

A conversation between Abri de Swardt and Persilia Caton

Hi, you busy?

Want to talk about your exhibition *Catapult Screensaver* that we worked on together that was at MOT Projects in September 2013?

What is it about the screensaver that you find especially relevant today?

Good morning!

The sun is getting into my room at 05:30 so have started wearing those aeroplane eye flaps!

What attracts me to the screensaver is its digital dumbness, how it is a space-time filler, and kinetically aesthetic and memorial in the manner in which it enacts (a series of gestures) whilst the computer user is offline, or away.

I like the idea of a thing performing the same routine to a phantom audience, and the performance being ended abruptly, without ever really looking at it. So something about the negation of visually and attention through moving image.

Tape newspaper over your window...

I have been reading about Aby Warburg's project *Mnemosyne Atlas*. The action of Warburg's process of constantly re-ordering his images was described by Giorgio Agamben in *Notes on Gesture* as "not a fixed repertoire of images, but virtually a moving representation of the gestures of Western humankind" every image "is the reification and effacement of gesture" that "maintains the dynamic (as in Muybridge's split-second photographs, or in any photograph of a sporting event)".

This is relevant when thinking about the screensaver as 'atlas' except that its randomness is generated by "digital dumbness" as you call it and not by a human. I don't want to get into the digital vs. analog dichotomy but I am wondering if you think of the screensaver as performing an atlas or an archive?

Warburg's *Atlas* as a pedagogic device has been milling about in my mind as a means of navigating a cluster of flat objects (or things flattened), and in particular the notion of him crisscrossing the Atlantic with these cumbersome panels. An excessive flatness in flux. In preparing *Catapult Screensaver*, Warburg's *Lecture on a Serpent Ritual*, an ontology of sorts where he traces the medical emblem of the Rod of Asclepius back to the lightning strike, had me thinking of gravitational velocity as a carrier of a kind of vertical history (the Rod of Asclepius lifted from antiquity also as symbol of the printing press). Vertical here becoming an almost archaeological idiom as things keep popping up as you head down (the tumblr archive). Warburg, along with Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* - which in its narratological back-and-forth drift preempts the modality of online browsing and multiple tabs - oscillates between the points of archive and atlas.

I was attempting with the screensavers seen in the desktop installations of *Dutch Rubber* (2013) and *A plume of grass can be a reservoir* (2013) to collapse the cartographic and conservational registers imbedded in making visible a collection of obscured images (photographs not excavated from official archives).

This has something to do with the choreography of these screensavers, and that they move over video clips in windows: moving still images over moving moving images.

I am thinking about the processual characteristics of your work, especially the selecting, cutting and arranging to make the collage elements. This mode of gathering together and reforming content is much more of a horizontal, associative approach to constructing information, and not closed or succinct in an encyclopedic fashion. We are clearly in a different time in terms of how we theorize the consumption of the image, but since you are talking about vertical and linear History as a discipline, and photography is central to this invention, how do you think about the role of photography in your project? Especially since you are using sources that construct and transmit a very specific study of the world.

The intangible nature of image flows has made the soft brushing up of one idea against another a weighty matter.

My work has quite a loose relationship to image classification; I tend to approach subjects with the aim to amass a swarm of images. The gathering of multiple photographs - not in the editorial linearity, generically speaking, of the book form - but in simultaneity. Collage takes photography as a sculptural material, the hand reaches into the lens.

I want to approach the seductive, directed nature of published photographs as malleable. In *Catapult Screensaver*, the photographs I used had an aerial underpinning - extreme sport leisure photography, early 90s stock images of tired office workers at ergonomic desks from massage manuals, and the calendar and coffee table mainstays of birds in flight and aerial shots of the British coastline. So things nestling with parameters and intangibilities, which in the costuming for the performance *Day4Night* (*flying in from the dark he nearly parted my hair*) I have cut into Instagram-type squares, or torn into mosaic segments. My practice thus inhabits or ventriloquises the modality of photography, emanating a difference through excess and proximity.

We've talked about the parallel between the aerial imagery and the mode of the screensaver and online soaring, but can you expand on the activities you chose and the elements of embarrassment, failure and political incorrectness within these?

The materials initially seem innocuous, and in some cases present themselves as altruistic. Grandiose adventurism through ballooning - seen in Matt Silver-Vallance's 2013 attempt to fly from Robben Island to Cape Town in aid of the Nelson Mandela Children's Hospital by way of a bunch of helium balloons, and the 2005 photographs of G-OLLI III, the first fancy shaped hot air balloon, lit in Chateau D'Oex a year after the Sunday Lunch Club's endeavour to take it to air went astray - lapses from whimsy into ignominy.

Photographs of outdoorsy South Africans in enjoyment at the height of the apartheid State of Emergency similarly engages race through escapism. This is a gradual jolting sensation, as the images start to undo themselves a bit in relation to the voiceover. In the performance work two men, one only wearing a kite on his back, the other just an office shirt, face a wall, evokes a silly punishment and abandonment of labour, and thus withdrawal from the desktop. The embarrassment of these historical elements had to extend beyond their content into the embarrassment of making work that deals with such materials, the embarrassment of trend, the embarrassment of homoeroticism, the embarrassment of not knowing how to use algorithms.

Does dealing with historical events that are embarrassing, perhaps, have less risk involved? Why go back to specific news-based instances instead of inventing fictions?

Shame as a historical condition can be banal and didactic, whereas pride or treason can retroactively take on ethical registers (I am thinking here of Genet's writing in *Thief's Journal*). The collections of photographs I compiled as screensavers are quite ambivalent, if not complacent, in their pleasantness, in their fantasy. They even seem unashamedly nostalgic, and propose a perverse relation to history. I think of them as icebergs melting as they glide across the screen, a kind of camp self-ridicule and camaraderie bouncing between them. These almost arcane bytes of news, some balloons and some white men, up North and down South, took on a fictional register in the process of decontextualisation in the matrix of the screensaver.

I think the speed of the screensaver, for news to travel and for history to develop is more akin to melting ice cubes or even snow flakes. As an expansion of your practice as a narrative, or perhaps more fittingly a dislodged collection, how, if at all, does this project inform your final piece in the degree show?

The element of queer politics visible in the sampling of *Proteus* and *Blue in Dutch Rubber* becomes more complexified, personalised and theatrical in my current project. I think I have come to inhabit and withdraw from the digital space in a way that is now as immersive as harrowing, whereas in *Catapult Screensaver* the sense of distance, separation and abandon have a colder edge.

*Catapult Screensaver* developed quite a bit in conversation with you, and seemed to grow from walks, dinner parties, g- and whatsapp chats. In another way it popped-up and dissolved rather quickly. How did you as the curator experience senses of time in its installation?

Certainly the project duration could be thought of as a pop up exhibition, with the 1-night performance. Obviously we have other commitments and the intensity and frequency of discussion has waned, but the interest doesn't dissolve. Curating is an invitation to start a conversation that has no fixed end.

Images of *Catapult Screensaver* at <http://www.motinternational.com/exhibitions/abri-de-swardt-catapult-screensaver/>