Machines Dreams & Fabulations: on Time After Time & The Wild Ones

New practices and discourses emerging since the 1990s have focused on the implications of some significant technological shifts in image culture. An increasing predominance of photographs made by machines and intended primarily as tools in technical processes has led to the designation 'operational image'.[1] The implications include changes in how subjects (individuals, or citizens) are viewed, for instance by governments, corporations, and the military. Similarly, the ever-improving resolution of digital images and the acceleration of their distribution gives rise to complex and far-reaching effects. Debates such as those inaugurated by Harun Farocki, and Hito Steyerl more recently, have concentrated on paradoxes where these new technologies and their cultural effects are concerned. On the one hand, the technologies promote the interests of those funding the developments, and on the other hand the changes come with potentials, new ways of democratising image-making practices, new circuits of exchange, and new ways of critiquing power.[2]

Such themes are invoked by the two series of Nick Berkeley's photographs in this current exhibition. *Time After Time*, re-exhibited here for the first time in more than two decades, involves the discovery and development of an archive of images made using a specialised camera designed in the early 20th Century to adjudicate on sports events. The series enacts a fundamental displacement, taking the photographs produced by the so-called 'Split-scan camera' and allowing them to be considered in isolation from the task for which they were originally intended. The images are, in some respects, puzzling. At the same time, because the camera technology is a hybrid, incorporating both common and less common mechanisms, the images draw attention to the facility we have as viewers of photographic information, to the automatic nature of that facility, and to the threat that we can feel when our expectations are not met.

[1] For an account, see Paglan, T. 'Operational Images', e-flux issue No. 59, available at https://www.e-flux.com/journal/59/61130/operational-images/ [accessed 22/09/2022]
[2] Steyerl, H. 'In Defence of the Poor Image', e-flux Journal issue No. 10, available at https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/ [accessed 22/09/2022]

The Wild Ones is, likewise, produced from an archive of 'found' images, in this case in the public realm of YouTube. It is a series exploring the qualities of images that might be passed over too quickly due to our habits, based on what we understand as appropriate to different image platforms. The photographs in the series evoke Steyerl's frame of thinking, what she refers to as the 'class society of image'.[3] At the privileged end of the scale, images within this system of classification have their value guaranteed by exclusive networks of exchange. They resist acts of modification, they tend to consolidate the identity of their viewing public, and they retain the aura of an original. At the less privileged end we find images that seem to invite modifications, that project an aura not of the original but—if such a thing is possible—an aura of the copy. Poor images give rise to new and "anonymous global networks" and imply new forms politics, although none of these potentials are ever guaranteed.[4]

A certain consistency is found across both of Berkeley's projects in the level of care taken with decisions about how his images should be printed and presented. In that respect, the works in the exhibition fall within a modern tradition of representation prioritising close attention and thoughtful viewing facilitated by the peculiar qualities of museum and exhibition space. The viewer's encounter with the image is a form of contemplative work commensurate with other cultural inquiries such as those progressed in different ways by philosophers and scientists. At the same time, contrary qualities of the images persist despite the transformations through which they have been put. A certain functionalism is evident in the *Time After Time* images, which may be felt as at odds with the implied poetics of their presentation. A marginal quality in *The Wild Ones* comes back to interrogate the perfection of the chosen print format.

The slit-scan negatives, which form the basis of *Time After Time*, were discovered by the artist unexpectedly while undertaking an editorial commission on the racing industry. Recognising that they were printable despite never having been intended for print, the artist was led to ask what kind of potential such reproductions might have. The camera has no shutter mechanism of the kind that would be found, for instance, in a cine camera, but it does use a motorised transport system to move the 35mm film

[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid.

through the camera. A narrow vertical aperture positioned behind the lens means that only the finishing line and whatever happens to cross it (horse and rider, greyhound, athlete, race officials wandering on the track) is recorded, effectively 'scanned' onto the moving film.

The images also show race details in textual form, which appear in a repeated sequence because the information is given on a rotating drum set up opposite the camera, on the other side of the track. Some photographs show an inverted image of the horses, riders, and athletes. In these cases, a mirror has been included as part of the mechanism, an addition to the technology made a decade or so after the first systems were built to give race adjudicators more visual information about the relative relations of bodies in proximity crossing the finishing line.[5]

Despite the complexity and curiosity of the slit-scan camera, its images, as least on first viewing, will tend to be read like those produced by more conventional cameras. The images appear, for instance, to present a figure against a background, such that both figure and ground comprise a composition of the kind commonly seen through a viewfinder, with all the elements captured together, in the same fraction of a second. The sharpness of the figures in these pictures might be attributed to shutter speed, the ground may be read as blurred, as if the camera had been panning with the moving object. But in fact, these elements of the slit-scan camera images are better understood as having been produced in different ways. If the moving figure appears still and in focus that's not an effect of shutter speed but because the film is moving through the camera mechanism at the same speed as, or at a speed very close to, that of the figure. Likewise, the blur of the background is in fact the same narrow portion of the scene—the finish line—recorded on the strip of film as it moves through the camera.

The printing of these images in the *Time After Time* series threw up some unusual technical difficulties on account of the negatives being up to several meters in length. Berkeley's chance meeting with Tim McMillan, another long-time researcher and exponent of innovative camera technology, led to collaborative work on this problem. As Berkeley explains, a conventional enlarger head was modified so

[5] Fenton, G. 'Who Invented the Photo Finish Camera?', available at: https://www.littleredfeather.com/who-invented-the-photo-finish-camera/ [accessed 22/09/2022]

that it could pan across the negative laid out on a curved carrier, the image then projected onto a photographic paper set up on a proportionate curve. The prints were then developed in troughs.

As should be clear from these descriptions, the slit-scan camera constructs a pictorial space differing in significant ways from the more familiar image-space of everyday camera technologies. Even while a figure/ground compositional format is maintained, anomalies in the image tell a different story. The most striking of these, the distortion of bodies heightened by the unexpected sharpness of those distortions, can be explained as due to the different speeds with which different portions of the photographed bodies are moving. An elongation means that the body part is moving more slowly than the rest, or more to the point, more slowly in relation to the moving film. A compression shows the opposite relation. Where there is no evident distortion, the speed of the body-part and the film transport speed are at their closest.

Another trap is set for the unwary viewer by the composition of the scene. The slit-scan camera images show groups of figures on a horizontal dimension, some in front, others behind, with an implied direction of travel. All these characteristics would be usual in race photographs—running bodies relating to one another through having been captured, together, at the same moment. Here, in one sense, the image does show real spatial relations; the gap between one isolated figure and another, one group of figures and another, does indicate a distance between. But just as vertical segments of one body crossing the finishing line are captured on film at incrementally different times, so isolated bodies and groups of bodies following one another on the racetrack are captured in the different moments of their crossing the same portion of space. This difference of the photographic mechanism produces subtle effects in the relations of bodies, which, due to the assumption that these scenes are captured in their entirety in one fraction of a section, are likely to be registered unconsciously before they are subject to conscious questioning. So, complications arise to unsettle any potential narrative that might be evolving between the groups of figures shown in relations to one another. Even while we read these to be images of bodies moving at speed, a simultaneous impression is had to the contrary, of slow movement, as if these characters—the athletes especially—are involved in a dance or ritual of mysterious origin. What's given is the impression of a world in which accounts don't add up.

At the same time, the anomalies are of a kind that may be intuited as realistic, even while they don't square with our common understanding of time and its representation. The images testify to an intuitively grasped fact of social relations, and they may be said to share a sympathy, too, with scientific and philosophical accounts of time which refute the modern persuasion, still widely reinforced, that both time and movement are homogeneous and uniform.

So it is that, even with a workable understanding of the images and why they appear as they do, fascination will persist. Again, perhaps this is in part because of our tendency to identify with bodies in reproduction. The confounded readability of the images makes it necessary, below the level of conscious cognition, for the viewer to bridge the evident inconsistencies, to construct an understanding of what's being seen, one that holds together, if tenuously. The fascination is a force exerted on the viewer, and one that might be read as a threat insofar as it comes from a source not usually thought to have that kind of agency—namely an inanimate photographic image. These dynamics can be thought in terms of 'fabulation', a concept more commonly encountered in literary theory, where it is used to account for why readers feel real emotions for characters known to be fictious. As John Mullarkey explains in his writing on narrative in film, fabulation is no ordinary fictionalising. It is a reflexive act of preservation, one with ancient origins, against a threat perceived on an affective rather than conscious level, and where the best or only chance of protection may be to engage the danger as if it were of a known kind.[6] Faces found in patterns of randomness—in clouds or in the leaves of trees—are everyday examples of the same phenomenon. In between the pieces of non-communicating visual data, the mind-eye fabulates what's missing, inventing an 'interlocutor' with whom (or with which) business might be done.

A similar dynamic comes into play in *The Wild Ones*. Indeed, in these works, the mechanism of fabulation may be even more apposite as an account of the viewer's response to what's felt while not being given in the image. The source archive in this case is freely available, the material can be watched, downloaded and re-edited. Indeed, Berkeley's working process has made use of all these affordances of

[6] Mullarkey, J. 'Life, Movement and the Fabulation of the Event', *Theory, culture & society*, 2007, Vol.24 (6), p.53-70.

the YouTube footage. Selection is the primary element, the string of video frames scrutinised for something uncommon that might be residing there.

If a dynamic is found in this work concerning the relationship of the so-called 'still' with a cinematic effect of movement, that would be supported by the artist's previous inquiries, which have included images in the form of short sequences of contiguous, cinematic frames, interrogating how that sequence gives rise to something we read as movement.[7] In *The Wild Ones*, as in these earlier inquiries, one suspects that the act of choosing a frame or sequence of frames to pull out of the continuum has been less a rational exercise and more like a form of divination. Such is the requirement for locating what the artist refers to as 'intermediate'. These are frames, we might speculate, in which all clear semiotic markers are compromised, where the usual speed of perception and the consequent normative judgement are thus interrupted, and where something fugitive, something usually buried by the conventions of entertainment culture, can pulled out into the light.

The photographs are produced as C-Type prints, a format with history dating back to the early 20th Century and which became more common in art practice in the 1970s before digital printing technologies were widely available. In this case, the analogue printing can be thought as another strategic displacement, the enactment of a temporal operation allowing viewers who are fully familiar with the image-effects of digital compression to look in a different way, encountering the contemporary 'poor image' as if from a vantage point in the past when the strangeness of those qualities would have been easier to see, when the images would not have been dismissed as merely impoverished.

As an aura of originality is reaffirmed in the transformation of trash data into finely produced images, a broader proposition emerges about what might be missed in images otherwise classified as lacking significance. The contemplative speed of the selection conditions the viewer's encounter, indeed, becomes the viewer's speed of viewing. Eyes settle with the darkness, with the algorithmic extrapolations, with the blur of objects, and with the awkward framing, so that whatever is lurking there might show itself, although it might be suspected that, still, what's 'seen' will be hardly recognisable.

[7] Berkeley, N. *The Women,* 1998.

The images that make up *The Wild Ones* concern intensities between bodies. They look for events, which, while being *of* the filmic continuum somehow lifts themselves out. And here, the commonalities of the different series in the exhibition become evident. Together, the works in the show speak to the curiosity that disjunction will give rise to meaning production. They explore the contemporary condition of the image in a time out of joint.