

## Archeology of Cinema at Vox Populi

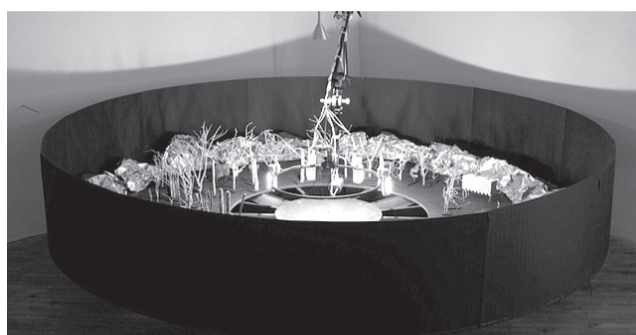
Amongst the potpourri of assorted artistic attempts at innovation, hip euphoria, bar-style virility—as well as the subtle humorous traces and small instances of refreshing displacement in the corners of its back rooms—, two pieces resonate in the most recent exhibit at Vox Populi. Intriguing undercurrents curiously link them together as differing attempts to return to the nascent state of cinema in an archeological exploration of the relationship between nature and culture.



Hiraki Sawa's *Eight Minutes* presents the viewer with a series of vignettes juxtaposing serene, abandoned domestic spaces with the uncanny appearance of miniature instances of the natural world: shrubs and trees that act as the decor for a persistent parade of tiny goats. This contrast between nature and culture exhibits the shrunken traces of vegetable and animal life encroaching on the aseptic spaces of household appliances as the domestic is oddly re-colonized by an organic world of feral goats and traces of their natural milieu. Indeed, the domestic spaces themselves are transformed into microcosmic ecosystems haunted by the constant migration of animals headed to an unknown destination. These mesmerizing black and white *défilés* create a more or less intoxicating phantasmagoria as the untamed forces of nature transfigure the intimate corners of civilization into an aquarium of natural life. The surreal change in spatial scale and apparent critique of the artificiality of culture recall Luis Buñuel's magisterial reconfigurations of space-time and livid critique of the discontents of civilization in *Un chien andalou* (1929) and *L'âge d'or* (1930). Yet, the precise orientation of Sawa's practice remains—perhaps charmingly—unclear. His resuscitation of surrealist motifs and preoccupations do not appear to bring with it the critique of repressive society found in Buñuel and Dali, and yet he does seem to be commenting—at least abstractly—on the exclusion of nature from civilization and the former's power of “re-possession.” As the artist's work continues to evolve, the precise nature of this relationship will hopefully be given the same crisp clarity of some of his images. In addition to echoing early cinematic experiments, *Eight Minutes* also recycles Eadweard Muybridge's pre-cinematic studies of movement that were so important for the development of film. The near constant stability of the camera and frame, animated by the ambulatory movements of migration, successfully resuscitates the magical power of film to reproduce a four-dimensional reality by adding time to the photographic image (thereby taking what André Bazin once called the “mummy complex” to the point of embalming time itself). However, the appearance of goats as the animal of choice is left lingering and undetermined. Is this simply to resist what early members of the Frankfurt School would have called the rampant rationalization of civilization? Is it due to the symbolic quality of goats as diabolical animals? Is this a subtle reference to the children's book, *My Pet Goat* (which George W. Bush happened to be reading with an elementary school class when he was informed that an airplane had hit the World Trade Center)? There are many insightful moments, captivating images and a crisp sense of refinement in *Eight Minutes*, but there are also undetermined

elements that leave the spectator wondering if they were intentional, or if the project could migrate to yet a deeper level of insightful production.

Brent Wahl's *Arrivals and Departures* also invites the spectator to return to the nascent state of cinema in order to explore the relationship between nature and culture. His slowly rotating quarter cylinder is a partial recreation of a Zoëtrope, a mechanism often fore-grounded as an important predecessor to film. However, Wahl's Zoëtrope is inhabited by a three-dimensional assortment of aluminum foil forms (including barracks, miniature trees and Le Corbusier's famous vision of communal living), and is



overseen by a surveillance camera that projects images of the tiny tinsel town and landscape on the opposite wall to the soundtrack of tropical birds and distant battle. Weaving together architecture, sculpture, sound montage, video art and cinema in a compelling composition of media, Wahl's piece calls to mind the work of Alain Fleischer, although it lacks the visual richness of the latter's saturated environments. Like Fleischer, he also adds to his installation an implicit philosophical narrative by partially mirroring the story of Plato's Cave (in which prisoners in a dark cavern watch the projection of shadowy images whose origin they cannot see, and which they come to mistake for reality). His skillful orchestration of diverse media suggests a circular History (the turns of the Zoëtrope) marked by a repetitive battle between the violent forces of humanity (military bunkers, the sound of battle) and the bucolic qualities of forests and tropical birds. Le Corbusier's attempt to architecturally harmonize the life-world of human beings appears to interrupt this strong opposition and suggest one of two things:

- either art can intervene to diffuse the incendiary relationship between the violence of humanity and the peaceful serenity of the natural world
- or art can not intervene successfully and Le Corbusier's project—with its reputed failure—confirms this inability.

It is unclear where the artist stands on this issue. It is worth noting, moreover, that the representation of the natural world is itself artificially produced out of glitter and recordings, suggesting that perhaps nature is always already colonized by the manipulative powers of homo sapiens, and that the pastoral narrative of a possible escape from civilization is an idyllic myth tantamount to the images of Plato's Cave. Moreover, since the source of these images is presented to the spectator (unlike Plato's prisoners), it is perhaps the case (Wahl does not give us enough to know with certainty) that the installation is ultimately suggesting that it is the repetitive loop of imaginary, artificial forms—i.e. our cultural inculcation through the repetition of imaginary narratives—that create our vision of History as a simple battle between nature and civilization.

This is not insipid work. Archeologically exploring pre-cinematic experiments to draw out the threads of the complex relationship between nature and culture, both of these pieces show the potential of artists capable of captivating the spectator and engaging the viewer both aesthetically and intellectually. They illustrate the extent to which the archeological reinvention of the past can paradoxically be one of the most productive ways for moving into the future.

- Theodore Tucker