

THE NEW YORK TIMES

AUGUST 21, 2008

NOW YOU PERCEIVE IT, NOW YOU THINK YOU DO

by Karen Rosenberg



Tinkering with reality in “The Cinema Effect”: Part of Mungo Thomson’s “New York, New York, New York”. Credit...Lee Stalworth, courtesy of Mungo Thomson and John Connelly Presents

WASHINGTON — The revelation that part of a fireworks display seen during television coverage of the Beijing Olympics was in fact a trick of digital editing is the latest news media moment to make a riddle of “reality.” The special effects were inserted, seamlessly, into a spectacle viewed by hundreds of millions — making it a challenge to prove what actually happened.

The metaphysical fog surrounding the Beijing fireworks is underscored by “Realisms,” the second part of “The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality and the Moving Image.” The show, an exhaustive survey of film and video art, is in the final weeks of its run at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum. (Part 1, “Dreams,” which concluded in May, focused on cinema’s escapist tendencies.)

“Realisms,” organized by the Hirshhorn curators Anne Ellegood and Kristen Hileman, showcases 19 artists who find fictions lurking behind every window, door and screen.

One touchstone, heavily cited in a catalog essay by Ms. Hileman, is Peter Weir’s film “The Truman Show” (1998). In it, an insurance clerk (Jim Carrey) discovers that his entire life is being staged and directed for a television audience. Many of the works in the exhibition riff on the premise of “Truman,” but rarely do they improve on the movie.

In “Lonely Planet” (2006) the German artist Julian Rosefeldt portrays a hippie-ish Western backpacker on a trip through India. As he moves through a series of clichéd sequences, including a frenetic Bollywood-inspired dance number, the camera periodically pulls back to reveal spotlights, dressing rooms and other filmmaking necessities. “Lonely Planet” advances the unsettling idea that all tourism is fiction.

Likewise the deserted blocks pictured in “New York, New York, New York,” Mungo Thomson’s four-screen projection, are revealed to be Hollywood sets. A “Spring Street” subway entrance dead-ends at the bottom of the stairs, chained-up bicycles keep their wheels, and palm trees shade the fire escapes. Are these streetscapes any less “real” than those in, say, the “Sex and the City” movie (which was filmed, with much fanfare, on location)?

In a host of other works characters elude labels of “true” or “false” — bringing to mind YouTube personalities like the home-schooled teenager Lonelygirl15 and the jilted spouse Tricia Walsh-Smith. In Ian Charlesworth’s engrossing video “John,” a working-class boy from Northern Ireland auditions to play his own “type.” Asked to draw upon personal experiences — a fight with a girlfriend, a confrontation with a drunken parent — he slips between polite deference and adrenaline-fueled rage with an alarming facility.

The young video artist Kerry Tribe hired actors to impersonate her in “Double,” a short autobiographical piece. The five women, chosen for their superficial resemblance to Ms. Tribe, make improvised statements based on their conversations with her. Their acting abilities (and levels of flakiness) vary widely, but a fuzzy picture of Ms. Tribe gradually emerges.

Self-portraiture takes a deliciously tawdry turn in a video by Francesco Vezzoli, in which his career follows the arc of an “E! True Hollywood Story.” Mr. Vezzoli, the artist behind the scandalous “Trailer for a Remake of Gore Vidal’s ‘Caligula,’ ” nails the format — anticipatory voice-overs, cuts from baby pictures to paparazzi shots, interviews with outspoken “frenemies.” The result is hilarious, especially to art-world insiders, but ultimately as shallow as the genre it spoofs.

Another work with a celebrity factor suggests that reality is a matter of editing. In two installations, titled “Mother” and “Father,” Candice Breitz weaves together snippets of dialogue about parenthood from Hollywood movies. While momentarily diverting, both works look and sound too much like Oscar-night montages.

More subtle, and clever, is Omer Fast’s video installation “Godville.” He interviews costumed performers at Colonial Williamsburg, tweaking the footage to blur his subjects’ real and assumed identities. A “militia man,” for instance, talks about his military service in Iraq.

Reality is subject to revision in Pierre Huyghe’s “Third Memory,” in which the bank robber John Wojtowicz re-enacts the failed 1973 heist that inspired Sidney Lumet’s “Dog Day Afternoon.” Mr. Wojtowicz’s recollection of the event appears to have been influenced by Hollywood; when he speaks, he is channeling Al Pacino.

“Realisms” can be relentless, in the manner of installation-heavy Biennials and Triennials — one black box after another. The Hirshhorn’s layout, a kind of cyclorama, makes it difficult to skip around. Viewers are advised to pace themselves, or to consider multiple visits. Two of the longer works, films by Jeremy Deller and Artur Zmijewski, can only be seen at thrice-weekly screenings in the museum’s auditorium.

Fatigue may set in by the second half of the show, which is unfortunate, because this section features several installations of dizzying structural complexity. Among them are Isaac Julien’s sweeping multi-screen projection “Fantome Creole,” Runa Islam’s “Tuin” (which uses three cameras to deconstruct a shot from a Fassbinder film) and Matthew Buckingham’s double projection based on Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Man of the Crowd.”

“Realisms” ends with Paul Chan’s “1st Light” (2005), digital animation that depicts objects and people as silhouettes against a deepening sky. While cellphones and cars float toward the heavens, bodies plunge to the ground. In Mr. Chan’s apocalyptic fantasy, the real returns with a vengeance.

“The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality and the Moving Image” continues through Sept. 7 at the Hirshhorn Museum, Independence Avenue at Seventh Street SW, Washington.; (202) 633-1618, hirshhorn.si.edu.