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The Ydessa Hendeles Foundation

James Coleman, Gary Hill, Eadweard Muybridge, Giulio Paolini, Bill Viola, Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto. Through March 1994

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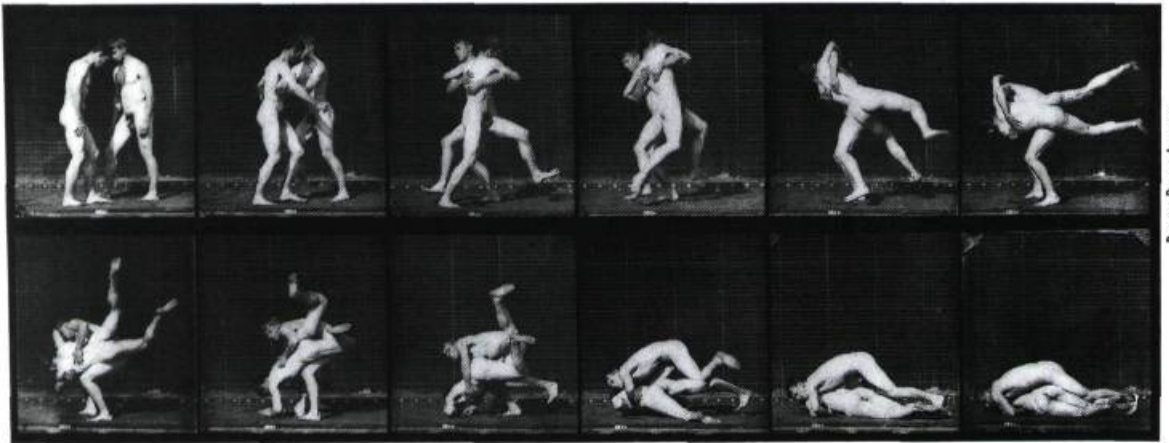


PHOTO: PUZANT APVAGAN

Eadweard Muybridge, *Animal locomotion*, Plate 347, 1887. Collotype; 47,6 x 59,7 cm. Collection and courtesy: Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto.

The viewer assumes a multiplicity of roles while moving through the current exhibition at the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation* - voyeur, spectator, initiator, participant. Characterized as the first 'group show' mounted in the galleries, it causes one to wonder why Ydessa Hendeles hasn't made it common practice. Featuring works by 19th century photographer Eadweard Muybridge, American artists Bill Viola and Gary Hill, Italian sculptor Giulio Paolini and Irish artist James Coleman, it builds a thoughtful and impressive curatorial framework that enriches understanding and affinities, but doesn't prop up the individual works. One of the most prevalent concerns of this grouping is the manipulation of time, and the thematic link extends to reveal the occupation of the body. The issues explored surrounding the body are not grounded in a purely physical investigation, though several of the works use the form of the body as an instrument, but instead probe the body's location in space and time (identity). The use of technology, as a vehicle to elucidate these points emerges as another common denominator, and invokes corporeal and spiritual examination as the issue of mortality strikes the viewer with the transmission of human identity through image devices.

The introduction to the exhibition features 130 collotypes from the *Animal Locomotion* portfolio (1877) by Eadweard Muybridge, each work comprising a series of sequential exposures (produced by special cameras patented by Muybridge in 1879) documenting the constructs of motion. Though exhibited with other works that achieve an advanced technological format, one marvels at the pioneering technique demonstrated in these photographs

produced over a century ago. Though Muybridge's investigations were motivated by the scientific curiosity of the age (one instance of note is his photographic documentation of a horse in full gallop, proving that all four hooves leave the ground simultaneously at some point in the run), they exude a cinematic feel, and their induction into fine art practice is perhaps merited by the influence his undertaking exerted in the realm of film and photography (moving pictures, precursors to the structure of animation, serial imaging). The work has also functioned as a resource for contemporary artists in appropriation (the most recent example is the work of Canadian artist Sorel Cohen) which, though not necessarily validating its classification, denotes its continuing cogency in current artistic investigations.

By virtue of the photographic medium, Muybridge's compositions are frozen images, but their serial format seeks to delineate the opposite - motion. This paradox infuses the work with a voyeuristic edge. The subjects (naked male and female figures, children, animals) and the acts performed (walking, running, athletic competition, dressing, bedding down) are laid out in their entirety - no stolen moments, no surrounds beyond the camera's eye - everything is captured on film for perpetual scrutiny. There is the reduction of the body to specimen and the quality of the individual beyond its component parts is neither evidenced nor considered. With these works, the issue of time assumes a dualistic role whereby the moments of motion, which the viewer invariably tries to reconstruct by running the gaze quickly through the sequences, belong to another time, but are vulnerable to an unending resurrection.

In Bill Viola's *Arc of Ascent* (1992), a synchronized channel video plays upon a suspended 22' translucent



Bill Viola, *The Arc of Ascent*, 1992. Video/sound installation. Collection and courtesy : Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto. Photo : Robert Keziere



PHOTO: ROBERT KEZERE

Gary Hill, *Inasmuch As It Always Already Taking Place*, 1990. Video installation (detail). Collection and courtesy: Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto.

scrim. Entering the gallery (superbly fashioned for this work), the rush of the amplified sound envelops the viewer, and the screen looms. Moving around the screen to the other side, there is a moment when the viewer is caught up in the screen and the sound, becoming an element of the installation. The action depicted, in extreme slow motion, is that of a diver plunging into the watery depths and then rising to the surface. The dive, from a 33 1/3' high diving board to breaking the water's surface, takes one second of real time and is protracted to a 4-minute exposition. The monumental figure, inverted on the screen as though suspended, illuminates another abeyance - the suspension of the moment. The eventual crash through the water's calm is intensified by the *orchestral thunder of the audio component*, slowed to match the pace of the imagery on the screen. The moments videotaped under water seem to eke out an eternity of calm and anxiety, life and death, unwilling surrender and euphoria, as Viola prolongs 3 seconds into 7 minutes. These provocative manipulations of time and space challenge our perceptual abilities, distorting the elements that characteristically inform our own position.

Moving to the upstairs galleries, the viewer enters the theater of James Coleman's *Living and Presumed Dead* (1983-85), a 25-minute panoramic play comprising of slide dissolves and voice over. As on a classical stage, costumed players are arranged in a row with numerous, sometimes subtle changes in their placement occurring with the dissolves. The characters in this 'play' are a combination of actors and mannequins, attired in different clothing styles ranging from historical or period dress to an almost carnivalesque costuming. The narrative is propelled by one voice, and the visual identity of the speaker is not revealed. Although coerced into the role of spectator, the viewer is removed from the action, as the players seem entangled in a struggle to distinguish the real and the fictive, both on the stage and within the structure of the play. With an elusive visual revelation and a disjunctive relationship between audio and visual components, the viewer's understanding is mediated by the combined effect of the voice - relating loss, suspicion, justice, vengeance - and the view - life, death, mimicry,

disguise - culminating in a complex representation of individual identity within the social context.

Coleman's second work in the exhibition, entitled *Box (Ahhareturnabout)* (1977), is presented in a smaller, more confined space. Though still registering the atmosphere of a theater, the stage has been replaced by a screen. The voice on the audio tape is intended to reconstruct the thoughts of heavyweight boxer, Gene Tunney, glimpsed through the imagery on the screen in the throes of the historic 1927 prizefight in which he was pitted against Jack Dempsey. The intermittent images of the fight are played with their fuzzy black and white rawness against this breathless voice with a parallel rhythm. The appearance of the images on film, spliced with full black, are synchronized with a metronomic pulse that fluctuates between heartbeat and *jab*. The film treatment recalls Muybridge's work with the assembly of movement from frame to frame, but unlike Muybridge, the images do not collate to expose all the action. There is no victory to be savoured, as the 7-minute film loop strands the fighters in eternal irresolution. And perhaps this reveals something more of the challenge, for the nature of a boxing title requires its reclamation - the identity as champion is always in flux, uncertain, except for the brief moment of triumph - and indeed, the footage of the 1927 fight saw Tunney struggling to re-establish his status in a return bout, his identity discharged until the conclusion of the match. Coleman has removed the resolution, granting immortality through *the chance*.

To round out the show, Hendeles offers up two succinct works by video artist Gary Hill. With the work *Inasmuch As It Always Already Taking Place* (1990), Hill has arranged several video monitors of varying sizes in a recess in the gallery wall, set just below eye level. The monitors are playing images of different body parts - some recognizable, others abstracted to the point of unfamiliarity. There is a similar layering effect with the audio component, with what seem to be samplings of unrelated phrases and sounds creating a lulling rhythm. As the viewer studies the work (just which part of the body is that ?), various aspects of this linguistic melody are distinguishable: "I couldn't



ask questions"; "I can't say it any other way"; "It was only an idea". The fragmentation of the body in an active video environment, combined with the splintered dialogue, implies the individual's multifaceted task in ascertaining a place in society. Hill has long used the combined devices of sight and sound to determine methods of interpretation and analyze the constructs of perception.

One of the most provocative pieces in this exhibition is Gary Hill's *Tall Ships* (1992), first shown at Documenta IX last year. The work combines a sophisticated system of floor sensors and responsive laser disc images played upon black and white monitors fitted with projection lenses. As the viewer enters the darkened corridor, the images are illuminated along the walls:

distant crouching or standing figures. As the sensors are triggered in front of each of these images, the forms approach to confront the viewer. As the life-size image stands before the viewer, the atmosphere is that of an awkward acquaintance. In their two-dimensional reality, the figures shuffle, avert their gaze, stare and fidget. The viewer is compelled to linger, as though waiting for the other to initiate the conversation. Overcoming this compulsion, the viewer moves away from the apparition, ready to meet the next, and a quick glance over the shoulder reveals the image walking back into the shadows, turning to meet your gaze. The experience is extraordinarily jarring, as Hill accomplishes the representation of language through an inaudible exchange, prompted by the visual *encounter*.



PHOTO: ROBERT KEZIRE

Gary Hill, *Tall Ships*, 1992. Video installation. Collection and courtesy: Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation, Toronto.

Though the exhibition demonstrates the susceptibility of time frames, there is a lingering sense of the past. The monochromatic element in the works links them to reportage: a documentation of what has already occurred, but is available for ceaseless review. Interestingly, even James Coleman's *Living and Presumed Dead*, the only polychromatic work (where vividness presumes present time) was initially represented by black and white graphic characters. There is a poignant quality shared by the works, resisting memorialization but effecting perhaps a "memento mori". Their inconclusive nature, most obvious in Coleman's *Box (Ah-hareturnabout)* and Hill's *Inasmuch As It Is Always Already Taking Place*, and their absent (Muybridge) or obscured

(Coleman's *Living and Presumed Dead*) narrative, place meaning at the brink of discovery, and the works' repetition offers a continual renewal of that exhilaration.

CLAIRE CHRISTIE

NOTE

* The Ydessa Hendeles Foundation is a privately founded non-profit organization formed in 1988 to provide a program of contemporary art exhibitions from a developing collection.