

Les Marques Aveugles

Centre d'art contemporain , Geneva, Switzerland

In his essay 'For a Metahistory of Film' (1971), Hollis Frampton mocks the received wisdom that cinema merely 'accelerates still photographs into motion'. On the contrary, Frampton insists, 'a still photograph is simply an isolated frame taken out of the infinite cinema.' The various works assembled at the Centre d'art contemporain under the title 'Les marques aveugles' (roughly translated as 'Blind Marks') seek, as it were, to reconnect these isolated frames to an expanded cinema that would go beyond Hollywood's narrative pleasures to embrace the discontinuities and lacunae of the apparatus.

A series of Levi's factory closures in Belgium and northern France provides the absent centre around which the narrative of Dutch artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh's documentary, *Après la reprise, la prise* (2009), circles. In this super high definition digital film, Van Oldenborgh extracts a series of stills to dissolve in and out of each other in the manner of a Powerpoint slideshow, with an edited script of the dialogue as voice-over. This mode of presentation, as well as the theme of a return to a traumatic event from the past, recalls the work that formed the starting point for this exhibition, Chris Marker's groundbreaking film, *La Jetée* (1962).

Van Oldenborgh was inspired by her own memories of the extensive resistance mounted against these closures by mostly female workers in the late 1990s, to stage a kind of confrontation of her own: this time not between workers and bosses, but between the past and the future, or at least two different responses to the present change in economic circumstances. The setting is a technical school just north of Brussels, at the very moment that its textiles department is being shut down and its banks of sewing machines replaced by computers. This switch is, of course, symptomatic, as is the change in circumstances of the women, who ten years ago were marching and going on hunger strikes to save their jobs. Since then, several have become professional actors – a line of work that is in many respects the model, as the artist points out, for the new, precarious, 'brand me' style of labour that has largely replaced the notion of the 'job for life' in the West. The story unfolds elliptically at first: the opening shot is of a bare wall; somewhere in the background we hear someone singing. The characters – not just the former Levi's workers, but a younger generation of students, who will probably never know the kind of steady factory work the older women once looked forward to – are introduced gradually, and often in reflection or partially obscured. But

gradually, and often in reflection or partially obscured. But what Van Oldenborgh's work reveals, alongside the explicit narrative, are two fundamentally different codes of communication: the declarative, storytelling mode of the older women, and the less self-assured, apparently more trivial, chattering of the youth ('Is my hair alright?' 'Is this T-shirt too big?').

The marks of a very different kind of trauma are the subject of Rosa Barba's *A Private Tableaux* (2010). Here, a grainy 16mm film traces the white line drawings of engineers marking points of stress in the tunnels beneath the river Mersey, in a style that recalls the low-grade quality of certain video nasties: with the growling industrial sounds (recorded in situ) competing with the flicker of the projector for soundtrack, we could be entering the cannibals' home in Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). But the artist's sans serif intertitles reframe this exploration as a mythic encounter with the ancient past. Barba finds in these markings, 'a dense diffusion of signs [...] an eagle with outstretched wings [...] riders without horses' as if these abstract drawings were being interpreted by some future anthropologist as something akin to the cave paintings at Lascaux or Chauvet. The last shot shows a white circle with the number 420 enclosed within it, now imbued with an obscure mystery, reminiscent of certain moments in David Lynch's films. Barba's film thus stages the erasure of brute functionality by aesthetics and the interpretive powers of historiography.

In a very different way, this tendency of the work to obliterate its own object is enacted in two drawings by last year's Northern Art Prize winner, the Czech-born, Manchester resident Pavel Büchler. The two sketches, entitled *The Shadow of its Disappearance*, 30 September 2011, *Sunrise/Sunset* (2011), represent the latest in an ongoing series of works in which Büchler uses discarded pencils to trace their own shadows as they lengthen or shorten with the falling or rising of the sun. The continuous redrafting as he tries in vain to keep up with the changing shape of his object – and the need to keep that pencil sharp – ultimately sharpens the instrument down to nothing, and its tiny stub neatly rests upon the bottom right of the picture's frame.

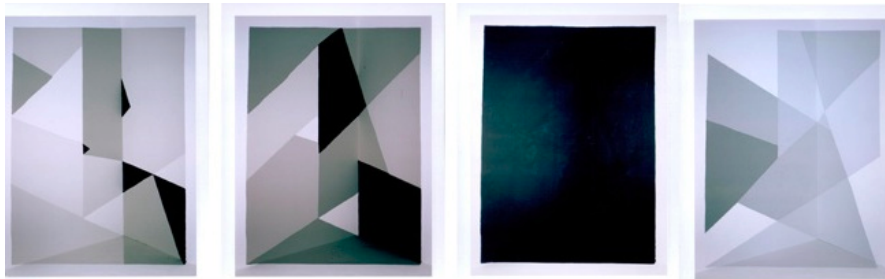
Introducing his work at the exhibition's opening in November, Büchler mentioned that Hollis Frampton has acted as a kind of 'spiritual mentor' to him since his student days, and one can find in these drawings a kind of repetition of the ideas behind Frampton's *nostalgia* (1971), which occupies the far corner of the gallery space. This classic 16mm film exhibits a series of Frampton's photographs from the beginning to the end of his photographic career – a stage

watches them burn. This incineration is in itself highly aesthetic, the flames seeming at first merely to dance on the surface of the photograph before, quite suddenly, the corners curl and blacken and the whole soon compounds to something like a rapidly decomposing fruit or the shifting, uneven surface of some soot-blackened planetoid.

In counterpoint to this orgy of creative immolation, we hear a wry voice apparently describing the pictures and their genesis in the first person. However, pretty soon we become aware of a certain disjuncture between what we see and what we hear. In fact, the work is doubly estranged: firstly, the voice we hear is not Frampton's but that of his friend, the filmmaker Michael Snow, reading Frampton's text. This creates certain ironies when Snow is forced to address himself in the third person ('I wish I could apologize to him...'). Secondly, the voice is always one jump ahead of the viewer, describing in fact not the image before us, but its successor, thereby creating a narrative tension that is exploited in the film's *dénouement*. Here, we are set up to expect an image of something so dreadful, something which fills the narrator, 'with such fear, such utter dread and loathing, that I think I shall never dare to take another photograph'. The following image, of course, is the black screen signifying the end of the film, whose obscurity stands in for the literally unrepresentable thing in a manner analogous to the famous black pages inserted into Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1767).

Critical Dystopia', feminist film theorist Constance Penley suggested that it would be impossible to remake *La Jetée*, as the film is rendered 'in its very structure' unrepeatable by the demand of popular cinema for 'pleasure without (obvious) paradox'. Since Penley's essay, popular cinema has proved itself more amenable to paradox than might have been suspected, by (almost) remaking *La Jetée*, not once but twice: in the shape of Terry Gilliam's *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) and Brad Anderson's *Happy Accidents* (2000). Both films use Marker's story of a man haunted by a photograph from the past to explore time-travel paradoxes and the relationship between a man from the future and a woman from the present. What both of these films miss from Marker's original, however, is the scar of trauma – the ghost of the Second World War that looms so heavily in Marker's film, and its imaginative transposition in the shape of the future apocalypse. In a sense, the various works collected in 'Les Marques Aveugles' also each seek to remake *La Jetée*, but instead of removing the stain of the trauma, it is precisely this aspect that must be insistently repeated, like so many black frames in the infinite cinema.

Robert Barry



Katja Mater, 'Density Drawings' (2011)

These black pages rear their head elsewhere on the gallery walls, in the six photographs that make up Katja Mater's 'Density Drawings' (2011). This series of Polaroids tells an abstract narrative of a constructivist architectonics assembled as much in the camera itself as in the gallery space. Mater painted and assembled geometric shapes on the gallery wall in the very corner where the photographs now stand, gradually filling the frame of the shot through double exposure and successive layering until, in the third image, the frame is entirely black. The following frames then chart the work's own erasure back to an (almost) empty white image (a small white wooden triangle remains on the floor to commemorate the ephemeral work of which it was once a part).