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PARTICLE ACCELERATOR

Daniel Horn on the Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement, Geneva



„Biennale de l'Image en Mouvement“, Centre d'Art Contemporain Genève, 2018/2019, installation view

There are too many screen stars to keep track of; one is born every minute, it seems. With cheap, mobile technology capable of churning out films on demand, what is left for cinema, or film, or whatever anyone might call it today that resists the long form? One ongoing legacy of experimental film is the festival, which has joined forces with the curatorial platforms of the biennial to offer something of an experience outside of the usual arthouse cinemas.

Enter “The Biennial of the Moving Image,” which opened in Geneva last year and featured a carefully curated selection of films, all made in 2018. Daniel Horn gives a roundup of the variety of subjects on display, including what those displays say (or don't say) about the ever-growing culture of the screen.

“The Sound of Screens Imploding,” the title of the most recent Biennial of the Moving Image in Geneva, has a faintly dystopic ring to it, familiar from recent lifestyle and think pieces that connect volatile Apple stocks to jaded and broke iPhone users. Rather than suggesting social media fatigue or distrust with screen technologies more generally, the nine newly commissioned films for the biennial – several sprawling intermedia installations at the Centre d'Art and multi-venue live performances (by Ligia Lewis, Pan Daijing, and Elysia Crampton) – seemed to reinvest instead in the historical notion of a countercultural Expanded Cinema. Take “Abyss Film” (all works 2018), the latest collaboration between



Eduardo Williams with Mariano Blatt, „Parsi“, 2018, film still

James Richards and Leslie Thornton, the premiere of which was stated by the artists to be the work's only showing ever, and which managed to revive the idea of an experiential exclusivity and singularity (or simply nostalgia?). Here, the one-off screening was squarely at odds with much of contemporary art's penchant for swift screen transmission and dissemination. "Abyss Film" was also site-specific in that it contained footage created during a residency at Geneva's CERN, blending observational, architectural shots with visuals suggestive of both vermin and vaguely human matter, overlaid with noise. Watching and hearing the film produced a sensation of pure inscrutability, much the way the guided tour of the actual

facility on the opening day left one feeling disconnected, with an awkward sense of nescience. CERN is an acronym for the Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire; established in 1951, today it is the European Laboratory for Particle Physics, the world's largest of its kind.

Disorientation, dissonance, the alien, alongside references to political realities – from immigration to borders – represented some of the common subjects addressed in this biennial. Florent Meng's "The Lost Line" presented a slow-paced, mostly subterranean scenario centered around the Engaña, an almost 100-year-old abandoned tunnel project located in a remote landscape in northern Spain. Built over several decades under changing regimes, by means of forced labor under Franco, the tunnel – the film's dilapidated "subject" – testified to the recurring historical violence inherent in projects related to transportation (think of the roughly contemporaneous forced labor used in the expansion of the Reichsautobahn).

Travel – imagined as the possibility of pure, arbitrary movement – was thematized in Eduardo Williams's piece "Parsi." Viewers were transported to an overcast visual South teeming with scrawny-bodied, angular-faced queer local youth of color. "... seems like Los Angeles, seems like the surface of the moon ..." could be heard as part of the film's soundtrack. The line is taken from "No es" (It is not), a poem by the Argentinian Mariano Blatt, who recites his own work throughout the duration of the film. In combination, Williams orchestrated the dialogue of his characters on such topics as money, sex, soccer, and trivia to slip into the verses penned on those very same subjects, which then ran as subtitles under Williams's rust-hued images. "Parsi" is neither *cinéma*

vérité nor any other cinematic expression of humanist longing. Formally, Williams's techniques recall those of ethnographic surrealism: disembodied vision, unusual perspectives, and angles, all trademarks of Western self-othering in this latest heart-of-darkness zone, which we learn is Guinea-Bissau.

"Parsi"'s formal devices – and this holds true for several of the works on view – might best be characterized as a kind of filmic creolization, which according to one of its foremost theorists, Édouard Glissant, describes conditions in which "nothing is true, all is living." Creolization names both the way in which certain geographies are constituted and, equally, social conditions. Meriem Bennani's multi-screen installation "Party on the CAPS" put this geographical "living" on display by focusing on the liminal, non-sovereign island of CAPS, which is situated in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean and frequently encircled by US drones. CAPS' denizens consist primarily of displaced generations of Middle Eastern and North African descent. In this Near East futuristic micropolis, we witness the CAPS community giving their best to defy (or flout) the racist immigration policies that have landed them on this island given over to intermediate states of belonging. In this warped place, *sans papiers* are granted screen time not for their status as victims – left to drown at sea or corralled into camps – but for their having mutated into a sort of "Star Wars"-style diasporic Planet of the Semites. The film features cross-generational partiers enjoying "fusion" Middle Eastern street cuisine, a tasting menu of which Bennani served during the opening dinner with the help of a hip New York chef.

A similarly Dionysian cast roams a megalopolis introduced as a "setting for tragedy" in Tobias

Madison's "O Vermelho Do Meio-Dia." Shot in São Paulo in collaboration with the local collective MEXA, the film uses shots of these characters interspersed with activist footage of riot police intercut with a meandering psychedelic rock session. The heterogeneous gathering of gender-fluid, post-racial, partially destitute outcasts self-reflexively negotiate the terms of their identities as their on-screen presence unfolds. As one of the participants elaborates, any such terms regarding filmic depiction must be conscious of and defy expectations about what a motley crew of bohemian gender-bending lefties is supposed to look and act like. The film characterizes this complex as a "trap," such that the members of MEXA reject the possibility that they could be used for the purposes of allowing an audience "to entertain themselves with our image." To deny everyone this orientalist fantasy, one of the most poignant scenes in Madison's film centers around two queer protagonists (MEXA members, one of them wheelchair-bound), casually ensconced by the luxury items in their collector home, where they engage in a parody of utter contempt for the working poor. This "revolutionary play," as the film calls it, is ultimately conceived of as a technical device for casting heavily against type. "O Vermelho" is set during the run-up to Brazil's 2018 Presidential election of yet another bum-turned-strongman. The return of this apparently irresistible figure is similarly treated in Neïl Beloufa's Big Brother ensemble parable, "Restored Communication." Set in Iran, the film reuses the somewhat dated format typical of the reality show: pre-house flashbacks of the contestants' everyday lives, which reveal the ascension of a soon-to-be despotic ruler, Amir, as just one more white-collar sleazeball grifter.



Neil Beloufa, „Restored Communication“, 2018, film still

Such referencing of recent productions notwithstanding, the works in the Biennale, as a cross section of what contemporary moving image work might look like, all deviate in their own ways from the new/old normality of click-seeking, distractive speech acts. The modes of screen interaction on view in Geneva openly contested both the mobile device’s assault and degradation of the moving image on the one hand, and the various narcissistic performances of the self on the other, all of which rely on the transmission of channels operated in Silicon Valley. Video-making and the moving image are generally the one field where any art/life divide is most visibly and conceptually (if not institutionally) porous,

while the most dynamic and exposed practices appear to be those that critically pause and spin this gyrating screen-speech complex.

Biennale de l’Image en Mouvement 2018: “The Sound of Screens Imploding,” Centre d’Art Contemporain Genève and other venues, Geneva, November 8, 2018–February 3, 2019.