Play of Light and Time
David Claerbout's Imagery

[LIEVEN VAN DEN ABEELE]

Although both photography and film are media that record, they each have their own specific qualities. In photography a fleeting moment is captured. In film there's a passage of time. It seems obvious, but looking at the digitally manipulated images of the Flemish artist David Claerbout (Kortrijk, 1969) one is no longer so certain.

One of his earliest videos, *Ruurlo, Borcoloscheweg, 1910* (1997) is based on an old postcard, projected on a wall. Besides its idyllic character and picturesque qualities there is nothing special about this rural scene with figures, a tree and a windmill. Till suddenly you notice that the leaves of the tree are rustling softly in the wind.

For *Retrospection* (2000) David Claerbout used an old school picture from the thirties. Forty-four pupils in neat suits and their teacher, a cassocked priest, are looking at us. Suddenly the camera zooms in on one of the pupils. The corners of his mouth curve upwards, almost imperceptibly raised, and turn into a nice smile. We are looking at the past and the past is looking back, smiling happily at us.

Photography is always nostalgic. Time has been brought to a halt but people go on. The only thing we know for sure when we look at a photograph is that what's pictured there no longer exists. Taking photographs is always a little like dying. Melancholy is part and parcel of photography. And therefore also of the work of David Claerbout. In his `video-photos' he tries to re-animate images and moments of the past.

David Claerbout, *Retrospection*. 2000. Single channel video installation, black and white, sound projection size: 200 x 150 cm (variable dimensions). Duration: ca.16 min. Courtesy of David Claerbout and Galerie Micheline Szwajcer.

In *Vietnam, 1967, near Duc Pho (reconstruction after Hiromishi Mine)* (2001) David Claerbout reconstructs a photograph by the Japanese war photographer Hiromishi Mine. On August 3, 1967, an American cargo plane loaded with ammunition was brought down by friendly fire. Thirty-three years later David Claerbout visited the spot to film the landscape. Into this landscape he inserted the `frozen' image of the downed airplane. The landscape moves, but the event has become static (through Mine's photograph) and therefore timeless.

Actualising the past brings it into contact with us. In this way the past tense becomes the present again. We have the impression that the picture exists in the here and now, instead of in the past. In most of his works David Claerbout makes *real time*, the actual moment when we look at the images, coincide with *reel time*, the time in the film. But simultaneously we also become aware of the distance. David Claerbout's work also investigates how our way of looking at things is conditioned by our imagination. Not all the schoolboys are smiling at us, and yet we instinctively tend to believe that they are.

David Claerbout, *Vietnam 1967, near Due Pho*. 2001. Mute big screen video installation, color, 3 1/2 min. Courtesy David Claerbout and Galerie Micheline Szwajcer.

Homage to the cinema

Anyone who would like to obtain a work by David Claerbout can download one for free at www.diacenter.org/claerbout/chooseflower.html. The computer will then receive a film of a flower of one's choosing: a pink amaryllis, a yellow gerbera or a red rose, that will slowly wilt and disappear after two weeks. A contemporary memento mori, to remind us daily of our vulnerability, our transience, our death; organic time (the images of the wilting process can't be accelerated or rewound) in a virtual era, where aging and death are regarded as phenomena from the past century. The flower withers, but it can always be downloaded again.

Loss and recovery, the transitory and the permanent, are themes we regularly come across in this oeuvre. An important aspect in this is time, mostly made visible through the movement of light, although Claerbout prefers to describe it as making time `tangible'. It is nearly always set against architecture of an enduring nature.

Architecture plays an important role in David Claerbout's work. Whether it's the skyline of Venice, a day nursery from the thirties, the entrance hall of an office building, a modernist villa, a residential district from the fifties or the concrete pillars of an overpass in Houston, the architecture always provides the opportunity for careful observation of the light. He examines the movement of the light in the buildings and other structures, how their solid masses and intervening spaces are individually and alternately darkened or, conversely, illuminated and how certain details, like the sleeping tramp in *The Stack*, become visible. In doing so he makes use of his own powers of observation as well as our imagination.

A second constant in his work is his interest in cinema. Architecture and film are closely related disciplines. Time and space are common to both. Light is their common binding agent.

With their slowly moving images and duplication of real time, his works are reminiscent of the early films of Andy Warhol, particularly *Empire*, a film in which Warhol and his camera spent eight hours and five minutes in 1964 observing the changing light around the Empire State Building. Never far away, too, is the work of Alfred Hitchcock, whose skill at using architecture as a dramatic character was unequalled.

David Claerbout's *Shadow Piece* (2005) is an open homage to the seventh art form. From the staircase in a modern office building we see a glass entrance door. Visitors trying to enter the building push vainly against the glass door which stays irrevocably closed. Only their shadows are able to penetrate the building. The architecture, the black-and-white images, the camera angle and the clothes of the characters remind us of the golden age of American cinema. But the title and the whole arrangement are also metaphors for the medium itself. The audience is sitting on the staircase and the glass window acts as a projection screen.

American Car (2004) can also be read as a homage to the cinema. The installation is made up of two screens that are hung in two adjoining rooms. On the first screen we see two men in a car. Since they are filmed from behind, the viewer, from the back seat, looks out with them through the windshield of their car. Because it is pouring with rain there is little or nothing to see. In the next room we see the same car in an immense landscape. The deluge has passed. The sky is opening up. Form and content owe everything to the cinema. The car acts as the cinema and the windshield as the screen. Two men in a car, waiting and watching, is a classic scene from a gangster film. But here time is not revealed through the narrative character of the film (which in this case is totally absent) and the editing doesn't happen in time but in space. By moving from one room to another we evoke the passage of time, but the chronology of the two sequences doesn't necessarily have to be linear.

Light is the subject

In 2004 David Claerbout shot a video film that ran for over thirteen hours, in colour and in wide-screen, in which he used professional actors and a real script for the first time. In *The Bordeaux Piece*, set in one of Rem Koolhaas' most inspired buildings, his two most important sources of inspiration, film and architecture, come together. The script is by Josse de Pauw, who also plays the leading part. `*I often think actors are superfluous,*' says David Claerbout, `*but this time they were necessary to give form to this superfluousness. The script is more or less standard. The narrative system of trigger and deliver activates the tension between the characters, but the content and the subject remain ˝empty˝. I'm mainly interested in time, the location and the trees in the background. It's the actors' task to temporarily distract attention from nature and the light.*'

Rem Koolhaas' father, the writer Anton Koolhaas, was the director of the Dutch Film Academy, and before becoming an architect Rem Koolhaas worked for a while as a script-writer. His architecture is built up cinematically. It is easy to recognise the grammar of cinema in his buildings. For example, he

frequently makes use of editing and travelling shots. He himself calls his work `*script-writing by different means*'.

The client who commissioned the house in Bordeaux was a publisher. Following a car accident he was condemned to life in a wheelchair. His home in the centre of town had become like a prison to him. He asked Koolhaas to build `*a complex residence*' in the hills on the right bank of the Garonne, a living space that would define his complex world. In his design the architect took as his starting point not the man's handicap but his abilities. Koolhaas built a house in three layers. The lowest part he describes as a kind of cave, `*a series of caverns carved out of the hill for the most intimate life of the family*'. The top part is divided into areas for the parents and an area for the children. In between there is a nearly invisible glassed-in space, half inside and half outside, from which one has a beautiful view of the historic city and the mighty river. A room-sized elevator platform enables the wheelchair-user to reach the other levels without difficulty.

Fascinated by the exceptional quality of the light and the possibilities of constantly observing its astonishing movements provided by this architecture,

David Claerbout decided to make the house carry the film, rather than use it as a subject or background. `I had in mind a house like the ones you see in Los Angeles, a villa of steel and glass, the way we know them from Pierre Koenig. I have framed my shots in such a way as to confirm this familiar image of steel and glass. Apart from this you only see the patio, floors and ceilings and the panorama of the city. The typical concrete construction of this house, with its holes, is kept entirely out of shot.`

For *The Bordeaux Piece* David Claerbout drew inspiration from *Le Mépris* by Jean-Luc Godard, a French cult film from 1963 which starred not only Brigitte Bardot and Michel Piccoli, but also the legendary film director Fritz Lang as the director of a film version of the *Odyssey*. The most important theme of this film is integrity. The *mépris* - or contempt - of the title is that of a young woman for her husband, a desperate writer who has been hired by an arrogant producer as his script doctor. While he worries about his artistic integrity he corrupts his beloved by driving her unawares into the arms of the producer. Apart from the numerous references to film history and Greek mythology, what really carries the film is the breathtaking photography of Raoul Coutard and the beauty of the

Homeric landscapes on Capri. Despite the notable presence of Bardot, it is the architecture that plays the leading part. Like the house at Bordeaux, the villa of the Italian writer Malaparte, built in 1939 by Adalberto Libera, is characterised by an underground section carved out of the rock and an enormous terrace. The script also contains direct references to *Le Mépris*. Thus Claerbout repeats the famous scene in which Bardot wants to know if her writer still loves her. `*Do you love my hair, do you love my face, do you love my breasts, do you love my belly ... do you love me?*`

But the real subject of this 'impressionistic film', as Claerbout calls it, is the play of light. *The Bordeaux Piece* consists of 68 fragments, each 11 minutes and 10 seconds in length. Every fragment shows the same scenes, with the same dialogue and the actors placed in the same positions. Only the light changes. The duration of the film, 13 hours and 43 minutes, coincides with the period between sunrise and sunset. The film has been shot and edited in such a way that it can be synchronised with the actual time at the place where it is shown. If we're watching the film at 12 noon, it's 12 noon in the film as well. `*The material I work with is time,*` says Claerbout, `*and it's a material that everyone is familiar*

with. Everyone knows what it means to lose a day, an hour or even a couple of minutes. If I can evoke the memory of this material with my work, that will be more than sufficient."

It's not the moment that's unique

The recent *Sections of a Happy Moment* (2007) is a curious work that opens up new possibilities in the artist's evolution, both in form and content. Against the backdrop of a housing estate, an ordinary Chinese family experiences a moment of domestic happiness, underscored by some restful piano music. Two children are playing with a ball while their parents and grandparents look on. They are also being watched by a third couple and a man with a plastic shopping bag, while two girls are walking away from the scene. The immobility of the characters – the ball hangs motionless in the air, the characters are frozen - provides the necessary element of confusion and alienation.

The scene was photographed by numerous cameras, all capturing the same moment but each from a different location and distance. These photos, in a

specific sequence and with a specific rhythm, are projected on the screen as a film. The moment is thus endowed with a passage of time. Because the images follow each other a narrative structure develops, but that does not create a storyline.

The photos of the architecture, a neighbourhood from the fifties by the Belgian architect Renaat Braem in Antwerp's Kiel district, were taken by Claerbout at the location and restored digitally. The characters, photographed in a studio, were then inserted into the architecture by computer. But despite the complexity of the technical interventions, they never interfere with the simplicity of the images.

The successive scenes have a poetic character, until you eventually realise, partly from the photos taken through windows and from apartments higher up,

that these people are being watched by surveillance cameras. Our participation in their happiness becomes an invasion of their privacy. Sympathy becomes voyeurism.

Here Claerbout draws our attention to the impossibility of understanding `reality' in a purely visual way. To grasp the complexity and richness of reality one has to be on the move. The myth of the `decisive moment' in photography is punctured. It's not the moment that is unique but the viewpoint, and it's because the camera is moving, that this `snapshot', a static entity, becomes dynamic in character. To understand reality as fully as possible one needs to be capable of anticipation and memory. From what one has already seen, one should be able to imagine the whole. The purpose of art is therefore a better understanding not just of art, but also of the complexity of the everyday reality that is the foundation of it. ■

David Claerbout,
Sections of a Happy Moment.
2007. Single channel video projection, 1920 x 1600, black & white, stereo audio. Duration: ca *30* min. Variable installation.
Courtesy of David Claerbout and Galerie Micheline Szwajcer.