



David Claerbout, *Radio Piece (Hong Kong)*, video stills, 2015. © David Claerbout. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In my first year in college I saw the film *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (*Last Year at Marienbad*), directed by Alain Resnais. Experiencing this avant-garde film was transformative and continues to inform my perception and understanding of contemporary art. The film was like no other I had ever seen in its use of visual language and style to structure the experience of memory and break with traditional depictions of time and place. As I walked into the David Claerbout installation in 2015 at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin, Ireland, *Last Year at Marienbad* immediately came to mind. Claerbout's works manipulate and combine photography, video, sound, and digital media, requiring a sustained gaze to navigate the meticulously structured architectural space and engage the aesthetic content. Speaking with curator Tessa Giblin (now director of the Talbot Rice Gallery at the University of Edinburgh) inspired me to bring Claerbout's work to the USF Contemporary Art Museum.

CAM's galleries have been skillfully designed to allow our visitors to immerse themselves in the four projections presented in this exhibition. Anthony Palms, CAM's exhibition designer, worked directly with David Claerbout's studio in Belgium to consider the best way to present four works: *Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain*; *Radio Piece (Hong Kong)*; *Travel* and *KING (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley)*. The exhibition also includes preparatory drawings for *KING* on loan from Sean Kelly Gallery in New York that will give visitors an introduction to Claerbout's complex creative process.

I wish to acknowledge and thank art critic and curator Christian Viveros-Fauné for his insightful brochure essay, *Visible Time: On David Claerbout's Signs of Presence* and for his opening night talk, *Slow Pictures*.

Tse-Ling Uh, Bram Vandeveire, and Willem Corten from David Claerbout's studio in Belgium facilitated every aspect of the exhibition. Janine Cirincione, Debra Vilen, John Haenle at Sean Kelly Gallery in New York worked with CAM registrar Shannon Annis to arrange the loans of the videos and the *KING* drawings.

The remarkable staff of CAM function as a team to ensure that all aspects of the exhibition and related programming meet the highest professional standards for presenting contemporary art. Alexa Favata, Deputy Director, oversaw



David Claerbout, *Travel*, video still, 1996–2013. © David Claerbout. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

this process, and Don Fuller provided his technical expertise and recommended the high performance projectors required for the installations and also provided oversight for printed materials and the banner. Madeline Baker served as the graphic designer of the materials associated with the exhibition. I extend my deepest appreciation to others on the team who worked together to bring about an exhibition of this scope, including the related educational programs and special events: Kate Alboreo, Amy Allison, Alyssa Cordero, Leslie Elsasser, Peter Foe, Mark Fredricks, Eric Jonas, Vincent Kral, Will Lytch, Scott Pierce, Noel Smith, David Waterman, and Randall West, as well as students Adam Bakst, Ronika Baldwin, Natalie Bohin, Faith Gofton, Leya Ibrahim, Ashley Jablonski, and Zoe McIlwain.

We are fortunate that Margit Grieb, Professor of German and Director of the Film Studies Certificate Program, will join me for a public conversation prior to the screening of *Last Year at Marienbad* in connection with the exhibition.

I am most grateful to David Claerbout for his extraordinary talent and for allowing us to present four of his immersive projections at the USF Contemporary Art Museum.

– Margaret Miller, Director
USF Institute for Research in Art



David Claerbout, *Travel*, video still, 1996–2013. © David Claerbout. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

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Cover: David Claerbout, *KING (skin + carpet)*, 2015.
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DAVID CLAERBOUT

AUG. 21
–
OCT. 28
USF CONTEMPORARY
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VISIBLE TIME: ON DAVID CLAERBOUT'S SIGNS OF PRESENCE

By: Christian Viveros-Fauné

Time, one can imagine the artist David Claerbout saying, is a state of mind. An artist who has spent decades illustrating the duration of images, he has become best known for his eye-and-mind-bending film projections and installations. These basically stretch and compress time like a rubber band. The result of highly deliberative investigations that begin with the history of images—his work includes drawing, painting, photography, film, and computer-generated imagery (CGI)—Claerbout's pictures seek to unlock a secret inside simple human perception: the unstable nature of time.

Mining the space between direct experience and the parallel universe of picture-making technologies, Claerbout has explored frozen moments throughout his oeuvre that, in his words, establish the existence of a "third kind of material" that lives "in your head." This "material," according to Claerbout, is located somewhere between phenomena the eyes can see and occurrences the mind cannot grasp without machines. On observing this perceptual gap, the artist has conspired to make existential time visible. Like a latter-day Eadweard Muybridge, Claerbout's pictures freeze movement; yet the Belgian artist also imbues still images with glacial change—while underscoring the uncanny effects this kind of dreaminess engenders.

Trained as a draftsman, a lithographer, and a painter, Claerbout first became interested in exploring the idea of time through his investigations of painting as tableaux—a medium he has referred to fittingly as "an old kind of cinema." Those explorations were subsequently followed by the artist's study of the essential properties of still and moving images. An artist who eschews realist Newtonian physics where things occur in sequence, Claerbout has learned to craft visual riddles that take as their starting point Henri Bergson's idea of duration: inner time as experienced by individual subjects.

In the book *Visible Time*, David Green writes about Claerbout's oeuvre: "What one actually experiences or indeed what one sees in [his] work, is not the conflation of photography and film but, a conjuncture of the two mediums in which neither ever loses its specificity. We are thus faced with a phenomenon in which two different mediums co-exist and seem to simultaneously occupy the same object. The projection screen here provides a point of intersection for both the photographic and filmic image."¹ Or, to paraphrase Claerbout himself, what the artist does is more than merely make time visible—he sculpted duration.²

This is readily evident in some of Claerbout's more recent works, like the single-channel projection *King (After Alfred Wertheimer's*

1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley) (2015-2016) and the installation *Radio Piece (Hong Kong)* (2015). In the first, he eerily animates a black and white photo of a young Elvis Presley—thanks to the use of gaming technology—approaching the image from angles that would be simply impossible in a still photograph. In the second, Claerbout plays with the idea of inside and outside via sounds and images taken from what was once the notoriously overcrowded walled city of Kowloon. The point of the latter, besides creating an eye-bending tableau, is to argue, with the full force of 21st century aesthetics, that it's possible to make crowded space that is both externally physical and that exists between the ears.

Partly in an effort to ground what appear to be airy metaphysical discussions, Claerbout has also relied substantially on drawings—art making's most elementary kind of images. Though Claerbout rarely exhibits his drawings, these works have become fundamental to the artist's layered working method. Not storyboards in any conventional sense, his highly detailed sketches serve an essential stocktaking function. Rather than employing illustrations to launch sequential narratives, Claerbout's handmade images give pause to what is, at bottom, a profoundly reflective process. "Mostly made," in the artist's words, "before the completion of the work, not often after," Claerbout's drawings are composed as crucial visual meditations. Thoughts cast in the form of deliberative marks, they lend materiality to problems, insights, and solutions arising from the artist's strange mission: namely, his repeated efforts to make extended time-based works from still images.

If storyboards have a clearly streamlined industrial purpose—the form was originally developed at the Walt Disney studio in 1930—Claerbout's drawings function more like maps drafted in the heat of travel. Examples include the heavily annotated pictures the artist made while producing his celebrated work *Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain* (2013). A deceptively complex HD video animation that finds its genesis in a single JPEG of more than two dozen men sheltering beneath a highway overpass, Claerbout's elaborate installation required him to periodically cast back to first principles. The drawings resolved basic questions about the work's direction; additionally, they helped him evaluate how to "get things back together." Another question Claerbout asked himself while turning to pen and paper: "Why did I make this piece in the first place?"

For Claerbout, the act of drawing has long functioned as a concrete time-stopper, a visual and conceptual cornerstone from which to rejig the scaffolding of his highly abstracted artwork. As the artist tells it: "For *Oil Workers* I started with a simple picture from the Internet, a very small, teeny-tiny picture, and I made this entire production which is very expensive and took one full year to make. At the end of that

production, I no longer knew what I was doing. Like a forest, it overgrew out of my head, and I had to make drawings to rediscover why I did some things."³

A similar relationship emerges between Claerbout's drawings and many of his other finished installations. Consider, for instance, the five sketches Claerbout made while working on the single-channel work *Travel* (1996–2013). A video constructed entirely from CGI, *Travel* uses advanced computer technology to plot an entirely fictional journey from a nondescript park to a dark European forest to a teeming Amazon jungle to emerge, finally, into a nondescript suburban plain. Scored by relaxing synthesizer music, the artist's swooping video recalls the kind of intense but generic cinematic experience routinely encountered at IMAX theaters. The drawings,

³ Matteo Mottin, "Matteo Motin In Conversation With the Artist," *ATP Diary*, <http://atpdiary.com/exhibit/david-claerbout-palazzo-grassi/>

on the other hand, couldn't be more specific. Among other written indications, Claerbout's illustrations of ersatz natural environments specify "counter light and main light" as recurring themes, while making explicit the cathedral-like feel animating the video's swelling penultimate sequence.

Much like his increasingly sophisticated videos, David Claerbout's drawings use art's oldest technology not to arrive at the truth of perception, but to confront reality with a relentless set of questions. Among these are: What do we mean by time? Is movement an illusion? And, if time is truly held by the observer, can sequential art be made from images with no actual duration? Claerbout's films provide answers in the form of consistent conundrums, while his drawings provide practical descriptions of basic metaphysical mysteries. In this process, all of Claerbout's works function as more than mere tools—they are not merely fascinating notations of time, they are signs of presence.



David Claerbout, *Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain*, video still, 2013. © David Claerbout. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

CHECKLIST

All works by David Claerbout.

KING (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley), 2015–2016
single channel video projection, black & white, silent, HD animation
10 minutes
© David Claerbout
Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

KING (Elvis at 21), 2015
washed ink, felt pen, acrylic pen and pencil on paper
18-1/8 x 24 inches
© David Claerbout
Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

KING (Elvis Lookalike), 2015
washed ink, felt pen, acrylic pen and pencil on paper
18-1/8 x 24 inches
© David Claerbout
Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

KING (skin + carpet), 2015
washed ink, felt pen and pencil on paper
36-1/4 x 24 inches
© David Claerbout
Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

KING Drawing (Nuclear King), 2015
washed ink, felt pen, acrylic pen and pencil on paper
24 x 36-1/4 inches
© David Claerbout
Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

Oil workers (from the Shell company of Nigeria) returning home from work, caught in torrential rain, 2013
single channel video projection, HD animation, color, silent endless
© David Claerbout
Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

Radio Piece (Hong Kong), 2015
single channel video projection, color, binaural sound over headphones
11:40 minutes
in collaboration with RAY Fotografieprojekte Frankfurt/RheinMain
© David Claerbout
Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

Travel, 1996-2013
single channel video, HD animation, color, stereo sound
12 minutes
© David Claerbout
Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

ABOUT THE ARTIST

David Claerbout studied at the Nationaal Hoger Instituut voor Schone Kunsten in Antwerp from 1992 to 1995 and participated in the DAAD: Berlin Artists-in-Residence program from 2002 to 2003. Claerbout's work is included in major public collections worldwide, including: Centre Pompidou, Paris, France; Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich, Germany; Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Canada; The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis and many others. He has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions internationally, including: Kunsthalle Mainz, Mainz, Germany (2013); Secession, Vienna, Austria (2012); Tel Aviv Museum, Tel Aviv, Israel (2012); SFMOMA, San Francisco (2011); WIELS, Brussels, Belgium (2011); Museum De Pont, Tilburg, The Netherlands (2009); Centre Pompidou, Paris, France (2007); Kunstmuseum, St. Gallen, Switzerland (2008); and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands (2005). David Claerbout lives and works in Antwerp, Belgium and Berlin, Germany.



Top: David Claerbout, *KING (after Alfred Wertheimer's 1956 picture of a young man named Elvis Presley)*, video still, 2015-2016. Bottom left: *KING (Elvis Lookalike)*, 2015. Bottom right: *KING (Elvis at 21)*, 2015. © David Claerbout. Courtesy of the artist and Sean Kelly, New York

¹ David Green & Joanna Lowry (eds) *Visible Time: The Work of David Claerbout*, Brighton: Photoworks, 2004.

² A. Will Brown, "David Claerbout: I Sculpt In Duration," *Studio International*, May 12, 2016.