



Abina Manning

Points of View – Video Artists Read the World

Inspired by Nancy Holt's early seminal artworks *Going Around in Circles* (1973) — included in this program — and *Points of View* (1974), a four-channel video installation made for the Clocktower Gallery in New York, this program ponders the role of video art as a tool for understanding the world. Through her works, Holt prompts such questions as: what is it that we are seeing?; can we trust the image, the perspective?; what happens if we look harder?; what happens when we look away? By engaging systems such as scanning, mapping, measuring, tracking, and classifying, the artists in this program seek to exhume something beyond the surface image, in order to further reveal the world and better understand it. The result is in turn revelatory, a call to action, magical, or mysterious.

In *Going Around in Circles*, an early video art work from Nancy Holt that continued her interest in the subject of perception, she talks off-screen to unseen colleagues about what we are witnessing — five circular holes on a black background, framing five people, one in each hole, standing in what seems to be an exterior location, facing the camera, turning, moving. It becomes apparent that the five holes are part of a cardboard prop held in front of the camera. As we watch, the participants follow instructions to reposition between various points and perform certain movements, and the five holes are



Visions of an Island, Sky Hopinka (2016)

in turn covered, obliterating the image, and uncovered. Holt states that she is able to look both at the choreographed events happening outside of the window, and at a live playback monitor in the room.

Despite the seemingly formal parameters of Holt's choreographed "ordered system," and her instructions to the participants to perform prescribed actions, the results of the exercise are somewhat chaotic, as participants chat amongst themselves and float in and out of the circles. The exercise can't be contained, and Holt comments that "the system seems to be breaking down." The performance is analyzed and judged against an imagined perfect system. We are witnessing an exercise of order and disorder.

Dana Levy's *Last Man* (2020) features a number of live streams from various cities and public spaces around the world, transmitted during the spring 2020 COVID-19 lockdown. Webcams transmit images of streets devoid of people, as in some dramatic pandemic-infested horror movie. Zoo animals wander up and down in their enclosures with nobody to gawp at them; plazas are eerily

empty as their monuments gaze only on one another; restaurants wait for their tables to fill. Solitary people and birds hurry across the scenes. The webcam feeds are edited together alongside post-apocalyptic scenes from *Last Woman on Earth* (1960) and *The Last Man on Earth* (1964). Levy's piece depicts a desolate lockdown life, prompting the question: which is stranger, the fantastic plot of a science fiction movie, or reality?

Kevin Jerome Everson's short *Half On, Half Off* (2011) condenses into a three-minute roll of film the workday of an emergency team tasked with cleaning up the beaches after the Deepwater Horizon Spill in Pensacola, Florida, documenting their hours of labor and fast-forwarding it before our eyes. In itself this is fascinating footage. Against a pale beach and foreboding sky, tractors transport the spoils from the spill site, and the mostly Black and Brown workers in their fluorescent vests toil. But Everson offers more than a testament to labor or an indictment of British Petroleum's environmental pollution. His ceaseless attention reveals evidence of another America, replete with

palm trees, skyscrapers, and holiday vistas, bought into focus by the surreal sight of a white family group sauntering by dressed in swimwear, beach buckets in hand, seemingly oblivious to the closeness of disaster and the rescue workers.

eteam (Franziska Lamprecht and Hajoe Moderegger) travel the conceptual road to amusing lengths in *1.1 Acre Flat Screen* (2004). After purchasing said 1.1 acre of land in the Utah desert on eBay, they set about planning a visit. But finding their tract proves to be no easy feat, as they utilize a number of tools to help identify their precise plot of sand – compass, topographic maps, satellite imaging. When they finally reach the actual plot — or what might be their plot, for there are no street names, fences, or other identifying markers in the endless desert landscape — the absurdity of their purchase is clear. Nevertheless, they set about the task of improving the lot and making the land functional, and come up with a number of schemes for maximizing its worth. By working through their various hopes for this gritty corner of America, eteam reveal the precarity of internet shopping, and of the dream of land ownership.

Basma Alsharif's *Home Movies Gaza* (2013) depicts images shot from a moving car and scenes of domestic life in the Gaza strip, a place most are familiar with only through the conflict footage periodically shown on the television news. There are graffitied buildings, a heaving washing line, farmyard birds, a horse-drawn cart, the distant sea — all vibrating with life and the everyday. But another perspective is suggested with a glimpse of a bombed-out building, a United Nations bus, and the appearance of the imposing wall, constructed to keep Palestinians contained and disallowed from entering Israel. This is life under confinement, underscored as the notes from a cello played by a young woman morph into the sound of an

overhead surveillance drone — the hum of the panopticon.

Framed by a rediscovered photo album and the memories of family and place it sparks, Martine Syms' *Memory Palace* (2015) mulls the space between documentary and storytelling. A female voice describes a house and a woman, an admired family member, seen through reenacted scenes that collaborate the narrative. But as the voiceover begins to contradict the story — “You don't want to see her like that. You want to remember her in a way you never knew her” — both the memory and the story are called into question. In the final moments, this schism is underscored by a male voice declaring: “This could be a movie!”

Alluding perhaps to the “Observer Effect”, a premise of quantum theory, which states that by the very act of watching, the observer affects observed reality, *Lightning* (1976), by Paul Kos and Marlene Kos captures a woman, a car, and a lightning storm, to experimental effect. An ordinary event is transformed and made transcendent by the presence of a video camera.

The final work in the program is Sky Hopinka's *Visions of an Island* (2016). Set on St. Paul, an island in the Bering Sea with a long history of occupation by Russia and the U.S., the video describes through both voiceover and image various aspects of the land. Unangam Tunuu elder Gregory Fratis Sr., a lifelong resident, talks about its history, its bird and animal populations, and of the difficulty of language to capture what is seen, echoed through the use of superimposition and slippage between image and sound. Of the Russian names for animals on the island, Fratis Sr. says “I don't think it's of any importance.” In the fullness of time, such human occupations are fleeting, and the ancient land prevails.

Hopinka, a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation and a descendent of the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians, employs an alternative set of systems to those utilized by contemporary industrialized society, among them game playing, language lessons, and poetry. At the moment when he literally flips the island on its head, showing land and animals upright and in focus, and the “civilized” world of buildings and people on their heads, we are liberated from the desire to constantly name and “understand”. Hopinka and Fratis' vision of the world is a thrilling revelation, offering possibilities for reinterpretation and wonder — at what the world was, what it is, and what it could be.

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