

Flash Art News

WORLD

Antonioni's Gaze

Lupe Núñez-Fernández

Michelangelo Antonioni's disappearance from the world of film-making happened a while before his recent death. But his passing has been difficult to escape, what with all the obits and film clips — oscillating vestiges of his searching, post-humanistic perspective within the realm of the visual arts. Oscillating is probably a weak way of putting it; these days it seems like the art student's love affair with the Antonionesque, and

the retro-Modernist at large, is reaching pendulum crest. And in doing so, paying homage to the filmmaker's primary fixation: modern alienation falling through the cracks in the surface of what seems real. Moving away from his initially neo-realist style, Antonioni experimented with technique and, filtering his vision through slowly moving, exquisite photography, soon reached an aesthetically impeccable, almost

self-referential facture. At its heart is a subversive use of the loaded act of looking, and especially of looking for too long. The counter-intuitive economy of the camera's lingering shot in the nearly mute scenes of *The Eclipse* (1962) reflects the inertia and impossibility of sustaining human communication. The same, decelerated and eroded by the disembodied point of view of *The Passenger's* (1975) famous final long-take, sug-

gests loss of communication with the self and with any single set version of reality. In all, the breakdown of the individual is shown through a frustratingly generous use of time and languorous long takes. Rife with a critique of repressed middle-class angst, sexual superficiality, spiritual vacuity and impotence, often climaxing in dramatically anarchic, or alternatively mysteriously unresolved results of natural beauty, the silent long take requires a certain kind of patience from its audience. And, as it happens, so does Antonioni's fascination with self-contradiction, with beauty that often presents itself along an unusual foil: nonchalance growing into boredom. But this nonchalance is usually paired with an arresting sense of passion, an eroticized duality not unexplored.

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From left: Clemens von Wedemeyer, *Silberhöhe*, 2003. Film 35 mm transferred on DVD, 10 mins. Courtesy Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Paris; Johanna Billing, *Project for a revolution*, 2000. Video, 3 mins. Courtesy Hollybush Gardens, London.



THESSALONIKI, GREECE

1st Thessaloniki Biennale

Yulia Tikhonova

The 1st Thessaloniki Biennale, organized by the Greek State Museum of Contemporary Art, debuted this last May. With three guest curators Catherine David, Maria Tsantsanoglou and Jan-Erik Lundström, 12 parallel exhibitions

took place during a three-month period around this multicultural and peripheral city, proving that Greece has successfully merged onto the road to 'biennialization.' Along with September's inauguration of the 1st Athens Biennale, it is clear that the country, defined by a stale guidebook as the "birthplace of modern society," is striving to boost a local art scene and join the more upbeat, contemporary pace of the Western model.

Desiring to set apart the Thessaloniki Biennale from the proliferating competition of other international events, the show's organizers drew upon concepts from the work of Michel Foucault: *Heterotopias* (1967).

Foucault articulates a claim about physical spaces as both mythic and real at once, unlike the fundamental

unreal space of utopia.

Foucault claims all societies to include heterotopias, public/private spaces such as cemeteries, hospitals, schools, museums, gardens, fairgrounds and brothels alike. Heterotopias are located between an ideal (utopia) and its antipode of oppression, destruction and control (dystopia).

Introducing 68 artists from areas not often at the center of Western attention, the Biennial curators brought together artworks from the Middle East, Latin America and the ex-Soviet Union. The art produced in the "gray zones" contested today's geo-political boundaries and proved the existence of new artistic sensibilities generated far from today's usual cultural centers. Many of the artists no longer live where they were born; by moving to

other localities they epitomized the dynamic of heterotopias and transcendental nature of contemporary art.

At the Greek State Museum of Contemporary Art and Thessaloniki Port exhibition venues, David choose the organizing premise of "di/visions," wherein her selection addressed the conflicts of borders, generations, politics and war.

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Tracy Rose, *What is it that makes today's children so different, so appealing?*, 2006. Video projection. Right: Daniel and Geo Fuchs, *Gefangnis Bautzen, Besucherzimmer*, 2004. C-print, 170 x 135 cm.





Olafur Eliasson, *Green River* 1998, Moss Norway.

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From the chic anti-authoritarian disenchantment of *Blow up* (1966) and its double takes, to the more flagrantly open focus of *Zabriskie Point*'s (1970) protesting, disestablishment politics, it's no wonder Antonioni's complicated mix of sleek but difficult visuals and veiled radical messages have garnered him a long shelf life, undoubtedly connected to the near-immediate acceptance of their status as art in and of themselves. Antonioni's themes and language are

still valid within the frameworks of later generations of art production and fit into an ever-evolving theoretical canon, from post-feminism to spatial studies. But perhaps more than anything, it is Antonioni's philosophical questioning of art itself, of time and the limits of human perception, which can be seen reincarnated in works that bear what could be called the post-Antonioni gaze. Much has been written about Antonioni's architecture of vision, his manipulation and structure of pace

and perspective and his signature way of looking both at narrative and at film itself. In his films, for example, walking through an empty city can be so fastidiously slow it becomes almost funereal. Walking becomes like giving a long last look at something that will soon disappear as the focus gets closer and closer to a figurative vanishing point, like in the aforementioned last scene of *The Passenger*. But it doesn't, just the opposite. In Antonioni's films, the commonplace, already part of a dead world, becomes exotic, and stranger with every step. His intentionally flat characters' knowledge of the obvious continually diminishes, and what has previously been experienced or documented becomes impossible to interpret.

Truth is similarly presented as precariously and theatrically unreal in the growing number of contemporary artworks paying direct homage to his films. Take Clemens von Wedemeyer's *Silberhöhe* (2003) or André Guedes' *Final Sequence* (2007), two very different recent tributes to the filmic and emotionally fragmented shorthand of the last scenes of *The Eclipse*. Or consider Girardet and Müller's ironic appropriation of Antonioni-style bourgeois isolation in their dual screen projection *Mirror* (2003); Barbara Probst's inclusion of stills from *Blow up* within her layered photo installations, or Johanna Billing's *Zabriskie Point*-like counter-culture players in her *Project for a revolution* (2000), all of which wear the sources of their references outright.

Less conspicuously, Antonioni's oeuvre is also the source of an unconscious, slightly manneristic visual language of self-aware multiple narrative. This is distilled as a special way of seeing things from different points of view at once, and doubting the truth behind what is seen. Maybe this could define the post-Antonioni gaze, one that can be read, for example, within the melancholy, figuratively and factually

abandoned architectural spaces and post-apocalyptic still lives of Jason Oddy; in the conceptually synchronous double perspective upon the same subject shown in Evariste Richer's front and back (or inside-out) images and sculptures alluding to the director's films; in the political, Red Desert-like primal, environmentally displacing symbolism of Olafur Eliasson's double-take-inducing *Green River* (1998), to name a few. What emerges is a dialogue of confusion and disappearance, expanding an unresolved set of meta-filmic questions on authority, perspective and ontological weight, ever evolving as more than quotations.

As in *Blow Up*'s eponymous photograph, or the doctored, disintegrating video in *The Mystery of Oberwald* (1981), the sediment of truth in all of the narratives becomes smaller and more difficult to perceive the more that's made of it. Time and again the films remind the viewer that any semblance between the actions and reality is purely coincidental. This self-contradictory duality, of showing but admitting there is certainly more than one point of view, is succinctly expressed in *Michelangelo's gaze*, the title of the 2004 film documenting an aging Antonioni's encounter with Michelangelo's restored sculpture of Moses, which predicates 'looking' on the director's touching the shape of the marble, and vice versa. Antonioni, who was bound to a wheelchair at the time of filming, is shown walking out of the church. What could be real is immediately cast as mere filmic illusion, a mimicry of reality to be doubted, and always, always, asserting its presence through its slow but certain disappearance.

—LNF

Left to right: Christoph Girardet & Matthias Müller, *Mirror*, 2003. Still from 35mm cinemascop; Evariste Richer, *Blow Up*, 2003. Tennis ball. Photo: Philippe Chancel.





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SOURCE: Flash Art 40 O 2007

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