



## *Future-Past-Present: A Journey Through the Twenty-Tens So Far*

How can one even start to articulate the conditions that determine the artistic output of a decade that has begun to experience such violent rupture? How does one give voice to a decade that began with the utopia of post-millennial transparency, only to descend into a whirlpool of continual lies? 'Post-truth' is the accommodating misnomer that has been instrumentalized by news media to articulate the 'alternative facts' that have been propagated by the presidential campaign and policies of the newly-elected President of the United States, former reality TV star and real-estate mogul, Donald Trump.

This is a decade book-ended by earthquakes, the end of an economic recession, WikiLeaks, and Chelsea Manning. It is also an era that began with the potential for transparency and a critical questioning of the facts that governments were hiding. Now, we have descended into an abyss of our own making – a result of the insular circles that have prevented us from 'seeing' divisive social, political and economic conditions, which should have seemed so plainly obvious to us.

In moments like these, I often descend into pools of memory. This is not nostalgia, but rather, an aspirational internalization into the self: a space to dream of progress. No other artist has done this for me recently like Martine Syms, who is represented here with her *A Pilot For A Show About Nowhere* (2015). In this work, Syms seeks to map a corrective path for the lived African American experience as portrayed in popular media. The film

begins with iPhone scrolls, sentimental aspirations for love in an all too familiar period of so-called technological fragmentation. As the movie unfolds, Syms posits her thesis, an alternative TV show called "She Mad," set in Los Angeles's Koreatown neighborhood. This proposition for a TV show is interwoven with a documentary history of the American sitcom – one that begins with pure prejudice – the figure of the Black Minstrel turned into parody. The artist then moves us through a panoptical view of mainstream 'white' sitcoms before moving into the era of *The Cosby Show*, that moment in time when Black could be bourgeois for a change – a distinctive kind of insularity.

Quoting Alison Landsberg's book *Prosthetic Memory*, Syms articulates the affective relationship between moving images and physical bodies, arguing that the birth of cinema allowed individuals to physically experience public memory and to develop empathy for others whose experiences have been lived in a different historic moment in time. Indeed, there are moments herein where this author descends into an unparalleled emotion, such as when the theme tune to the UPN/CW sitcom, *Girlfriends* from the year 2000, its title track playing "My girlfriend... there through thick and thin." In these melodic phrases, my college years are unearthed; nights spent watching this series in syndication on a small 14-inch television.

Basma Alsharif similarly seeks to unearth another hidden history, albeit

one that is altogether more esoteric, in her *O, Persecuted* (2014). Here, the artist presents the militant documentary *Our Small Houses* (1974) by Kassem Hawal. The picture begins with the hiss of a drone, and a set of non-diegetic sounds overtake the viewer's senses. Images start to appear and disappear – their contents like earthly sediments. Fragments of text come in and out of motion. These images start to appear painted. When suddenly, a rupture: a melange of Israeli beach bodies soaks up the screen. Thumping techno music plays, as the frivolous freedom of the young Israeli girls becomes apparent: a belly dancer becomes super-imposed onto the image. Basma Alsharif's film is a tumultuous act of restitution. Through the process of negotiating memory, and an archive that has been lost, she illustrates the prickly politics that bind and separate the iconography of struggle.

Another kind of struggle is emblemized in Matt Wolf's *I Remember: A Film About Joe Brainard* (2012). Wolf's delicate portrait unfolds like a dream, harking back to a time that feels all too familiar today. A moment when the AIDS crisis had begun to take its toll on a generation, when the National Endowment for the Arts was threatened by the Republican party, and when popular politics took precedence over the well-being of minority groups. Brainard, a member of the New York School of poets and artists, recites his epic poem-memoir entitled *I Remember* (1970). He begins:



*O, Persecuted*, Basma Alsharif (2014)



*Beirut Exploded Views*, Akram Zaarati (2014)

*I remember the pale green tint of Coca Cola bottles...*

*I remember not really trusting Mince Meat Pie...*

*I remember the way Cranberry sauce falls out of the can, then plops...*

These words are juxtaposed against images of an insular American family before they become interspersed with stories from the late artist's friend, the poet and essayist Ron Padgett. Brainard was to die of AIDS-induced pneumonia in 1994.

The lustfulness of Brainard's persona is reflected and refracted in Akram Zaarati's poignant, *Beirut Exploded Views* (2014), a post-apocalyptic universe where men only communicate through smart phone devices. Making homes out of found objects, the beautifully rendered young men in the picture move through space like sculptures that Zaarati is quietly examining through his lens. Hyper-saturated color unspools a worldly dream that is reminiscent of Agnes Godard's stunning cinematography. As the film carries on, it becomes clear that this is the artist's examination of the surreal quotidian world that we come to aspire to: one constructed through mediated communication technologies, one where physical silence exists in opposition to the

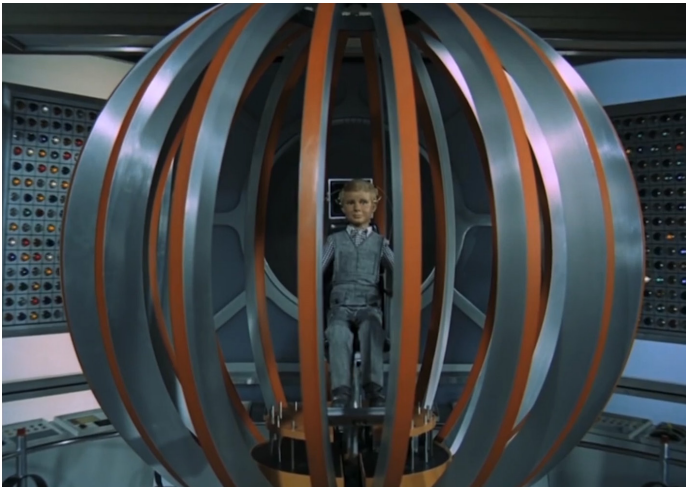
overwrought noise of the digital stratosphere. In *Beirut Exploded Views*, Zaarati also creates a painterly portrait of desire. His male protagonist's are striking; they float through a desolate landscape moving in and out of consciousness.

The hallucinatory effects of time resurface in Rosa Barba's *The Empirical Effect* (2010), a science-fiction narrative that documents a community living on the edge, the literal brink, of a volcano. The citizens (or should we call them denizens?) anxiously live in temporal flux, half-alive and half-asleep. Here, a sheltered community emerges, including the Mafia, Chinese immigrants, and who knows whom else. The surrounding environment around the volcano becomes a mythical wonderland, interspersed here by Barba with aerial and close-up images, as well as archival footage, revealing a world that is haunted by the threat of eruption, of exposure, but which also functions as shelter to many.

The surreal effects of how time and space are emblemized are clearly imagined in Nicolas Provost's *Storyteller* (2010). *Storyteller* recomposes aerial shots of the Las Vegas casino skyline, creating an undulating collage of repetitive motifs that absorbs the viewer into a hypnotic trance. The artist's silent

film oscillates formally between looking like a screensaver and like an existential critique of capital. Through this merry-go-round of light and color, the viewer becomes entrenched in a Victor Gruen-esque transfer – a state of perpetual loss and reconciliation through the potential whims and wills of late capitalism. In the end, Provost's film is a desirous fantasy, delving into a phantasmagoric universe.

Desire is at the core of *Alone With You* (2011), a work by Doug Ischar that pivots around two characters, a pro-wrestler and the artist, Robert Mapplethorpe. The picture begins with a punk soundtrack and scenes of the wrestler about to be smashed into some form of oblivion. Patti Smith's cover of *Gloria* plays in and out of scenes of violence, overhaul. Ornaments. Is this a film about collecting, objects of glass desire? Mapplethorpe, also a collector, suddenly appears – his eyes sliced out of the pages of a magazine, or an auction catalogue. A Christie's catalogue appears. Price lists. Is Doug Ischar in love with the commodity value of Mapplethorpe? His impossible need to attain a now un-attainable object? As Ischar's film unfolds, it becomes a lacerating critique of market desires and values, as much as Provost's film is one of daydream fantasy.



*Welcome to David Wojnarowicz Week*, Steve Reinke (2016)



*Alone With You*, Doug Ischar (2011)

Doug Ischar resurfaces as a character in Steve Reinke's wonderful collage film, *Welcome to David Wojnarowicz Week* (2016). A suicide candidate, a bottle full of pills and booze, he sits by the water with a novel, waiting to ascend, before he is rescued by his boyfriend.

"All things projected, are pre-selected" are the words that open this scenario: words that read like phantasms from the potential grave where Ischar may have lay.

Here, Reinke proposes a new holiday, a week named after the late gay icon David Wojnarowicz, who died tragically, again, of AIDS. Reinke implores, let us celebrate with MORE RAGE LESS DISGUST.

A week – any week, a private holiday, one that is our own.

The film opens with a set of phrases: "All the sticky molecules of the world... this commerce is consciousness." These are quotes from Edgar Morin, the French philosopher known for "complex thought." It comes as no surprise that Reinke is invoking Morin inasmuch as his films often function like rhizomatic structures woven together through appropriated materials – music, poetry, and philosophy are protracted into visceral renderings of a world that is as stark as it is lush. Deploying his own voice as

narrator in his signature style, Reinke informs us that, "whatever is most sad is most beautiful." He continues, "I will become the only sinner who is not roasted," which we hear while watching Bette Davis clean a floor. Soothing sound effects play. Sadness. Empathy. Opera. Poetry. Drama. Violence: Collapse! But I return to Doug Ischar in all of this, and his need to escape this world, as a metaphor not only for this film, which is in essence a celebration of a way of being, a queer lived experience, but also as a symbol for how we might choose to live in this future-present moment. Reinke's film is the most recent selected here; produced in 2016, it foreshadows in cornucopic style, a world that we must find a way to exit – to create spaces of unity and freedom of our own making, as banal and quotidian as that may first seem.

**VDB TV: *Decades*** celebrates forty years of Video Data Bank's support for video art and artists. This five-part series, programed by experts in the field, casts a distinctive eye over the development of video as an art form from the early 1970s to the 2010s.

**Dr. Omar Kholeif** is the Manilow Senior Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the Arthur and Carol Kaufman Goldberg Visiting Professor and Curator at Hunter College, New York for 2016. He has curated over 100 exhibitions,

commissions and special projects, including the Liverpool Biennial, the Cyprus Pavilion at the 56th Venice Biennale, and the Abraaj Group Art Prize. Previously he was Curator at the Whitechapel Gallery, London; Senior Curator at Cornerhouse and HOME, Manchester; Head of Art and Technology at Space, London; Curator at FACT (Foundation for Art and Creative Technology), Liverpool; Senior Editor at Ibraaz Publishing; and Artistic Director, Arab British Centre, London. Dr. Kholeif is the author and/or editor of over twenty books of criticism, poetry and fiction, including, *You Are Here: Art After the Internet* (2014), *Moving Image* (2015), *The Rumors of the World: Re-thinking Trust in the Age of the Internet* (2015), and *Electronic Superhighway: From Experiments in Art and Technology to Art After the Internet* (2016).