

LIMINAL SPACES

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This text accompanies the exhibition CARNATIONS

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The opening of Godard's *Contempt* (1963) offers the spectator a triple layering: a tracking shot in which one watches the actual movement of the camera on rails, the cameraman at work, boom operator in tow as they follow their subject, the actress Georgia Moll (playing Francesca), while at the same time the filmmaker recites the opening credits. The shot ends with the camera turned and aimed at the viewer/camera—the other one, the real one—documenting what we have seen in a still shot. An extremely compact and effective reflexive encounter of a narrative to come: reality and fiction, authorship, speech, image, context, labour and reception.

What occurs in those few minutes is an imbrication of different modes of the real in filmmaking, or, simply put, of different ways of projecting that confound the limit between the made up and the concrete and physical realm of the apparatus of production and experience. We are at a juncture, tottering between the *here* of our viewing and the *there* of the staged drama that Godard and his team construct for us. The technical apparatus, indeed the very economy of filmmaking, is transformed into a subject; the smooth passage into the unreal, the imaginary and the surrender to desire is complicated.

CARNATIONS is not an exhibition as *mise en abyme* as *Contempt* is in many ways. It also is not film, but it does play with boundaries between the inside and the outside, reality and artificiality, and, in particular in the case of animation, reality and mimesis. The works more specifically further explore the general question of how body and psyche, as they interface with technology, apprehend and negotiate not only the real, but what constitutes the human and our constitution as subjects.

Of interest in Godard's approach for the construction that is the exhibition—indeed this exhibition—is the resistance applied to seamlessly plunging the spectator into the realm of cinematic fiction, into a narrative of tragically baffled desire. It insists on keeping the spectator from smoothly relating to or falling into a single unique space and points to many other spaces as well as degrees of experience and cognition. For a few moments, the gaze is made investigative and analytical. A distance is imposed on the spectator whose space of viewing is made to expand. In the following shot, it will have shifted with the space retracting into scene two of the film where the camera tracks Brigitte Bardot/Camille's body as it lies naked on the bed in the arms of her lover Michel Piccoli/Paul.

Philippe Hamelin's animation *Scène 2 (découpage)* (2014-17) refers to that very sequence. But here we are confronted by a red mass, voluptuously meat-like, resting on a fur-like white surface, being examined and revealed through various camera angles (reproducing the ones that dissect Bardot's body from foot to head in the film) as a pathos-filled orchestral soundtrack plays. The only identification that takes place here rises inchoate from our unconscious to form a web of human, animal, mineral, sensorial and affective associations. As the red mound recedes and the music continues, a small irregularly shaped plane of moving water appears in a projection on the wall immediately to the right, accentuating the atomization of one's faculty of cognition. To experience *Scène 2* is to be propelled into a series of spaces with no possible common ground. This lack, however, does not diminish the pull the animated field has on us—the viscosity and strange sensuality of it—in creating a state of liminality.

In cultural anthropology, liminality is the indeterminate state that is produced in a person in the process of moving from one stage to another, typically in the context of a rite of passage.¹ Conceived and operating at the edge of incorporation, I would like to suggest that Hamelin's animations also hold the viewer in this indeterminate state, a space of a quasi-suspension where a fully realized passage or incorporation fails to take place (unlike in a rite of passage, of course, where there is a resolve and a one moves into another state). In occupying this in-between state, however the very nature of digital animation, the technology of making live or producing life through movement in relation to reality, is closely examined.

Each of the three works in the series *Sci Fi Haikus* (2012-17) are structured in the same way. Like the Japanese poetic form, they are short, concise and evocative. A video segment of an event in the natural world (an aviary filled with agitated and screeching birds, a frontal view of rail tracks as a train speedily advances, a horizontal segment of a torso breathing in and out) alternates with an animation of two white prisms floating in a black void in a series of movements that ends in their unification. Unlike the multi-angled continuous presentation of the red mass with its enveloping romantic musical score, the *Haikus* adopt a frontal take of a privileged scene abruptly and repeatedly interrupted by two moving white geometric forms. It is impossible to reconcile these juxtapositions, which are defined by a radical difference of order. In this liminal situation, the question of what firmly inhabits reality and the unity of being are addressed: the animate and inanimate may be made to coexist and a kind of merging of the two orders suggested at the end of each *Haiku*, but their realization remains suspended, their spaces impassable. What is left to operate is what lies outside the rational domain: affective disturbance at the violence and excess the screeching birds express; anxiety and foreboding as we visually ride the rail track; corporeal hyper-consciousness of breath regulated by the one emanating from the resting torso. These external and internal agitations are, at short intervals, countered by the smooth, hyper-defined prisms ominously travelling in silence through the black void. For a moment,

they are invaded by the sound of the birds, the rumbling of the train and the intake of breath, and a threshold is almost crossed.

CARNATIONS as a whole compounds a series of spaces as environments and temporal experiences where liminality occurs, thus challenging the boundary of the space of exhibition. Indeed, the gallery's very antechamber or vestibule has been metamorphosed into a colored environment bathing the visitor in a reddish glow. This is the only intermediate space where a transit is actually realized, a threshold crossed from the outside of the gallery into the large space where *Les amis (à l'infini)* (2014/2017) occupies the large expanse of wall. The frenzied, abandoned dancing of the group to a techno beat is continuous with no possible respite. Their technicolor, sightless bodies, capable of unnatural torsions, tears and gestures mesmerize us with their connectedness. Identification is sensorial and emotional, but remains unengaged, the obvious disembodiment fascinatingly repelling. The space one occupies as a viewer, in spite of its immersiveness, is the tenuous interface where recognition and identification are possible, but only as an incomplete externalized force.

Vivariums (2017) articulate a temporal experience of a different order in presenting us with animations of transformations that mimic animal life processes such as birthing and moulting (classic forms of rites of passage). Displayed on screens embedded in a large prism-like wall construction, organic-like forms are made to slowly expel a worm-like "being" or open up to reveal a scintillating elongated pod. The action unfolds in real time and thus the visitor can only witness very slight changes in a normal viewing experience. *Vivariums* locate experience at the very point where animation exercises its pull on reality, confounding the order of the real, seducing us by assimilation to its space and effects, while disorienting our subjectivity.

If the space of exhibition mines its boundary by way of a series of spaces that afford liminal experiences, it is primarily because Hamelin's animations produce constant dis-localizations effected not only by the ambiguity of the carefully constructed

digital worlds, but also by the way they are displayed across five interconnected galleries and how they relate to each other. It is played out in how each work configures space and inhabits the walls, how these walls interrupt or frame, in the image's expanse or containment, in its location in proximity or distance, in how viewing is positioned, in the type of sound and its intensity (techno beat, orchestral and ambient) and in the degree of light and darkness.

Dis-localization is then constructive of *CARNATIONS*, unfixing the relationship to place, declassifying order and unmooring the process of identification. In doing so, it initiates an open process of inquiry for the visitor into what digital technology's mediation transmits sensorially, emotionally and intellectually to the structuring of the real. The distinction of categories is mined by way of an environment that exceeds the works themselves in order to confound the category of space that is name "gallery".

Liminality and dis-localization can be considered as processes that define the space of a place of exhibition and programming such as the Ellen whose status is never tamely embedded in the cultural whole. It seems to belong tenuously and uncomfortably to that larger cultural system. Indeed, this also the reality of its often, awkward relationship with the university. Neither academic department nor curriculum bound or dispenser of degrees what exactly is its role and function? However, this is exactly where a university art gallery should locate its practice within the unstable ground of indeterminacy and the distancing associated with a redirecting or overturned gaze.

NOTES

ⁱ The concept of liminality was introduced by the French folklorist and ethnologist Arnold van Gennep in Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* [1909], trans. Monika V. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). Victor Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de passages*," in *The Forest of Symbols; Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), 93-111 and "Liminality and Communitas," in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* [1969], (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), 94-130. Contemporary applications

of liminality are discussed in *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, ed. Agnes Horvath, Bjorn Thomassen, and Harald Wydra (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015).