

# ARTWRIT

## 11. JODY ZELLEN: NOTES ON MULTI-CHANNEL/SCREEN WORK

Spring has brought warm as well as cold weather to Manhattan and with the change in air there has been a change in attitude toward digital media. The presentation of digital works ebbs and flows: It is present and then conspicuously absent from the commercial galleries that dot Manhattan. This spring there have been numerous exhibitions that have invited viewers to sit and look and listen to communications from multiple screens. The awkwardness of walking into the middle of a single screen projection is compounded when entering a space that presents many. Rather than dwell on the pros and cons of scheduled time and a cinema-like setting in a gallery, as in Eve Sussman's curated film series at Winkelman Gallery, it is the nature of the fragmented narrative that this essay is concerned with. It is curious to note that almost all of the multi-screen works on view are political in nature, i.e. content driven works which begs the questions: Why fragment the narrative across multiple screens if there is meaning to be gleaned from the viewing of the work? and How can a fragmented narrative embellish content?

When imagery is split across multiple screens there is a fracturing that occurs. The advent of two three or more simultaneous projections becomes a distraction for the viewer as they often do not know where to look and when to look. Amongst the many multi-screen works on view in New York museums and galleries this spring included: Barbara Kruger "The Globe Shrinks" at Mary Boone Gallery (March 27 - May 1); Adrian Paci "Gestures" at Peter Blum Chelsea (April 2 - May 15); Michelle Dizon "Civil Society" at Cue Art Foundation (March 23 - May 12); Amar Kanwar at Marian Goodman Gallery (March 16 - April 24); "Ouroboros: The History of the World" at Ise Cultural Foundation (March 9 - April 23) and William Kentridge "Five Themes" at MOMA (Feb 24 - May 17). What ties these shows together is the fact that in all the presentations, multiple projections fill a room, requiring viewers to think about how the fragments coalesce as a whole.

Barbara Kruger is a master at choreographing the sequence of projections that fill a given space. For her installation "The Globe Shrinks" she "engages with the kindness and brutality of the everyday, the collision of declaration and doubt, the duet of pictures and words, the resonance of direct address, and the unspoken in every conversation"\* through the sequencing of floor to ceiling projections that encircle the darkened space. Viewers can sit on the benches positioned in the center and sides of the gallery but must then turn their heads or bodies to take in all the screens during the twelve minute loop. Within the projections, actors speak to the audience and to each other matter of factly, describing real-life situations where they acted badly. Intermittently, textual fragments fill the walls. The larger than life sized talking heads relate carefully scripted scenarios. A head occupies one wall, then moves to another creating a conversation across the space. Sometimes it is a monologue, other times a dialogue, otherwise a recreation of an event. Nevertheless, the experience is one of bombardment, of being talked at and through. Kruger syncopates the fragments with the utmost care, allowing the dark moments in between to resonate. In Kruger's signature style, the in-betweens are filled with phrases like "Blame it; Buy it; Kiss it; Fear it; Believe it; Love it; Blind it; Temp it; Share it" They flash on the walls, guiding the

interpretation of the work. Kruger's installation is purposely fragmentary. She understands the attention span of her audience and creates a looping sequence that can be entered and exited at any point. There is no beginning, middle or end. The floor to ceiling projections engulf the viewer and immerse them in the narrative for however long they choose to stay. The audience is watched almost involuntarily as if being assaulted by the projections and the text. This strategy, often employed by Kruger is consistent with her desire to bombard the viewer.

How a narrative can be read across numerous screens becomes something of a challenge. With simultaneous projections, one often does not know how to look or in what order to watch the videos. When watching the eight screens in Amar Kanwar's "The Lightning Testimonies," it becomes necessary to move from seat to seat around the room in order to take in all the screens. One can watch one video for a period of time, or through its sequence, then move to another, but more often than not, one's eyes drift from one screen to another. In works like this, trying to engage with the content of the narrative(s) requires finding a point of entry: Without one it is impossible to fully grasp the project's integrity. Sometimes this is precisely the point of the work, but in "The Lightning Testimonies," the combination of fragments is meant to give meaning to the greater whole. Kanwar's haunting work relates the experiences of female victims of sexual violence. Kanwar collected these women's stories during his travels through India and Bangladesh weaving them into factual accounts as well as into poetic meditations. The work is about trauma and the power of the will to move on, but not to forget. When the work was first shown in Documenta 12 it was at once praised and criticized, less for the subject matter than the commitment required from the viewer. Presented in a small claustrophobic space requiring more than 32 minutes of viewing time, the fragmented presentation of what was, for the most part, a documentary left many viewers frustrated because they wanted to glean the meaning rather than indulge in its aesthetic value. In Kanwar's new work at the Marian Goodman Gallery, he further fragments his narrative creating an installation that plays across 19 small screens. The required hours of viewing becomes less the point than taking in what becomes a moving collage. The display that holds the works takes precedent over the content. In an installation of moving images, especially in one presented as a montage, it is never assumed that the viewer will actually watch all the videos from beginning to end. If this is the case, then what is the artist's intention and when is enough, enough to understand the work. In Kanwar's "The Torn First Pages," it is virtually impossible to see the entire work from beginning to end, so one comes to rely on the textual description. While the installation is stunning, does it do a disservice to the content of the work?

In an exhibition such as Adrian Paci's "Gesture," the multi-screen project is an element within the larger context of the exhibition. Although "Last Gestures" can stand alone, it is informed by the other works on view. "Last Gestures -- a rear projected 4-channel video installation -- shows four different scenes of the Albanian wedding ritual in which the bride spends the last moments with her own family before she leaves to start her new life. Unaccustomed to the presence of a video camera, the family positions themselves as if for a photograph, allowing the camera to capture some unintentionally tender and awkward moments."\* If shot as a single channel work the simultaneity of the gestures and expressions would be lost. This work, because of its short duration can be seen again and again, more nuanced with each viewing. Each of the four screens is suspended from the ceiling and is illuminated by a rear screen projection. The four screens work in concert with each other, presenting a slightly different point of view or a shifted moment of a particular event observed in real time but presented in slow motion.

Although Michelle Dizon's triptych, "Civil Society," loops indefinitely, it in fact has a beginning, middle and end. The elegantly choreographed piece flows between three distinct screens allowing the action to unfold individually as well as collectively. "Civil Society" is a meditation on urban violence, using text and images that depict the global crisis. Beginning with the LA Rodney King beatings in 1992 and moving to the unrest in Paris in 2005, Dizon creates a work that speaks about displacement and loss, drawing from both documentary and experimental film traditions. The use of the triptych allows her to not only show three scenarios at once, but also to take advantage of the larger wide screen format. The pacing and use of projected texts guides the journey of unrest. The use of voice over directs the narrative, but it is the beauty of Dizon's imagery that, while depicting images of violence, carefully avoids the trap of aestheticizing it. Meant to be watched in its entirety, the single bench positioned in front of the screens asks the viewer to commit to its 18-minute duration rather than floating in and out of fragments.

In addition to seeing multi-screen works in galleries, the Museum of Modern Art's season was full of projected imagery. Was it coincidental that Joan Jonas had an exhibition at MoMA, Location One and Yvonne Lambert simultaneously; and that her work was on view at MoMA concurrent with William Kentridge and Marina Abramovic? Jonas creates installations that combine numerous projections, monitors, objects and drawings that surround viewers and immerse them in her world. Her's is a holistic vision where different media are digested by the viewer to form a

strong, unified impression. Kentridge creates single channel as well as multi-channel works that become immersive environments. In his MoMA exhibition, audiences could see the works chronologically and trace how the ideas evolved to become installations that encompass multiple projections. In works like "7 Fragments for Georges Méliès" the action unfolds across seven screens. How to view the installation becomes a question. Is it necessary to watch each projection all the way through or does it suffice to wander from one moving image to another? Because Kentridge's visuals are so seductive, it is easy to get lost in his installations and relish in their surface quality rather than deal with their subject matter.

Art viewing that requires a time commitment is often rebuked by audiences who are used to taking in a wall full of painting a few seconds at a time. Installation and video artists who fragment their works perhaps are referencing the traditional mode of art presentation, where one looks at multiple works in a space, each for an indeterminate amount of time. More often than not, when greeted by a darkened space, a viewer will choose not to engage with the work. The ubiquity and instant availability (online or elsewhere) of digital media has made it so that viewers can choose not to fully encounter this kind of work, since it can be reproduced on demand in the comfort of the viewer's own home. In this sense, the proverbial art object, in its materiality and physical presence, demands attention in the moment and makes for an encounter that cannot be reproduced elsewhere or at any other time. Plurality of media, then, as in multi-screen work cannot be reproduced on demand and to regard these works as installation likens them to a traditional art object and reinforces the need for these to be experienced in situ and in the moment.

\* from gallery press release.



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