

MILLENNARIAN CINEMA: DAVID CLAERBOUT AND OLYMPIA

KINDL Center for Contemporary Art, Berlin
September 11, 2016 - May 28, 2017

From September 2016 through the end of May 2017, David Claerbout's new piece entitled *Olympia (The Real-Time Disintegration into Ruins of the Berlin Olympic Stadium over the Course of a Thousand Years)* is shown in a huge room of the KINDL Center for Contemporary Art in Berlin. A smaller version of the moving-image installation was put on display last fall and winter at the De Pont Foundation in Tilburg, the Netherlands.

Olympia is a two-channel video projection that simulates the natural process of decay of the 1936 Berlin Olympic stadium. One screen shows only static shots of details of the impressive building designed by Werner March and the archaizing sculptures by Karl Albiker, as well as shots of the pavement, trees, and grass. The other screen, much larger than the first, is a simulation of an uninterrupted, slow tracking shot of the digitally rendered building's exterior. Emphasizing the solidity, monumentality, and sculptural qualities of the structure, Claerbout's HD animation film evokes a disembodied camera that situates the stadium in a world devoid of human beings. In addition, there is hardly a sense of scale. Even the windows, doors, and gates of the

building might be more appropriate for the Olympian superhumans in the opening sequence of Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* (1938). Designed for cheering crowds, the now empty and silent stadium creates an uncanny atmosphere tallying with the sublime dimensions of the building as well as with those of Claerbout's film, which is supposed to last for a thousand years.

In large parts of the film, we can see a glimpse of the building's context on the edge of the frame: a misty landscape with some trees and contours of adjacent buildings. At a certain moment, apparently determined by actual weather conditions, the camera approaches the stadium and climbs into the external gallery on the first floor, now offering a better view on the surrounding park-like landscape, the road, and the wide-open cement plaza. When the camera passes the main gate, we get a clear view of the stadium's interior with the impressive spectators' area and the metal cauldron for the Olympic flame. Following in an anti-clockwise direction, the circular camera movement on the oval-shaped building emphasizes the endlessness (or rather the millennial proportions) of the film. At certain moments,



David Claerbout, *Olympia* (2016), screengrab.

David Claerbout, *TOP Olympia (Simulation View from Albiker to East Gate in Snow)* (2016), drawing. Courtesy the artist.

BOTTOM *Olympia (Impression of Rain)* (2016), drawing. Courtesy the artist and De Pont, Museum of Contemporary Art, Tilburg.

one gets the impression that the building itself is rotating on its axis, almost like a huge mechanical clockwork or a ring-shaped monument with 178 unadorned pillars, the site of an ancient solar cult. As it turns out, the camera circles the building in the course of exactly one hour.

With its focus on the Berlin stadium, *Olympia* connects with many of Claerbout's earlier works featuring architecture. Like *The Stack* (2002), it visualizes the play of light on architectural fragments in a dilapidated landscape. Like *Man Under Arches* (2000), it evokes the sublime power of empty spaces and neoclassical buildings. Like *Kindergarten Antonio Sant'Elia, 1932* (1998) and *Reflecting Sunset* (2003), it deals with 1930s official architecture in a totalitarian state. Many of Claerbout's works are characterized by his interest in modernist architecture and its utopian aspirations, perfectly evoked by the geometric surfaces and the glass volumes in *Shadow Piece* (2005), in which characters seem incapable of entering the building. The Berlin stadium, of course, and its vast solid volumes as well as its associations with a regime marked by obscurity, contrasts sharply with the elegant glass volumes celebrated in modernist architecture. Ironically, to Hitler's dismay, Werner March initially designed a modernist stadium for the Berlin Olympics. Albert Speer allegedly redesigned it overnight, giving it a more classical look to invoke comparisons with the Colosseum in Rome. In his memoirs, Speer advocated the Romantic *Ruinwerttheorie* (or theory of Ruin Value), which stipulates that a building should be designed such that it would leave behind aesthetically pleasing ruins after its eventual collapse. In so doing, Speer made a plea for an architecture with its appearance in a thousand years in mind, the Colosseum being an explicit example, reflecting the notion of a "Thousand-Year Reich" propagated by the Nazis.

In this way, the building combines architecture with time, the other major preoccupation in Claerbout's oeuvre. Often exploring the boundaries and tensions between still and moving

images, Claerbout's works are primarily understood as reflections on time and duration. Extended duration and the idea of an endless, eternal, or cyclical film already marked *Bordeaux Piece* (2004), another film featuring an architectural landmark (Rem Koolhaas' *Maison à Bordeaux*). Watching this film, spectators only gradually realize that the work does not consist of a loop projection but that the actors and crew are repeating the same scenes over and over, spanning an entire day from dawn to dusk. *Olympia*, too, stretches the limits of the perception of time as Claerbout now exceeds the human ability to imagine the real-time projection meant to last thousand years. The work itself, of course, changes endlessly and a visitor seeing the work in May 2017 will have seen a quite different film than somebody seeing it a few months earlier or several years later.

Moreover, Claerbout plays on the contrast between the solidity of the massive building and the small contingencies of the passing of time. The eternal structure of the stadium becomes the stage for the presence of ephemeral elements such as moving leaves on the floor, growing weeds, fluctuating light, and meteorological changes. With the help of a real-time computer program, real-time weather information and the position of the sun and light conditions are constantly integrated into the film. Claerbout evokes the limits of the "digital sublime" rather than the imperial dream of a millennial architecture. Although the work is the result of a vast undertaking involving many collaborators, which, at this stage, already guarantees the work's progression for the next 25 years, the promise of an "eternal" film can only be considered ironic given the short life span of digital formats and the constant need of software updates. *Olympia* is not only a memorial for (im)perishable buildings, it is also a meditation on the disintegration of their visualizations.

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