

## “Days of Endless Time”

At the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden to April 12, 2015

Non-narrative video art is less stuffy than it seems.

By Jeffrey Cudlin • October 24, 2014

In “Days of Endless Time,” the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden is setting audiences up for failure. This exhibition of 14 moving image artworks—including video, animation, and even motorized shadow puppets—requires at least two hours to be experienced in its entirety. While four of the pieces are continuous or interactive, the 10 durational videos have a total runtime of 92:32. A brief visit won’t work, and a full day may not suffice, either.



The show promises opportunities to slip into a more contemplative, mindful state—a “poetic refuge” or “reflective realm,” as the exhibition text describes it. Accordingly, the pieces presented here unfold at a languorous pace, asking viewers to suspend their expectations for linear narrative and reckon with time-based art in which nothing much really happens.

What does pass for action consists mostly of staying put and fidgeting. In Guido van der Werve’s “Nummer Negen (#9): The Day I Didn’t Turn with the World” (2007), time-lapse photography shows the artist standing at the geographic North Pole for 24 hours straight, slowly turning his body relative to the sun as it crawls across the horizon. In Douglas Gordon’s “Play Dead: Real Time” (2003), an elephant is seen lying on its side in a gallery, then rocking and repositioning itself to sit upright, stand, and take a few short tentative steps. And in Eija-Liisa Ahtila’s “Horizontal” (2011), six separate asynchronous channels of video form a sliced-up, sideways portrait of a spruce tree swaying in the breeze.

With “Days,” curators Kelly Gordon and Mika Yoshitake add to the Hirshhorn’s history of exhibitions devoted to video, film, and light-based art, as seen in the 2005 synesthesia-themed show “Visual Music” and the 2008 two-part blowout “The Cinema Effect: Illusion, Reality, and the Moving Image.” As it was for those shows, the museum’s second floor has been transformed into some sort of movie theater-turned-mortuary—a low-lit maze punctuated by sparsely furnished black-box spaces. Plunged into near darkness, audiences move from one funeral chamber to another, engaging with the different modes of awareness that each artwork seems to propose.

While the show’s sleek minimalist design and banal-to-bizarre range of imagery should provide a feast for lovers of art-house cinema and stoner-y weirdness, it’s not clear that general audiences will be in a hurry to go along for this ride. Folks in the museum world should know that most patrons don’t necessarily have the attention spans for something this epic. As George Hein wrote in his 1998 book *Learning in the Museum*, “Empirical data supports the view that visitors spend little time at

individual exhibit components (often a matter of a few seconds and seldom as much as one minute); seldom read labels; usually stop at less than half the components at an exhibit...and that attention to exhibits declines sharply after about half an hour.”

It's hard enough to reach people in the gallery with traditional art—never mind hours of avant-garde ambient video. So why package this much of this kind of work in this format?

Part of the answer might lie in the persistence of old-school modernist ideas about experiencing art. In the early 20th century, critics like Roger Fry and Clive Bell insisted that art required the disinterested contemplation of universal truths. Artists should confront audiences with what Bell in 1913 called “significant form,” elements of color and composition that have no direct relationship to daily life, and transport them to “the superb peaks of aesthetic exaltation.”

This way of thinking about art persisted through the 1960s via formalist critics like Clement Greenberg until enough art-world-ers eventually came to see it as a bunch of elitist hokey—at which point conceptual art took the stage and the story of postmodern and contemporary art began. Yet the culture of display in museums like the Hirshhorn continues to perpetuate a sacralized modernist vibe, asking audiences to find “poetic refuge” with art in austere, artificial spaces.

If “Days of Endless Time” seems to promise encounters like Bell’s “superb peaks,” much of the art in the show—having descended from conceptualist practices—undercuts or lampoons that notion.

Take, for example, David Claerbout’s “Travel” (1996 -2003). While the 12-minute video references 19th-century categories of encounters with nature—the pastoral, the picturesque, and the sublime—it is deliberately bland and awful. The soundtrack, full of Vangelis-like synth swells and cheesy rainsticks, is actually 1980s-era relaxation music. The video is digitally animated, seamlessly panning through a European forest, then an Amazonian rainforest, and ending in a crummy suburban park in a flyover state. It’s a hilarious encounter with impoverished sounds and images.

In Flatform’s “Cannot Be Anything Against the Wind” (2010), an Italian landscape is reduced to three panoramas, each shot separately—foreground, middleground, and background—and layered so that they overlap with one another. The bands shuttle across the screen, sometimes in unison, sometimes in opposite directions, creating a confusing, cartoonish world a bit like an out-of-control stage set.

And then there’s Hans-Peter Feldmann’s “Shadowplay” (2002 -2014). For this kinetic installation, silhouettes of toy guns, dolls, and common household objects whirl and dance on the grey gallery walls. The effect almost transports us to a child’s dream world—except the mechanical means by which the silhouettes are created are left visible. Eight buzzing turntables loaded with random objects sit on a long workbench; casually strewn around them are work gloves, empty water bottles, glue sticks, and scraps of cardboard, as if the artist will be back shortly to finish the haphazardly started job. The shadows promise to transport the viewer, but the provisional and earthbound physical elements of the piece negate that promise.

With pieces like this, “Days of Endless Time” seems a bit like a bait and switch. While the show’s design and the language used to describe it promise something meditative and portentous, much of the work itself veers toward humor, absurdity, and the impossibility of ever really escaping our shared day-to-day cultural context. Art like this could be presented in a more culturally promiscuous way, connecting the artists’ ideas to other art, past and present; artifacts of popular culture; or even the city in which the Hirshhorn is sited. Such a treatment might be a welcome change for tourists wondering why they keep having to navigate curious grey mazes in which

contemporary art seems scarier and more serious than it actually is.

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