

Film & Video

The Russian Club Gallery London

4 February to 6 March

It has become rather a cliché to talk about the tactility and indexicality of film as a desirable quality. The density of emulsion may well be more seductive than the paucity of pixels, but film is notoriously more difficult to manipulate and can consequently tend towards heft or preciousness. But then again, it is video's lightfootedness that is responsible for the gruelling proliferation of dull footage, arbitrary montage and the random externalisation of ill-developed ideas. The work in 'Film & Video', however, seems to suggest that it is the capacity of both media to describe, rather than construct, that is of more interest these days, rendering the question of analogue or digital almost a matter of irrelevance.

Whereas experimental film from the 1960s to the 1980s constructed image, sensation and varying registers and legibilities of meaning through its surface and physicality, in many of the works here the medium is distinctly in abeyance to the ideas communicated and the scenarios represented. Grant Gee's *400 Anarchists*, 2002, for example, adopts an essayistic form that tracks the technological and socio-political legacy of the anthropometric system, developed in the early 1880s by the French police officer Alphonse Bertillon to identify suspects by way of face and body measurements. The images on screen – in

Juneau Projects
a rich future is still ours 2003
video still

Phil Coy
Wordland 2008
film still



particular the series of mug shots of *fin-de-siècle* anarchists that mysteriously surfaced at a fine art auction decades later, from which the film departs and to which it ultimately returns – operate as illustrative spurs for the voice-over. While this may ruffle the experimental film purist, it has, in the endless cycles of critique-fuelled patricide, become the 'newish' stance. Narrative clarity is no longer taboo, but neither is it all-pervasive. We are at that comfortable time when the tide is in the process of turning and we are neither contemptuous nor bored by the proposition.

Juneau Projects sit squarely on the crossroads of construction and description. In their one-minute short *Stalker*, 2001, the camera, in night vision mode, retells the story of its own destruction; its anthropomorphised, subjective viewpoint as it is shot dead with a rifle evokes themes of obsolescence and mercy killing. The deadpan relationship to the camera in all of Juneau Projects' films hints at their perception of their own role as interlocutors. In any situation the unwinking cyclops is not only the point of capture, it is also metonymic of a future audience, a proxy for sensory perception and the construction of meaning beyond the artists' control. The specificity of that audience must be identified and performed to, and here the camera is treated as the democratic everyperson, the universal multitude that demands the right to clarity and resolution.

Richard Grayson's *Various Things Explained*, 1998, performs a playfully didactic turn that increases the distance between himself and his audience so that he may better perform the act of pedagogy across it. Grayson recruits the *mise en scene* of a dinner table to illustrate the mechanics of such notions as Marx's theory of surplus value, how a nerve fibre works, Jung's graph of desire and how the artist split up with an old girlfriend: a spear of asparagus becomes an indicator of causality, an olive becomes the equivalent value for an hour's work and a plate becomes a city inhabited by snackable fruits. Grayson's patient and friendly delivery is entirely beguiling, his use of props to clarify the explanations is read as a generous act. But, of course, the camera is an unresponsive audience, it cannot protest. Grayson challenges our credulity at times, and the difference between the grandiose universals he is explaining and the homely specifics of the apple he handles are not lost on us as analogous to the breaches between perception and knowledge.

Spoken word features heavily in 'Film & Video'. In Grayson's films it is open-handed, in Gee's it is driving and in Phil Coy's elegy to water, *Wordland*, 2008, it shiftingly underpins the imagery. A greyed-out seascape is imbued with extra steely power by a fragmentary narration of encounters with flooding; occasionally a pegboard carrying letters spells out an excerpt of the spoken word or announces some aspect of the image – its out-of-focus state, for instance, or the battleship grey of the skies. Coy ascribes the spoken and written word fluctuating operations that in turn open out and narrow down our reading. In Knut Åsdam's videos, though, the readings form a near-solid, prohibitive wall. The reading voices are amateurish, drawing attention to the roughshod fabrication of the work and the contingency of significance. Whether this is desirable is a matter of taste (polished clarity is still considered, by some, somewhat mainstream and, consequently, bad), but the oblique pitch of the text builds to a poetic swoon that drapes itself over the surface so that even after three viewings a vague sense of meaning emerges from the footage of rainy protests and murky dance floors. References to corporeal bodies, the social body, architecture and event form a Deleuzian silt that fills the handholds in the video's edifice, offering us little incentive to engage.

The curatorial remit of 'Film & Video' rests on the thesis that self-reflexivity as a condition in opposition to the mainstream is rooted in a previous era. Coy's *Wordland*, while

openly self-conscious of its status as artefact and as informed by art history, problematises the structural filmmaker's strategies it references. As if to press home changing cultural contexts, the landscape is seen to be no less staggeringly beautiful despite the occasional rupture of the representational spell. Coy is not shy of customary trickery, such as the reversal of the timeline and jump cuts to a click track, with the end of the film dissolving into an expertly choreographed montage that ends on the simplest series of edits between a night view interrupted by windscreen wipers and the most hyperbolic of sunsets. Optical rhythm and associational interplay work together here in a perfect demonstration of the curator's thesis, performing an operatic elision of the robustly constructed and the eloquently described. ■

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■ Uriel Orlow: Remnants of the Future

Laure Genillard London 16 January to 10 April

Swiss artist Uriel Orlow's multi-work installation *Remnants of the Future*, all works 2010, ruminates on time travel, architecture and Armenia since the 1915 Ottoman-Turkish genocide, the 1988 Spitak earthquake and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The dominant element – a video loop – is a study of Mush, a vast housing project in Gyumri, northern Armenia. Mush has had two incarnations. The first Mush was the site of massacres during the 1915 genocide, the second was constructed to accommodate the people displaced by the Spitak earthquake. This project was curtailed by the break-up of the Soviet Union, leaving the reconstruction of Mush in stasis – a hollow concrete exoskeleton haunted by the spectres of failed state capitalism and the neglect of free markets.

The video is elegantly shot and edited, with striking sound. Via a sequence of long and horizontal panning shots we see Mush in topographical context, a brooding anachronism set among dun-coloured hills and arid khaki scrub. As Orlow's camera gradually swoops closer to Mush life, colour and activity are revealed. Hawks hover and finches perch, a blue plastic carrier bag ensnared by a bush trembles frenetically in a breeze (in the gallery an identical carrier bag is suspended from the ceiling to the left of the screen). Scavengers salvage scrap metals, an elderly lady in crimson hangs laundry out to dry on dilapidated fencing, children play in a rusting playground, a cattle herd armed with a scythe walks amongst animals, rubble and thistles. An elderly male in a straw hat straightens bent wire with a hammer, his hammering a delightful series of extra-musical pings.

The video's captivating audio track, composed/ designed by Mikhail Karikis, slips furtively between warm naturalism – field recordings of quotidian activity – and the cold chirruping modulations of the electro-acoustically processed radio signals of pulsars. As Mush moves from day to night the soundtrack becomes more insistent, a pulsating skein of sub bass frequencies and telegraphic sine tones. Then, quite suddenly, an electronically processed female voice begins to speak. This section appropriates text from Mayakovsky's play *The Bathhouse*. Premiered unsuccessfully a few months before the playwright's suicide in 1930, *The Bathhouse* is a time-travel satire that lampoons Soviet politics and bureaucracy. 'I'm an emissary from the future. I have switched into your time for twenty four hours. Time is short



and our aim high ... Direction: infinity.' The sudden introduction of this section of speech provides a compellingly odd perceptual jolt. Like *Mush* itself, it seems displaced; written in the 1930s by a man out of sync, speaking from the future to the past.

On a plinth, in the same space as the video loop, lies the text piece *Top Lines* – two heavily redacted British government policy documents concerning Armenian and Turkish relations. In the basement area of the gallery there are other supporting materials: collections of photographs, pencil tracings of Soviet death masks, *Soviet Sleep*, and *After The End of History*, a first edition book cover of Francis Fukuyama's neo-liberal classic *The End of History*.

The photographs consist of production stills, large colour prints of areas destroyed by the Spitak earthquake and *Still Aftershock*, a selection of colour and black and white images culled from personal archives, the Gyumri public library and the Gyumri city archive. Among these images are two curious shots of politicians and their spouses. One depicts a flustered looking Mikhail Gorbachev pictured with his late wife Raisa amid a crowd, the other a disturbingly vibrant image of Margaret and Dennis Thatcher standing beside a red coach surveying a scene unrevealed by the photograph. Margaret, in a blue suit with white-piping, looks perplexed and Dennis embarrassed.

The day I visited the gallery the *Wall Street Journal* reported that, after decades of tension, attempts to develop positive diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia had collapsed. That same week miraculous stories of survival in Haiti were all over the media as people were dragged out of earthquake ruins days after official rescue operations had ceased. One wonders what Haiti's fate will be and whether it, too, like *Mush* will be subject to subsequent indifference and neglect.

Uriel Orlow's *Remnants of the Future* is at heart a strange and subtle paean to absence, survival and the resourcefulness of people in the aftermath of a cataclysm. It is refreshing in its empathy, subtlety and resistance to mawkishness. The video is the strongest component, though time with the other elements is necessary despite an initial sense of extraneousness. ■

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Uriel Orlow
Remnants of the Future
2010
production still