1998, instills an anticipatory sense of excitement that calls up memories of our fondest cinematic experiences. On the other side of the glowing curtain, the cliché is quickly shattered: our presence interrupts the projected cone of red light and our attention, paradoxically, reverts back to that partition and the specter animating its rippled surface. Initiated into the realm of illusion in this way, we pass into darkness punctuated by everything from poetic reverie to nightmarish fantasies. The sleeping figure in an extended excerpt from Warhol's *Sleep*, 1963, for example, entreats us to speculate upon the subject's imaginings, whereas works such as Stan Douglas' *Overture*, 1986, Darren Almond's *Geisterbahn*, 1999, and Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler's *Eight*, 2001, track through disorienting experiences of sleeplessness, carnival rides, and childhood disappointments.

Bucolic views of the world portend conditions that, despite their apparent innocuousness and vaguely hypnotic qualities, remain unsettling in an understated way. The powerful roar and massive scale of a waterfall in Wolfgang Staehle's *Niagara*, 2004, the indolent rain of fire balls in Kelly Richardson's *Exiles of the Shattered Star*, 2006, or the non-stop vertical roll through urban and natural vistas in Michael Bell-Smith's *Up and Away*, 2006, take our reaction between fascination and incuriosity.

The most potent visions not only occur in black and white, but also reference the physical aspects of motion pictures by incorporating three-dimensional elements. Gary Hill's video installation *Suspension of Disbelief (for Marine)*, 1991-1992, mimics the minute scale of a filmstrip while the randomness of images flickering through time and space subverts its inherent linearity. Focusing on outmoded technologies, Rodney Graham uses an immense and loudly whirring Cinemeccanica Victoria 8 to project a silent loop of a Rheinmetall typewriter gradually disappearing under snowy white powder. The narrative hardware paired in *Rheinmetall/Victoria 8*, 2003, exhibits an archaic beauty that conveys romance, muscularity, and sorrow. And, lastly, Anthony McCall's *You and I, Horizontal*, 2005, reminds us that projected light can be two and three-dimensional. With the aid of a haze machine, abstract shapes not only move across the wall/screen, but exist as volumes.

Positioned out of the darkness, Harun Farocki's *Workers Leaving the Factory in Eleven Decades*, 1995, a multi-channel installation presented on a string of television monitors, forms *Part I*'s final installment and a bridge to *Part II*, which offers us the opportunity to see ways in which we portray ourselves. From fictional portrayals appropriated from cinema's history, the exhibition moves into documentary mode by examining Reality TV, historical reenactments, and news media. Paralleling this shift is
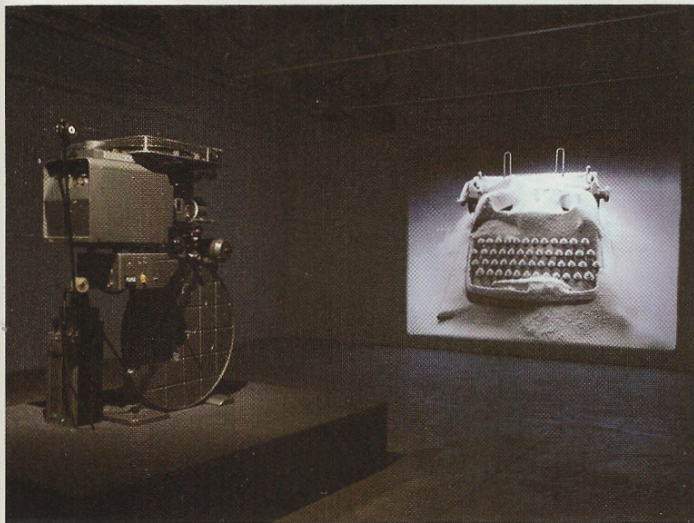
the evolution of media technology. Once an industry based on large-scale studio projects and theatrical distribution, the cinematic sphere has now evolved into multiple formats and diverse production scales. But does this mean we know more about ourselves, or has the power of the cinematic frame supplanted real knowledge?

Works such as Ian Charlesworth's *John*, 2005, make it plainly clear that, in front of the camera, we become something other than our normal selves. Isolated on an empty stage where he is respectively told to act like himself in fights with a girlfriend, a drunken parent, and a perceived adversary, this young man's attempts at self-portrayal simply fail. Similarly, the sight of a palm tree behind an entrance to the Spring Street subway station in Mungo Thomson's four-channel video work *New York, New York, New York, New York*, 2004, further confirms the incongruity between reality and its depiction—in this case, a Hollywood movie set. Francesco Vezzoli chooses to package reality in a form that is as intense as it is artificial. Through his effective appropriation of the Hollywood exposé, Vezzoli reels us in with

Marlene Redux: A True Hollywood Story!, 2006, a fevered and ersatz tale of the artist as a celebrity-obsessed eccentric grappling with the power of media attention.

Kota Ezawa's *The Simpson Verdict*, 2002, takes up the issue of celebrity in news media. His paper cutout animation emphasizes the celebrity status of the trial's participants while downplaying the news' traditional purpose: procuring information. In related pieces, several artists focus on historical reenactments to reveal multiple perspectives and ways of manipulating visual information: Pierre Huyghe's *The Third Memory*, 1999, in which the artist juxtaposes excerpts from Sydney Lumet's *Dog Day Afternoon*, 1975, with news footage and his own restaging of the failed bank robbery; Runa Islam's *Tuin*, 1998, which recreates a scene from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Martha*, 1974; and Omer Fast's *Godville*, 2005, in which the artist reworks interviews with actors employed in a living history museum. Instead of establishing verity, these works raise doubts as to what we should—or even can—believe. Do we, for example, accept Fassbinder's sophisticated three-

hundred-and-sixty-degree color shot or credit Islam's black-and-white recreation that reveals film equipment and her crew as being more real?

Perhaps Corinna Schnitt's *Living a Beautiful Life*, 2003, makes one of the most relevant comments regarding cinema's effect. In asking teenagers "What constitutes a beautiful life?" she uncovers a sense of reality so highly idealistic and devoid of conflict that it lacks any semblance to what we consider to be real. Absurdly comical, the work also reminds us that we have all, at some point, been affected in the same way. While *The Cinema Effect* delineates an inverse relationship between empiricism and imagination, it not only speaks of the power of the moving image, but also underscores the need to be critical of what we see onscreen.

—John Gayer