The city of cinema is woven into a tapestry of raw aesthetic and political force at the hands of Pat O’Neill in Horizontal Boundaries (2008), currently on view at Screening (located in Vox Populi). O’Neill presents a field of visual and auditory confrontations in which a multi-layered soundtrack is delicately woven into a landscape of rhythmic, superimposed imagery to create a dense aesthetic fabric that is as captivating and mesmerizing as it is thought provoking.

The incessant imprint of the individual photogram is the most visible horizontal boundary in the video, the border of the singular image that is stitched into the temporal continuity of a film. This reflexive strategy of highlighting the constitutive elements of the medium has, at times, become a tiresomely weak ‘modernist’ reflex. However, at the hands of O’Neill, it serves as a syncopated reference point grounding a complex sensory rumination on dividing lines, fronts and boundaries. The horizontal horizon of the photogram is seconded by the boundary between the image tracks that are lain over one another, producing a depth to the imagery as superimposed visions bleed into unique constellations of ‘median images.’ The frontiers of sight and sound function as a third series of horizons that are repeatedly crossed and re-crossed. Indeed, Pat O’Neill and George Lois mediate on the dividing lines and tensions between positive and negative, light and dark, up and down, vertical and horizontal, inside and outside...

This extraordinary formal complexity of writing with sound and composing with images avoids the ocular driven naïve aestheticism. To begin with, the video itself carries with it the dull shadow of the film industry that haunts the city serving as its setting. The soundtrack contains the voices of apparent figures from film noir or detective stories. A terrified woman on the telephone, who also appears in O’Neill’s masterful and much more explicit Troublemaker in the Image (1995), is reminiscent of the mid-century heroines of celluloid. The horizontal boundaries of the photogram, constantly reframing Los Angeles, are thus meant to create a productive parallax between the constructed images of the city of cinema and counterpoint images that destabilize the frames of the industry, that unstick the comforting order of narrative.

Much more interesting than this now well-worn trope of ‘discontinuity editing,’ which always runs the risk of reifying a stale opposition between the industry and its ‘other,’ is the way in which the formal boundaries worked on in the film are intertwined with a series of thematic borders. The frontier between nature and civilization is perhaps the central limit that O’Neill works on as he juxtaposes forests, mountains and oceans to the concrete jungle of the cityscape with its gas and oil refineries. At times, he seems to foreground the austere ‘natural’ beauty of L.A. by night. At other times, he stages the awesome power of nature against the frail constructs of man. At still other times, he appears to simply juxtapose the destitute ecosystem of ‘humanity’ to the idyllic world of nature. Rather than reifying borders, he situates himself in the ambiguous meeting ground between man and world, as if he were one of the anonymous figures on the beach where people, stripped of most of their civilizational accoutrements, drift back into the primordial soup from which they came.

The rhythmic gestures of a Latino selling sneakers similarly stage, at one level, the stark political boundaries between citizens and immigrants. At the same time, his integration into the communal fabric of the city suggests that this lone individual character (the only one in the sea of anonymous figures populating the video) is part of the lifeblood of Los Angeles. Yet, this apparent integration is held in tension by the background, which seems to suggest that the price of integration is a new understanding of ‘freedom’: the freedom to sell cheap shoes in the street... Like the juxtaposition between war and suburban tranquility (or leisurely beaches), O’Neill is not simply inscribing a borderline. Just as the horizon of the photogram is repeatedly crossed and re-crossed in the video itself, the artist traverses and re-traverses socio-political frontiers in order to reveal their complexity.

Fortunately for those whose gene pool has not arbitrarily predestined them to stardom in a world where putting a ball through a hoop is often more important than putting a meal on a plate, there are an increasing number of options. With a few regular shots of steroids (or perhaps genetic engineering in the very near future), you can sacrifice the size of your scrotum for larger biceps if you’re a man, or sacrifice your relatively hairless physique for ripped abs if you’re a woman. Who can forget how the ‘slowpoke’ Ben Johnson tore the gold medal away from Carl Lewis in the 1988 Olympics (and broke the world record) with the help of a little extra juice? And yet, according to the film Bigger, Stronger, Faster, Carl Lewis was just as juiced as Ben Johnson. The only difference was—and this is where politics comes back in—the American administration went to bat for Carl to make sure that the drug tests were overlooked. So politics is still definitely involved in athletics, but it’s the politics of sponsorship and nationalism, the politics of big money and worldwide competition. The Olympic games in Vancouver were a clear illustration of this as native lands were usurped to build sports arenas and any protesters were systematically sidelined. The contrast between the Olympic village and the destitute squallor of the Downtown Eastside—Canada’s poorest postal code and the region with the highest HIV infection rate in North America—should have recalled the true logic of competition operative in the sports complex.

Fortunately this video does not resolve itself in favor of a politics of ambiguity pride itself on the trend-setting, stultifying concepts of indistinction, indiscernability, etc. On the contrary, O’Neill’s attempt to problematize borders is an invitation to think and rethink the horizons structuring our world, a unique and passionate summons to reconsider the aesthetic, ontological, social and political limits of our ‘here and now.’

- Theodore Tucker

Apolitical National Pastimes

In the main, the sports complex of American culture functions as an apolitizing mechanism that funnels people’s affective, intellectual and physical energies into the arbitrary confines of a playing field. It is not only that the forces of collective investment