

REMOTE VIEWING

MIREILLE ASTORE

JOHN CUSSANS

JACQUELENE DRINKALL

NATE LARSON & MARNI SHINDELMAN

CURATED BY CLAIRE TAYLOR

11 FEBRUARY - 6 MARCH 2010

REMOTE VIEWING

There is an extent to which we are increasingly becoming remote viewers: surfing the net; watching the TV, news and sports; and often emailing, texting or telephoning people instead of meeting up with them. While there is nothing new about mass entertainment and correspondence, it is arguable that many of the technologies developed with the intention of keeping us more connected with each other make us feel ever more isolated, alienated, passive and remote.

Remote viewing, in its specific usage, is a kind of clairvoyance: the purported ability to report on remote events, interactions, things, etc. that have never been seen or known directly. It is a particular way of bridging or collapsing distance, specifying significance or meaning from a seemingly unlimited field of competing information in the passing present. This offers a model of artistic practice—it is an artist's ability to show us what we cannot already clearly see that we highly value; they invite us, the audience, to participate in their vision. Perhaps this also offers a strategy for resisting something of the passivity of generic remote viewing as well.

The artists in this exhibition articulate how our view is always tied to where we are looking from—whether these are cultural, ideological or political perspectives—and explore different ways of penetrating the distances that are simultaneously produced, collapsed and perpetuated by mass media technologies and the hegonomies they support. In varying ways they examine limits, failures and slippages of communication and attempt to reconnect with others and themselves.



MIREILLE ASTORE

Mireille Astore's performance/video *Efface: Death Becomes Her* draws the viewer through a series of still images of bushland punctuated by close ups of a barbed wire fence and a body within this landscape. Wrapped in plastic, this body appears dead. Whilst she does not make it explicit in the work, the artist refers in interview to images she had seen of hundreds of bodybags left out in the open during the heaviest bombing periods of the 2006 Israeli incursion in Lebanon. These contained retrieved bodies that could not be buried until it was less dangerous. I had thought that Astore had encountered these images through TV footage, however, very little news was coming from Lebanon through the international media agencies at that time and she had in fact seen the images on friends' blogs. Rather than her experience being framed by the perspective of the mainstream media, the artist's experience was from reading intimate accounts of friends who had witnessed these events. These types of internet forums provide an insight into perspectives significantly under-represented in Western media. Astore notes that mobile phone footage posted on blogs also enabled news of the recent Iranian protests to be shared and by-pass state censorship. In *Efface* the body seen in the frame is the artist's own and the performance is in part a melancholic act of solidarity with civilians in her homeland, Lebanon, and an attempt to reconcile the process of mourning given her physical separation from there. Enacting the performance within an Australian landscape is a process of "bringing home"—to her new home—her experience of mourning, which cannot be articulated fully within the context of either those who experienced the violence first hand in Lebanon or the context of the general media audience outside of the Lebanese community. It also refers to the personal histories and connections that are effaced when you migrate. Many of the images in the video are beautiful details of Australian bush flora. The performance in this location draws a tension between ways in which nature, landscape and the body—particularly the female body—have been represented in European traditions of painting and the inadequacy of Arcadian conventions to represent the Australian bush, which nevertheless persisted in early Colonial painting. This superimposition of cultural conventions and representation is all the more interesting in the context of what Melody Willis describes as "a remnant Colonial mythology of the Australian bush as strange and malevolent," which is bound up with a "tension between an insistent, imported European culture and our anxieties about theft and ownership of land." The recognisability of the distinctly Australian landscape and the repetition of the image of the fence—the only image repeated in the piece—point to the work being a response to two very different historical claims to ownership of land: exploring something of not only the territorial violence that Astore fled but that which created modern Australia as a place where she could flee to. In this way, the performance is a way of marking histories that have been largely effaced by dominant cultural perspectives.



JOHN CUSSANS

Invisible Mirrors is a film John Cussans made during the Ghetto Biennale in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, December 2009, which explores Cussans' interest in how the mythology of Vodou and Haitian culture has been "encountered and distorted in the colonial imagination, popular culture and mass media." Running throughout the film is the narration of Reginald Jean François. The film revolves around the recurrence of the symbolic significance of the pig in Haiti, rooted in the oral histories of the ritual sacrifice of a pig in the infamous 1791 Bois Caiman ceremony, which is widely attributed as when the leaders of the slave rebellion committed themselves to fight for Liberty. The revolution that had started with the Bois Caiman ceremony in 1791 continued until 1804 with the declaration of Haiti as a free republic, the "first post-colonial black-led independent nation in the world". France and other Colonial powers refused to recognize the sovereignty of the nation, cease hostilities or trade with it, further crippling the already decimated economy from the years of war. In 1825 an agreement was reached for former French slaveholders to be paid reparations for their loss of property (defined as land and slaves) and estimated future income from it—the historical source of Haiti's national debt, which has continued to undermine Haiti's self-determination. The film explores the legacy of this in more recent conflict between Western and Haitian interests, in particular instances of interference in Haiti by the US and UN Forces. Reginald describes how after outbreaks of swine flu in Haitian pigs in the 1970s, the Haitian government bowed to US pressure to slaughter the pig population to protect the regional industry. They were replaced with introduced breeds that were highly susceptible to disease in comparison to the pigs adapted to the climate and conditions and were reliant on expensive US-patented medicines. This was thought of as not only an attempt to steal a major food source and resented for creating a cycle of dependency but exacerbated rural poverty and was perceived as an exercise of Western power or *White magic*. The power relations that determine racial and economic difference are further articulated by Reginald in terms of different types of knowledge: *Black magic* aligned with spiritual knowledge and *White magic* with technological knowledge. The first main section of the film is footage shot in a car—a journey to see a replica of the Florentine Boar in the Plaza Italia, Port-au-Prince—with glimpses of the city visible through the windscreen and rear view mirrors, but neither the narrator nor interviewer clearly visible. The second part of the film is out in the open and Reginald speaks in front of and to the camera. He describes how during the 2004 UN intervention in Haiti a number of UN troops conducted a ceremony on the Florentine Boar sculpture and points out the markings they left on it: a number of crosses on the main body and marks around the legs. This is not defacement of a sculpture but described as a "ritualistic binding" of the national symbol of freedom and irreconcilable with the UN mandate to restore public order following the US-backed ousting of the democratically elected Jean-Bertrand Aristide—the president who had been seeking the repayment of the reparations paid to France, in order to redress Haiti's national debt. Towards the end of the film a blind man playing a recorder/flute starts to circle the sculpture. Cussans' film directs us to the fact that to-date justice for Haiti has been far from blind.



JACQUELENE DRINKALL

Jacqueline Drinkall situates her practice as “illuminating unusual forms of belief and the cult-like legacy of art, society and contemporary culture and counter-culture and points to how experiences of telepathy occur within liminality, border experiences and extremism of all cultures”. She frequently utilizes parapsychological processes in her work as a vehicle for exploring our desire to find other means of communication. In this exhibition is her installation *Psychic Scott on the Telephone with Duchamp*, comprised of an oversized table, which dominates the space, and a number of old-fashioned telephone handles suspended by their wires from holes in the table top. The assembly of suspended telephones appear inert, like many of the artist’s pieces woven from telecommunications wire, neither receiving nor transmitting, but as if waiting to be activated. Through one of the earpieces, however, there is a recording of a session the artist commissioned with a professional medium “to contact Duchamp” audible. Throughout a lot of this soundtrack there is an irritating scratching audible over his narration—this is the psychic drawing on a piece of wood making it difficult to hear his voice at times or fully concentrate on what he is saying. Whilst the drawings are not part of this exhibition, they leave their mark through the audio, frustrating the listener’s attempt to listen if, that is, they have picked up the receiver and put it to their ear. Much of the artist’s work has combined performance processes of direct and indirect communication with the incorporation of material and installation elements from communications devices we are familiar with in the everyday—and increasingly take for granted. Whilst many people consider themselves skilled end-users of such devices, very few have any knowledge of the workings of the technology—the engineering and programming—inside the black box. With the incompatibility of successive platforms, the shift away from physical storage archives to digital archives, and the increasing speed with which operating systems are superseded, the knowledge of how these technologies work is becoming more specialized and less accessible. The phones in this installation are old analogue ones, which do not require power to channel an audio signal. The distance with which we already look at these out-dated devices, begs the question: how many current electronics might be unrecognizable artefacts to archeologists in the future, especially, for example, once the battery runs out or one component fails? What might be the Rosetta Stone for software and data encryption down the track? In this respect, Drinkall’s work signals how fetishized many of these tools have become and yet how quickly we not only adopt but become reliant on new technologies.



NATE LARSON+ MARNI SHINDELMAN

Nate Larson + Marni Shindelman have been working in collaboration since 2007. Their work largely explores the intersection of public and private communication. In this exhibition are six prints from the *Geolocation* series. In this ongoing project Larson + Shindelman follow strangers' posts on *Twitter*: "We imagine ourselves as virtual flâneurs, exploring cities 140 characters at a time through the lives of others. Sometimes we follow these strangers for a day and other times for months, following the ups and downs of their posts." Embedded in each *Tweet* is a geotag giving the GPS coordinates of the user at the time the message was sent. Larson + Shindelman follow not only the messages but these GPS coordinates too, taking photographs of the location from which the message was sent. These images are then paired with the original text in the final prints. Removing these messages from their online context reveals how the medium is at one and the same time intimate, banal and very public. Larson + Shindelman's process also reveals other contradictions that are emerging in the electronic information age. Whilst the expectation of any developments in communications technologies is that they will make communication easier and link more communities and individuals, Larson + Shindelman assert that the opposite is often the case. In particular, they are interested in how so-called hyper-connectivity can potentially increase loneliness and anxiety and note "[w]hile it is possible to be in contact across large distances, people report to be increasingly unhappy." Their works seek out some of the ways in which these technologies are appropriated and exploited for very different uses to that originally intended by the developers, backers and marketers. The *Geolocation* series though has a very interesting way of removing and reinstating context for the selected messages. This process of removal highlights messages that are often written as correspondence or as if they are part of a dialogue, which in fact appear to a forum. These messages are posted for any subscriber to see. Whilst some of those may also be participants, there can be many unknown observers. From a cacophony of monologues, Larson + Shindelman chase a few and chose to follow them outside of their context in the virtual social field and bring them back to a point of origin in the material world and a particular locality. The time, however, has passed and the messengers remain anonymous. In all of the photographs the most striking thing is the absence of people—there is only the occasional glimpse of a figure escaping the frame.

days like today i really miss working outdoors.

WORKS IN EXHIBITION

Front space:

1. Jacqueline Drinkall, *Psychic Scott on the Phone to Duchamp*, 2003
Pine, hardware, phone, audio documentation (of a psychic contacting Marcel Duchamp), 240 x 215 x 120 cm.

2. Nate Larson + Marni Shindelman, from the *Geolocation* project, 2009–2010.
From left to right:

Bill Gates, 2009
Days Like Today, 2009
Household Chores, 2009
Kissed While Sick, 2009
Morally and Ethically, 2009
Sneaking Suspicion, 2009

First edition prints are Digital C-Prints 55 x 75 cm framed with spacer in hardwood frames.

Second edition prints are Archival Pigment Inkjet prints, 30 x 45 cm on 32.5 x 47.5 cm paper, and framed 50 x 60 cm window-matted with museum board.

Exhibition prints 30.7 x 41.9 cm ea.

3. John Cussans, *Invisible Mirrors*, 2009–2010
Digital video, 16 mins/48 minute loop.
Footage shot during the 2009 Ghetto Biennale, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, with narration by Reginald Jean François.

Back space:

4. Mireille Astore, *Efface: Death Becomes Her*, 2007
Digital video, 5 mins.
Commissioned for the 2007 Sharjah Biennale, United Arab Emirates and made with the assistance of the Bundanon Trust. Courtesy of Conny Dieztschold's Multiple Box.

BIOGRAPHIES

Mireille Astore (Australia/Lebanon) is an artist and writer. She has been publishing, exhibiting and performing her works in Australia, Europe, the Middle East and the Americas. She has a PhD in Contemporary Arts (University of Western Sydney, 2007) and is a sessional lecturer at Sydney College of the Arts and Macquarie University.

John Cussans is a London-based artist and writer. He is theory coordinator of the Masters programs at Chelsea College of Art and received his PhD from the Royal College of Art in 1995.

Jacqueline Drinkall is an artist and theorist and holds a PhD in Art History from COFA, Sydney. She currently lives and works in Far North Queensland, where she is a Lecturer in the School of Creative Arts, James Cook University.

Nate Larson is a Baltimore-based artist and a member of the full-time faculty at the Maryland Institute College of Art. He received his MFA from the Ohio State University.

Marni Shindelman is associate professor of art and an associate of the Susan B. Anthony Institute for Gender and Women's Studies at the University of Rochester. She received her MFA from the University of Florida.

Claire Taylor is a Sydney-based curator, originally from the UK. She holds a Joint Honours BA in Art History & Fine Art from Camberwell College, and a MA in Fine Art from Central Saint Martins College in London.

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Astore, Mireille
Cussans, John
Drinkall, Jacqueline
Larson, Nate
Shindelman, Marni

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Many thanks to Lisa Jones, Dot and Pete Drinkall, Rachel Scott and PJ.

Throughout the exhibition donations can be made at the gallery for the Australian Red Cross, proceeds will go towards their Haiti Earthquake Appeal 2010.

John Cussans has also posted information on <http://codeless88.wordpress.com/> about Haitian-run community organisations with details for how to donate to them directly to make sure the funds get to the right places. The Haiti Support Group is highly recommended <http://haitisupport.gn.apc.org/>

Gallery hours
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