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SPACES
IN BETWEEN





SHOWING NOTHING
SHOWING EVERYTHING

Tommy Hartung, video still from *Anna*, 2011, HD video, colour, sound, 20 minutes, 17 seconds. Images courtesy the artist and On Stellar Rays, New York.



Tommy Hartung's Search for the Sublime

by Robert Enright

Tommy Hartung, the video artist, animator and sculptor who lives and works in Queens, New York, admits that as a child he wanted to be a writer and that his impulse has always been “to tell a story over the passage of time.” In *Anna*, the 20-minute-long HD video, which was recently purchased by MoMA in New York, we can see how complex is his way of telling stories. *Anna* is based on Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* and Hartung’s loose retelling filters the original story through his own life experience, love of reading and political understanding. He insists that his is not a book-to-film project, nor is it a book-to-life transcription, but it does combine art and life in compelling and unsettling ways. *Anna* conflates the artist’s interest in agrarian social experiments practised by one of the characters in Tolstoy’s novel with his own farming background in western New York and links Anna’s suicide by train with the deaths of some of his childhood friends. “I’m interested in how little we need in a moving image to tell a story,” he says, and while the effect of his minimal inclusions can be confusing, they are consistently mesmerizing. Perhaps the most captivating of these scenes is a storm he created out of Cellophane, cotton batten and theatrical makeup. Components that should add up to a *tour de farce* are transformed, instead, into a *tour de force*.

Hartung is an artist of eccentric enthusiasms. His admiration for Jacob Bronowski’s 13-part television series called *The Ascent of Man*, 1973, was the provocation for his own video of the same name. In this case, his borrowings from the original source were more direct than they were in *Anna*. He incorporated a number of images or sequences from the television series and while the footage might be identical, what is especially intriguing is how he builds upon them in his own videos.

Hartung sees himself not as a dreamer or a fantasist but as a documentarian. In one sense, this is a contrary position. But he is clear about his reading of documentary; it is the truth achieved through an accurate presentation of the way things are and not the way we expect them to be. His use of dolls is a telling example of his understanding of the way we get to truth. In *The Ascent of Man* there is a scene in which a doll with green hair and ponytails stands in water that just nudges the tops of her thighs; she is an emblem of adolescent desire: buxom, perky butt, wearing only panties and a waist-hugging leather jacket. Suddenly a white rat breaks the surface of the flower-petalled water and slowly begins to climb onto the doll’s body, eventually ending up perched on top of her head.

It’s hard to pin down what about this image is so riveting, but there is something perverse about the

water-sleek animal’s pink tail hanging in front of the doll’s face. The more you say about why this scene either attracts or repels you, the more you reveal about yourself. Hartung’s videos are the artist’s self-expression and the viewer’s self-awareness. They are not easy to fathom. “I want to set up situations where people will scratch their heads.”

It is important to say that no single scene in a Hartung video is arbitrary. The doll and rat episode extends a sequence that Hartung has liberally lifted from the Bronowski program on human sexuality, which combines an actual birth, a TV image of a crawling baby who eventually stands up, a terrarium and a dark jacket with a hand in only one sleeve that moves around the floor in awkward stop animation. It is a sequence that mixes the innocent and the grotesque, as if the Quay Brothers had been engaged to shoot a promotional image for *The Family of Man*.

The scene following the procreative sequence in Hartung’s *The Ascent of Man* acknowledges an earlier program in the television series on the subject of knowledge. In the program, Bronowski, wearing his shoes, steps into a puddle at Auschwitz and reaches down to cup some of the water in his hand. He says, “We have to touch.” In the next section of his video, Hartung lets his eyes do the touching. In the same aquarium where the rat had climbed onto



the doll, we see a snail slowly floating away from a black leather shoe that sits on the surface of the water like a boat.

For Hartung, the scene is a tribute to Bronowski and his subjective and emotional presence in his series. As viewers, we are left with the perplexing and undeniably beautiful image of the snail’s slow drift to the bottom of the tank. Trying to locate specific meaning in Hartung’s videos is a



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1–2. Video stills from *Anna*, 2011.

difficult endeavour. His work is like poetry, in that meanings and connections are associative and rely on an imaginative logic, not a literal one. It is in this sense that his real world begins to read like a dream world, a realm which has its own rules, procedures and movements. “I devise a box and I suspect that something will happen within this box,” he says with characteristic candour, “but I am never quite sure what it will be.” So far all the activities that have happened within his boxed-in world have been utterly seductive, even if we don’t know what they mean, or what story they are actually telling. Tommy Hartung is the master of the unaccountable sublime.

The following interview was conducted by phone to Queens on June 29, 2012.

TOMMY HARTUNG: I’ve always made movies. My BFA was in sculpture and my MFA in sculpture/new genre, but when I was in high school I was making short documentary films for an educational program on a cable-access channel. Through that process I started remixing footage and was making montages. But I was never interested in going to film school and being a filmmaker proper. I was more interested in subcultures, in the punk

scene, in making fanzines, skate videos and playing in punk bands. When I got to undergrad a lot of modernist fine art institutions didn’t include experimental films, maybe in performance art, but not the kind of experimental narrative filmmaking that I do. Then I saw the films of Jan Švankmajer and everything came together for me; I could make sculpture and collage and have it all go towards one thing. As a child I wanted to be a writer. I would write and illustrate short stories and my artistic impulse has always been to tell a story over a passage of time.

BORDER CROSSINGS: But the busts and animated objects that appear in your work are things that must have come out of your background in sculpture.

Yes and I also appropriate things and then modify them. The figures in *Anna* are all originally beauty practice mannequins for hair. They started out as female heads in my studio. I wanted to use a woman to tell a story—what Tolstoy was doing in *Anna Karenina*—to literally use the tragedy of the female character as a sculpture. My practice is about filming my personal relationship to different material processes that have narrative content. So I take

these female figures and force the ambiguity of gender so that they end up looking like men and like females. You're never totally sure. You don't directly see that process in the film but that's how those characters came about.

Do you want uncertainties about everything from gender to what it is that the viewer is actually seeing when they look at the films?

Yes, especially in *Anna*, which is my longest piece and the one in which I was trying to perfect that heightened sense of uncertainty. You're not sure if you're supposed to be watching this; you're not sure what these people are doing. They're not even people. It's as if someone with a camera is acting out things that happened and these figures are stand-ins for a film. I don't even like calling *Anna* a film or a video. It has a beginning, a middle and an end, but in some of my other pieces you'll see a more pronounced narrative arc. With *Anna* I wanted to construct a narrative process showing the violence that occurs when you empty out that dramatic arc, when you empty out the sex and the romance that is in *Anna Karenina*. What is there when that's all gone? It is just these people trying to use other people to say something. It could be something as grand as Tolstoy, or it could be the millions and millions of videos on YouTube, where someone is doing something in front of a web camera. They're not doing something interesting; they're not saying something; they're just moving around like weird puppets. My theory is when we're looking at those things, we're thinking about ourselves, and I wanted to say something about that.

But there are residues of *Anna Karenina*?

Yes. *Anna* was a whole mix of things for me. As a teenager I had a couple of friends who jumped in front of trains and so for the novel to end with *Anna's* suicide that same way was quite powerful. I wanted to give people pieces, like with Hansel and Gretel and the breadcrumbs. I leave behind little traces of that narrative with which people can identify.

Early on you have this Muybridge thing with the golden horse and then later a rider falls off another horse and is menaced by it. How are those scenes connected for you and for the viewer?

I'm not sure how many connections I want to make for people. When I make a piece I don't use a storyboard; what I do is write a text. My pieces always start off with a poem, or a verse, or a short monologue. These monologues are new and about the different things I'm trying to reference with *Anna Karenina*, or instances where I'm trying to develop a personal relationship between myself and my materials.

Is that a reproduction of a Cézanne still life on the wall in the background?

Absolutely. In my reading, Cézanne represents Levin and his bourgeois escape. The reproduced painting is called *Cupid and Cherub* and is pasted to this fake-brick wall structure, so I'm using this romantic escape as urban graffiti. That simple gesture helps me process the narrative. I don't care if the viewer gets the contradiction. That's not so important; I'm interested in presenting a problem with each one of the scenes. But I'm not producing a book-to-movie remake of *Anna Karenina*. I am taking the book and trying to make satire out of it. But not postmodern satire. I'm trying to do it in the most disturbing or disgusting way or, if all else fails, in the most neutral way, where you don't know what to think. So you're confused. Satire, for me, is setting people up for this romantic love story, and then giving them a set of problems about the way we tell stories, about the way we talk about *Anna Karenina*. I'm more interested in the viewer's response to nostalgia than I am in being nostalgic myself. I like creating atmospheres for viewers to respond to. At a certain point I believe you have to let people decide; that's an ethical responsibility on my part. You have to keep things as free and as open as possible. The way I do that is by making the space engaging enough visually that people can inhabit it as I do. With *Anna* I spent hours and hours filming by myself in a very dark, gloomy basement and I wanted to bring people into that. So the point of view in this film is close to what I do on a regular basis in my studio. I will set up a scene, set up lights, and the different things I want to say, and I'll move the camera around. I'll practise that movement over and over until I get it right. So it has a performative element; the camera is a character performing for us and bringing life to this space.

I want to talk about the scene in *Anna* where you have a torso, a garden rake and a twirling pot, all of which are moving, as are a number of your ambiguous mannequins. What we see is mesmerizing and seductive. The word uncanny occurs to me but I'm reluctant to use it because I know you have resisted associations with Surrealism. Tell me what you had in mind when constructing that particular sequence and its myriad moving objects.

I identify a lot of narrative content in *Anna Karenina* with broader cultural references that interest me. But I'm also the person making this thing and so my personal experience floods in. I grew up on a farm and my summers were spent in the fields with my three brothers and farmhands in western New York, between Erie, Pennsylvania and Buffalo. The farm is about 50 miles south of Buffalo. My Dad was a railroader who received a settlement after he

was injured on the job. He was an evangelical Christian and his generation had this romantic idea that you could go and live off the land, which is what he decided to do with us. It was an experiment, much like one of the agricultural social experiments that Levin was doing with the peasants in Tolstoy's novel. Not that I saw myself as a peasant but I do identify with that sort of culture and environment. I particularly wanted the objects in the scene you asked about to seem to be working, fucking and fighting, all at the same time. To me that is what is happening in the midst of Levin's bourgeois romantic and spiritual meditations. Tolstoy is telling us in the novel that they are working, fighting and

That's the intersection of the uncanny that you were talking about before with Surrealism. Bellmer and Dalí used psycho-sexual devices but I think they are always just representations of strange psycho-sexual situations and not anywhere close to the real thing. I teach video art and there is a famous documentary called *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, narrated by Slavoj Žižek. He has this brilliant moment where he's talking about having sex and you suddenly realize how foolish you look and how stupid you are doing this strange act, moving your body and gyrating. Everyone has felt that kind of awkwardness. A lot of filmmakers in the history of moving images made romantic ideals out of psycho-sexual desires



Left to Right: *Epilogue*, 2011, mannequins with plaster, nail polish, paint, salt, dirt, crushed walnut shells, incense, white wall and unique single-channel HDV, dimensions variable; installation view of *Anna*, 2011. Photograph: Adam Reich.

fucking and what I try to do is condense these ideas as much as possible, even if it ends up being confusing. You're not sure if they're torturing each other, or if they're actually working. Their actions seem futile and confusing.

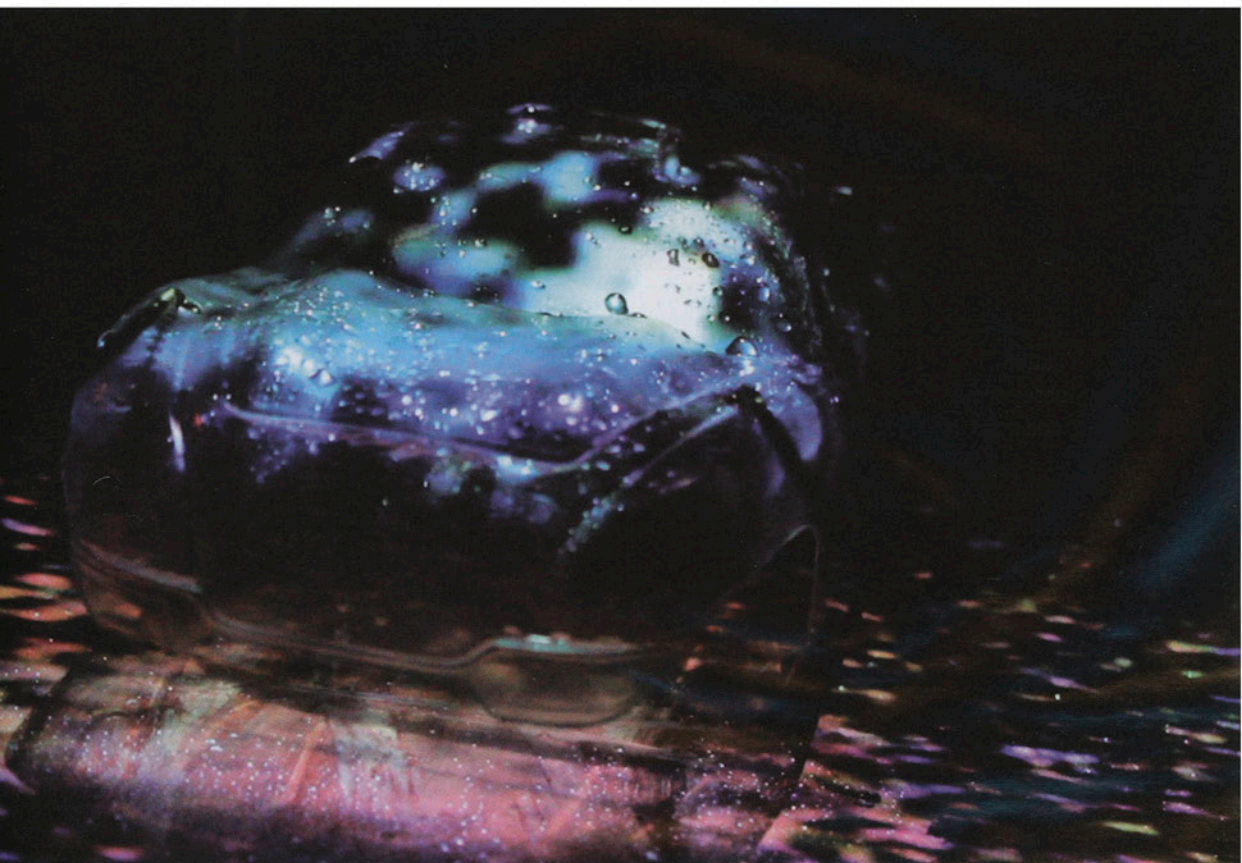
The erotics in your work is especially interesting. It comes up at the end of *The Story of Edward Holmes* where this fictional narrator is given a lover "whose idea of courtship would flush the cheek of even the most amorous libertine." One of the things that rides throughout the work is this uneasy eroticism, like the image of the mouse climbing out of the water onto that fetching little doll in *The Ascent of Man*.

and weren't interested in trying to represent the reality of the situation. I'm using dolls and not real people because they offer sufficient narrative distance to think about that moment. People have strong reactions to the mouse and the doll, and to other scenes in my films, because it does get them there. So many things in our society reference sex, but they're not actual sex. Even a porno is this terribly scripted thing. There's no romance, no poetry, and no fantasy. It's just T&A and cocks shaking around.

At the end of *Edward Holmes* there is the scene of a naked, raven-haired woman straddling a figure that looks as if a corpse from the Franklin expedition has been hauled out of the ice.



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The mouse scene is an improvement on that scene because I see my stuff as having a linear evolution. I would say those scenes are the same thing but one is more effective than the other.

You have said you want each scene to be a sacrosanct image. I get a sense that you compose like a painter.

Totally. I have a lot of friends who are painters and I sit around for a year with these pieces, without shooting much video at all. I take photos. Some of those scenes involve months and months of my taking a photo and then another photo and moving one thing and changing some other thing around. It is related to more painterly issues because the surfaces and the atmosphere of the moving images I make need to be something with which I can spend time. In a lot of traditional filmmaking you do a storyboard, you get a crew and you get actors, you get all this stuff together, and then you spend a few months shooting it. It's a thoroughly planned-out process. I like being able to inhabit these spaces and live with the thing. If you think of it like a painter, the form and the content are more fused; if you think of it like a filmmaker, the effects and the atmosphere are always reinforcing the content.

Let me ask you about *Stay Golden Ponyboy*, which is fascinating for all kinds of reasons, not the least of which is its postcolonial dimension. The opening scene, which I assume you've taken from Bronowski's *The Ascent of Man*, shows four Amazonian fishermen flanking a prone doll figure in a way that looks like a gang rape. Do you intend some degree of ambiguity in that opening scene?

Yes. I like the fact that you're not sure if it's a gang rape or a funeral. That kind of confusion appeals to my sense of humour. It could be that or it could be something else, and if you go to gang rape, then there's something wrong with you. The way I started working with the piece is connected to music. I have a strange relationship to music. I don't have a playlist. I'll get obsessed with a particular melody and I'll play it over and over again, even thousands of times.

Is what you did with the Paul Robeson version of *Shenandoah* in *Stay Golden Ponyboy*?

Yes. This piece started when I looked up the Wikipedia entry for the song and saw that it had two very different interpretations. One views it as a Manifest Destiny song, where a white explorer is going west and asks an Indian chief if he can take his daughter with him. So it's a "Let's Go West" love song. The other interpretation is that it is a spiritual where African slaves escape by bathing in the Shenandoah River so they can't be tracked by bloodhounds. I took both of these loose readings and mashed them

together. I was also starting to look at *The Ascent of Man* footage and wanted to reinterpret that. Just before, I had done a related short web project for *ArtReview* magazine. I included the audio from *The Ascent of Man* of a Victorian anthropologist who was one of the first to live with and study indigenous populations. I was struck by this quote that romanticized these people and the freedom of their way of life. So I took that and mixed it with this hyper-sexualized anime doll for teenage boys. It also dealt with this distinction in the States between black and white nipples. As far as the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] is concerned, you can see black nipples any time you want on PBS, or in advertising and billboards, as long as it's some primitive person from somewhere else. But if you see a white nipple on TV, or an Americanized dark person, like Janet Jackson and her wardrobe malfunction, then people freak out. I showed *Ponyboy* in the Queen's Museum [of Art] Biennial and they put it in a room that said, "Inappropriate for children."

Because the squirrel chews on the little nubs on the doll's breasts?

Yes. They show all that footage from *The Ascent of Man* on PBS, but a contemporary art museum in New York City puts it in a separate room with a content warning. My decision to make confused scenes is a reaction to this kind of thing. I want to set up situations where people will scratch their heads. Manifest Destiny was gang rape; it was genocide. In America people are allowed to romanticize Pocahontas even though we murdered her entire family. A lot of my friends when I was growing up were Native Americans and the American government is still shitting on their rights. I think my desire to talk about these very subtle racist clues is some form of latent activism.

The singing mound in *Ponyboy* reminds me of one of the opening close-ups in *The Ascent of Man*, where Bronowski is considering the crystal. What was your attraction to the television series and when did it first happen?

I watched the whole series as a child. I was raised in a really conservative creationist evangelical family, so I grew up getting pulled out of sex ed. and getting pulled out of science class when they talked about evolution. In the very insular background that I came from there was a cultural conflict between Darwinism and Creationism. Not that I'm a creationist but I think that polarity in either direction is a bad thing. You have someone like Pat Robertson and, at the opposite end of the spectrum, you have Richard Dawkins. I dislike them equally because they don't bring productive ideas; they only



promote destructive ideas. They want to destroy the other side and it is very violent. What I liked about *The Ascent of Man* was that Bronowski was so emotional and subjective on camera. Bronowski would be relating his discovery of Newton's scientific ideas in a very personal way. Then when he gets to the episode about the Holocaust, he steps into the mud at Auschwitz and starts walking on the water. That moment was really powerful to me and that is where the shoe in the fish tank comes in. I would focus on brief moments of his visceral, poetic and emotional attachment to these big ideas and I'd try appropriating, accentuating and condensing them into my film, which was an elaborate, over-educated fan video about Bronowski. I wanted to make some kind of homage. At one point I was even dressing up like him in my studio, wearing the kind of leather jacket and shoes that he wore in his series.

In your *Ascent of Man* you take his line when he dips his hand into the mud at Auschwitz and says, "we have to touch" and use it as the bridge to get to the birth sequence you appropriate from *The Ascent of Man*. The program you seem to borrow from most often is the one on sex—I think it's called *Generation Upon Generation*.

When I was in graduate school this visiting anthropologist gave a lecture about Darwinism, sex and artistic practice. She said if you wanted to be stupidly

reductive you could say that art is the bird of paradise in the jungle collecting a bunch of colourful things, making this bed and trying to attract a mate. I like superficial and stupid things because they can be more economical. So I'm attracted to this idea that you're never really sure as an artist whether you are turned on by art in an intellectual, creative way, or whether it is just sexual. I don't think there is much emotional difference in your attachment to a project or an idea. You love it, you are obsessed with it, you want to pursue it, and that pursuit is similar to the pursuit of people we love. When Bronowski is talking about Newton I don't think he is physically in love. He is in the Newtonian Library, leaning back on that bust, and he is totally captivated by Newton's ideas. As a narrator he is able to show his emotional connection to the subject matter. I wanted to bring Bronowski back from the dead. The movie starts off as Frankenstein; you see the outline of his bowels and his stomach. So I'm resurrecting him. Bronowski wanted to bring Newton back and I wanted to bring Bronowski back.

He has a line in one of the programs where he says, "I would like to be able to tell you of transformation and change." One of the things that characterizes your work is how transformative it is. I get a sense that Bronowski provides you with a methodology, a way of working.

1–2. Video stills from *The Ascent of Man*, 2009, video, colour, sound, 15 minutes, 36 seconds.



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Yes. I brought him back from the dead for what I was doing—that piece was really about me making a film about that aspect of my practice. I think all my pieces bleed into one another.

What was the source of the Edward Holmes piece?

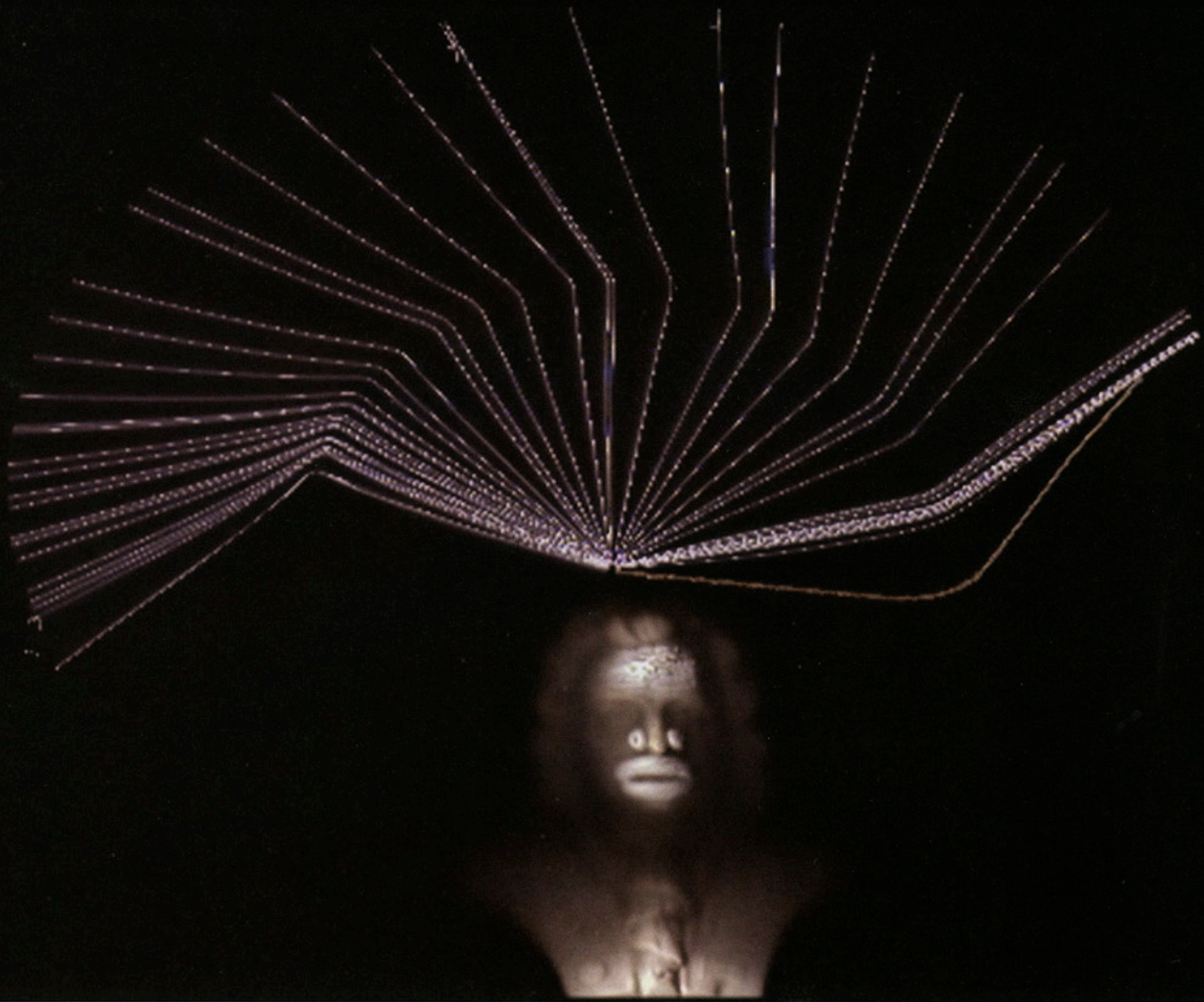
It came out of reading Bernal Díaz del Castillo's *The Conquest of New Spain*. He was Cortés's biographer and his text was used for many years as the historical document of Cortés's conquering of America's indigenous people. In the beginning what interested me was the way that he describes Cortés as this messianic figure; Díaz was one of the chief architects of the myth of Cortés. I wanted to take my reading of that book and turn it towards the Edward Holmes story, which is a narrative of Western domination. Of anecdotal interest, I guess, is how different the indigenous populations in Central and South America were treated by the colonizing cultures. As soon as Cortés gets there, he takes an indigenous wife. I think the Spanish viewed them as primitive but they didn't view them as not human. You can see

the difference between the number of indigenous people the Spanish left in Central America compared to the English, who were much more brutal. They didn't intermix. I think the English had very clear distinctions based on colours of skin and perhaps because the Spanish had been conquered by the Moors, they had more of a cultural mix. Edward Holmes comes out of this. I start off with a classical figure bust and then I put indigenous stereotypical features onto his face.

The figure that is almost ape-like?

Yes. That was the beginning of the idea in my movies that human figures generally oscillate around this proto-man. If there is something not quite human about them, then you can avoid the uncanny. You know it's not alive because it looks like a species of something, or a racial caricature that doesn't really exist.

You perfectly capture the tone of the recording diarist who would have been on the ship. Did you have to work hard on the tone of the language?



I had a friend who studied Old English literature and he helped me with the cadence and some of the wording. As I worked on the piece the text and the images changed. Like with the Bronowski piece, I'm thinking about the words as I'm making the piece. I would repeat this weird mantra about transformation and change. The words and the images almost grow up together. But it always starts off with me talking to myself.

It is interesting that your father was an evangelical Christian because in the script of *Edward Holmes* the idea that life shall eat life, death shall eat death sounds like some version of Christianity. At the end of *The Ascent of Man* you include the Kyrie Eleison, so Christian ideology and ritual is something that you find functional in the films?

Oh, yes. I don't think it's possible to make contemporary art, or art in Western culture, without taking into consideration hundreds and hundreds of years of religious commissions and sanctioned art. Modern art wants to start off with a totally clean slate but I see Donald Judd as one of the most puritanical artists you could possibly have. You could say that Judd was influenced by Zen Buddhism but I would say that he was more likely influenced by John Calvin. A lot of fundamentalized forms of religion are very anti-representational. The churches I grew up going to have nothing in them other than folding chairs. If you go back further, you can't even represent the prophet in Judaism and Muslim culture. So this conflict between representing something that is sublime and capturing the sublime through not representing it is very old. My work is about Western art oscillating between

1-2. Video stills from *The Story of Edward Holmes*, 2008, video, colour, sound, 14 minutes, 34 seconds.



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these two things. My films attempt to represent the sublime by not showing anything, or by showing everything. It's either nothing or too much.

Is there a Juddian joke built into the collapse of the boxes in *Anna*?

That's a reference to a film I was watching for inspiration about housing projects around the country, and the idea that we could build these big modernist block buildings as temporary structures and then every 10 years we could refresh them by knocking them down and building new ones. Like a throwaway Juddian box. I love Judd but the problem with a lot of contemporary art is that, like American politics, it becomes ideological. So you either want representation or you don't want it.

It's not the ideology of contemporary art that I find reflected in your work but images that remind me of Rebecca Horn, June Leaf, David Altmejd and sometimes Fischli/Weiss. You're pretty canny about contemporary art, so these associations wouldn't seem unusual?

They are all artists whose work I respect. The contemporary artist that probably had the most influence on me was Chris Marker. And I mentioned Švankmajer and then Paul McCarthy in sculpture.

I like what he does but the absurdity does sometimes get to me.

But your things have a Classicism about them. I mentioned Altmejd because of the severed glitzy arm that you have in *Anna*. It made me wonder if your world is a fragmented one that is inventing procedures to put itself together, or is it a broken world that is happy and self-sufficient in its ruined quality? Is there a dialogue going on between the fragment and the whole?

That's a good question. This might seem a bit strange, but I am always making a documentary about myself and my relationship to objects and cultural narratives. I devise a box and I suspect that something will happen within this box, but I am never quite sure what it will be. So the fragmentary nature is me, as a documentary filmmaker, trying not to assert too much of a voice that is artificial. This is how it plays out; these are the connections that are in there when I verbally talk about it. But I would suspect they are neither fragmentary nor moving to completion. It really is me acting out different ideas on objects and these actions can sometimes be fluid and connected and make sense of traditional film continuity. But then sometimes I get bored with traditionalist film, so *Anna* had a lot

less continuity than *The Ascent of Man*. The danger with formal continuity is that the illusion can overpower the idea. With that film I felt the romance, the music and the atmosphere were too successful. So with *Anna* I felt the need to step back and show people what is really happening as I'm working, and not just the formal continuity that is possible from these actions. I needed to show the truth of my practice. In some ways, *Anna* is a more honest piece and perhaps a less palatable one for that reason. So *Anna* went back to some of the things that *The Story of Edward Holmes* was trying to do. It was even more open-ended.

Did you intentionally set out to write a trilogy in doing *Holmes* and *Ascent* and *Anna*?

When I made *Edward Holmes* I thought I was going to do a serial thing but any time I say I'm going to do something, it ensures its own demise. If you see all my films you can see connections but the atmosphere I end up creating with each piece does take on a new life or a new dimension. There are these psycho-sexual tropes that echo throughout the work, different things resurface or reappear, and different connections can be made, but that aspect of my practice seems more like a traditional filmmaker. I have my western; my science fiction piece; I have my music video. I actually like each of my works to have a different genre interest. *Anna* was like a video that a teenage boy and his friends would have made. It had that sort of campiness to it. The film *Earth*, that I appropriated footage from in *Anna*, is a social realist film made to promote the wonders of modern agriculture to the Russian peasantry. *Anna* is what would have happened if a bunch of American teenagers got hold of the idea and tried making that film.

I want to ask you about the sounds in *Anna*. Where do they come from?

A lot of the sounds filtered down into the basement where I was making the film. I also didn't want to use music for that piece; I wanted to keep the sounds as real as possible and see what could happen. You hear footsteps and people's voices. You also hear the train from the tracks that go right above the studio. In the piece, you hear the train as this ominous, modernist machine that is the harbinger of progress but is also the harbinger of death. It acted as a constant threat coming to crush *Anna* and I really liked Tolstoy's weaving of that. Something like the car represents a totally different meaning to poor, urban kids; it's this harbinger of progress, power, wealth, status and sex.

Which is why the molded car gets fetishized and stroked in the film?

Yes. It's my version of *The Wire*. Kids will do anything, kill, cheat, steal and hurt people, to get that kind of status symbol. Personally, I've always hated cars. Even when I was in a rural environment, I rode my bike everywhere.

There is the line in *The Ascent of Man* that a storm was like a fit of weeping, which makes me think of the animated storm you fashioned from Cellophane and cotton batten.

I'm glad you saw it as a storm. I always worry about that piece reading poorly on the web because of the lower resolution. If you see it on the big screen you get a lot more detail. It is just Cellophane and cotton batten and the ground cover is all theatrical makeup.

You have said that you are interested in how little you need to tell a story.

It's something I spend a lot of time on. That storm took me about four months to make. It was the most exhaustive scene in the movie because I shot it so many times before I got it to look the way I wanted. I was rereading the novel back on my Dad's farm. One day I was out in the barn, about 200 yards from the house, and I got trapped when a huge storm hit. There was sideways rain, a foot of water on the ground and I was trapped for six hours. I have never been that close to a hurricane. I found out that when lightning strikes 50 feet in front of you it makes the air smell funny. My Dad's farm is on a big hill and you could see the flood coming and circling around below. The whole town was covered in mud and the rain actually took an entire trailer park into the valley. So I wanted to make a scene that felt like being in that storm, rather than the way the storm could be represented. The intangibility of a storm also seemed like a good place to start off a movie about *Anna Karenina*. It is something that is very abstract.

You don't need to have dreams; you just need to make films. There are times when they remind the viewer of the unusual territory of the dream world, a condition of not knowing exactly where you are but getting this visceral intensity.

I want to get to a state where you can see something that would be like that experience. I think dreams look either very abstract or very normal. Instead of a person really looking like a person, something about them looks a little different. It's not like their face is cut in half and Jesus Christ is crucified on the inside of their head, or anything like that. There is no symbolism in it. It is unnerving because you're looking at something that seems like it could be a person, that seems like it's going to be alive, but isn't. I don't even think you need to dream to have that experience; you just need to go to a funeral and look at



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1. *Horse*, 2011, C-print, 20 x 24".

2. Detail view of *Vehicle*, 2011, Plexiglas and plastic mold, 42 x 16 x 14.5".

someone lying in a casket. When you're looking at a film, you're always thinking about your own death because what is uncanny is seeing another person projected on this screen and moving around. Our ability to look at a videotaped recording of ourselves is a new phenomenon. They did this study where they showed a chimpanzee different gradations of chimp avatars on a screen. The first avatar would be cartoonish and the chimp wouldn't have much of a reaction to it. They had a stress monitor hooked up to the animal and the closer the avatar likeness

got, the more stressed and uneasy the chimp would become. So anytime you're looking at a film, you're dealing with uncertainty. It's different from theatre. In theatre you have living, breathing creatures in front of you who are asking you to participate in an illusion. With a film there is nothing alive in front of you; it is just the semblance of reality. They are zombies asking you to believe in something that is alive when they're not.

That's what you mean when you say that you're interested in some kind of dead cinema then?

Yes it has to do with the uncanniness of the living seeing the dead. You can see yourself dead; you can see yourself as this apparition on a screen that you have no control over.

I assume one of the reasons why you like stop animation is its insistence upon the artificiality of what you're seeing?

That is the thing that keeps me animating. I mean, it takes a long time and it is not the most productive way of doing things but it does automatically say to me and to the viewer, this is something constructed. Bugs Bunny was able to dress in drag and go around acting like a freak long before any person was. I think there is still the possibility of indirectly saying things about the world through total artifice. ■