

Screengrab6

Catalogue Essay

Velocity: change / at speed / everywhere

The dawn of the 20th century represented the grand opening up of narrative, of formal space and of our perception of time. Central to this recalibration was the moving image dreamscape. Cinema reconfigured our collective mind's eye: the Lumiere Brothers brought locomotives steaming into theatres and Parisian factory workers spilling into the light of day / Picasso and Braque saw the relationship between form, perspective and time and gave birth to Cubism / while the Italian Futurists, knowing a good thing when they saw it, took these formal experiments and wedded this new found perception to their virulent manifestos. Jilting history and orthodoxy for the romance of the future and the ferocious power of electricity and distributed networks (radio / rail / flight paths) the Futurists carved a tradition of technological engagement that remains to this day.

The 20th century is bookended by such fascinations – of the play of light, of experiments in three dimensions, and our obsession with communication technologies. But with these attractions and their repetition come the consequence of invention: the accident. As Paul Virilio has observed:

Overexposure is the live broadcast, it is real-time replacing the past, present and future. A society that heedlessly privileges the present necessarily privileges the accident... So somewhere the end of the future and the end of the past, in our societies of immediacy, of ubiquity, of instantaneity, are necessarily the advent of the accident. (Virilio, 1994)¹

The icons of this relationship are speed, image making and the industry of war. It was the changing ratios of technology and the terror that they engendered which spirited otherwise sane politicians and emperors and the military arms of their ruling parties to war in 1914. They feared the Russian railroad, the British naval fleet and the gauge of the German machine gun. Similarly it is the speed and dexterity of technology which governs the balance of power in 2014. The instantaneity of relational data, the scope and penetration of satellites and the omnipresence of image capture devices breed their own revolutions, conflicts and paranoia. Within this evolving lexicon of visual communication methodologies exists the artist / the cultural observer / the media analyst. As we watch the quaint windmills of Robert Wise's *The Sound of Music* evolve into the animé dreamscapes of Jamie Hewlett's *Gorillaz* to the giant wind turbines dotting the coastlines at the ends of the world like icons of a distant solarpunk future, we are constantly witnessing change in shape and in form and at speed.² It is the image maker who tracks the temperature and nature of these prevailing forces and by extension our collective reality echoes these visions with ghost-like tracings. It could be said that at the heart of this creative exchange is the quantification of difference – in speed, position and direction. Mapping the various social, political and cultural consequences of this by registering – and archiving - the vector shapes of our shared reality we can see the past as the science of the future. Indeed, it just may be the making of us, this velocity of things.

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The rushing up of the Earth from below as we leap into the unknown is a strong pervasive force. We witness this image in our collective mediated histories time and time again: in Tullio Crali's Futurist aeropittura painting *Nose Dive Into the City* from 1939 / in the GoPro footage from the helmet of space jumper Felix Baumgartner / in Robert Drew's 9/11 photograph, *The Falling Man* / to Sandra Bullock's plunge back to earth in Alfonso Crurón's 2013 film *Gravity*.³ Authors, artists, designers and futurists have witnessed, imagined and predicted technological states of change, at speed everywhere for the best part of a century. The comings and goings of objects, the rhizomatic fever of

life - of memories and of perception - is the stuff of both nature and the machine but also the stuff of change - of a compelling need to move forward, at pace.

This velocity is expressed by data and scientific measurement as much as it is by our personal perception of such change. We constantly bear witness to the variable rapidity of velocity, from the reconfiguration of physical space to the fluctuations of our emotions and thoughts. In physics we understand this to be the boundary layer, a layer of fluid that is influenced by the speed and direction of a moving object. We too are influenced as much by our observations of the object itself as we are of the effects that object's movement has on our environment. As an inherently visual society, we are attracted to the influence of change upon ourselves and our immediate surrounds. And it is visual evidence of this change that we seek to capture, to have and to hold – one image from an infinite number of angles. We tap, snap and archive these evidential phenomena incessantly via analogue hand and by machine sensor. The immediacy of these experiences is more tangible and traceable than they ever have been before.

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Screengrab6 seeks to investigate this change – in direction, position, speed and most importantly context. It is as much about movement and shifting points of view as it is about studying objects from a fixed position. Velocity operates under various guises: hypervelocity exists at supersonic speeds in often imperceptible parcels of reality, while glacial velocity is represented by incremental modicums of change over a long extended period of time, while terminal velocity is the final act – the ultimate rendition - often going nowhere, preserved in its inertia back *here* where we started.

The artists whose work has been shortlisted for **Screengrab6** interpret the notion of velocity in the broad spectrum of these terms. Through the technology and mechanics of visualisation they depict and explore velocity as a shifting coordinate, as an exploratory reconnoitre, as a fine grain study of the present and the future state of things – in flux – via the medium of the screen.

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It is this notion of the screen as a medium and a mechanism of display that is challenged here - its spatiality, its aspect ratio, the orientation of its perspective and of course its temporal linearity. The works submitted for **Screengrab6**, as in previous iterations, recognise the signal bending past by the likes of Nam June Paik and Jud Yalkut and the theorist Wolfgang Ernst⁴ as well as the static and formal subversions of the screen as an enclosed two dimensional plane by contemporaries such as Chris Cunningham, McLean Fahnstock and even Craig Walsh whose frames are often as soft and exposed as the images themselves. The digital screen in portrait mode is not new,⁵ but “vertical cinema” is becoming a playful emergent form, precipitated by mobile devices and their iUsers. The portrait orientation of the screen (or as it maybe, the device) has had a growing influence on the format of screen display in the gallery space and elsewhere.⁶ Several such works feature in **Screengrab6** this year, Justin Lincoln's *SlipStream2* (USA) and Stephen Hilyard's *Waterfall* (USA) exploit this approach by accentuating the screen's verticality with walls of rushing water and glitches. Similarly Parisa Ghaderi's *Keep Calm* assumes a much more literal portraiture style both in its subject matter and composition. Ghaderi's work along with the technically similar *Twilight Shimmer* (Australia) by Luhsun Tan, reflect another digital practice born from the network – the video loop. This early net art form, popularised via the rough pixel GIF file format, has enjoyed a renaissance of late as a vehicle for memes and a shortcut to pop cultural references particularly slices of HBO and AMC⁷. This has been popularised even further in the mobile device realm, where file size is less political and image quality more fetishized, here the GIF's cinematic heir apparent is the *Cinemagram*; a nostalgic app perhaps but also an extension of video's lexicon. In **Twilight**

Shimmer we see the glister of the ocean, the puff of the steam engine and the rolling clouds - over and over and over again. This is classic mobile-app steampunk.

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Rose Staff adopts a multi-channel approach for her work *The Space Between Us* (Australia), an extension of a mapping performance in Tallinn, Estonia. Staff superimposes traces and coordinates – the movement, shape and direction of her expedition – over triangulated image fragments of architectural shapes and landscapes. The three video channel work is by design and not coincidence, the triangle is an enclosed space, the three image vessels a terminal construction – a self-contained journey. A memory by geography as much as it is by consciousness. There is an effort here to examine the form and shape of the pixelated image as much as it is a shuffling – albeit a carefully handled one – of stacks of video layers. Theodore Tagholm approaches this fragmenting of the moving image within the frame itself in his short piece, *Plain Sight* (UK). We are above looking down, we are moving, the camera is steady – gliding – but the world slips and splits like panes of glass below us. A highway, a suburban street, it is modern urban America. As the image slips and repositions itself we see new forms and new meanings in a manner that recalls Oliver Ratsi's *Anarchitecture* series from 2010.⁸ Tagholm's appropriated image stock is drone-like, it is uncomfortable, we are in a cockpit – a helicopter perhaps – we see a city skyline, a level crossing, pedestrians. We watch.

Joana Silva's *Black Horse* (UK) is an image appropriation which achieves a similar feat yet in a haunting, almost ethereal manner. The sequence is a sample from Andrei Tarkovsky's 1966 film *Andrei Rublev* of a horse picking itself up off a sandy beach. But there is no shimmering sun here, little light at all, the horse seems locked in a struggle as Silva folds the sequence several times, playing with time as much as she challenges the format itself carving the imprint of the horse into the surrounding image like ripples in a topographical map. Silva has taken a knife to each frame of the sequence, cutting out the form and movement of the horse and re-assembling it with black thread. This provides not only a texture to the reconstituted image sequence but also a hesitation in the horse's movements and an uncertainty for the viewer – is this a healthy animal, free to move and act as it pleases or are we witnessing its final death roll? There is a moment when we are lead to believe through the subtle manipulation of time and layering of the image fragments that the horse may in fact fail to rise from the sandy escarpment.

With each of these works we are of course dealing with fragments - we are cutting literally into the substance of the image – with intent – turning pixel perfect framing into neat angles of repetition or scuffing the jagged edges of a physical negative to accentuate a haunted dreamlike impression of the real. Briefly captured / in a loop / at terminal velocity.

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A much more visceral and organic experiment in image manipulation and exaggeration is present in the work of Iaroslav Ianovskyi (Ukraine) and Will Copps (Germany) whose works *On the Horse* and *Target* are more willing to allow the nature of captured light and the properties of the recorded image file to dictate their approach to assemblage. This is exposure of the fabric of the digital image. This is the mapping of the movement, direction and change in light as seen with the lens of the camera – all of which are at the mercy of the tweak and the bump of the software plug-in. This is a violent yet beautiful unfurling of the signal; rough and playful. Ianovskyi in particular is marking the upheavals in his country – “this is how it feels, *right now*” – not with tanks, and bodies and flags, but with the volatile liquid of modernity – the digital image. We are looking through something, we are not seeing, the act of looking is irrelevant now. Perhaps we are merely feeling the disorientation that

he feels as the mass media machine fills in the gaps with headlines, video grabs and sound bites. This is thoughtful, challenging film making: a streetscape / a puff of smoke / a burnt copper image.

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Time is being observed here; measured. In this place we can discern its passing by its accumulation as much as we can lament its escape by its absence. In Justin Lincoln's *One Image After Another* (USA) the occasional glimpse of a rational video frame flashing from behind the stretched digital fabric provides a split second envelope through which the audience is permitted entry into the stream. While Billy Sims' *Tempo Rubato* (USA) literally stacks the frame with rapidity and repetition achieving a sameness that is both edifying and monstrous – her lips / that pose / his eyes – the more we look for change the more we appear to stay the same. In *Shooting Loops* by Stuart Pound (UK) it is not fragments we are offered but instead the opportunity to watch time unfold in sequence via the Wachowski Brothers' 1999 film *The Matrix*. This is a simple trick, yet a revealing one all the same. As we watch we see the process, we understand the methodology; we can sense the passing of time by watching its deliberate measured examination. We can feel this too in the incessant sound of breathing in *WIATR/ODDECH* by Katarzyna Parejko (Poland). The audio dominates the claustrophobic three minutes Parejko asks us to endure. Here a pale slender figure breathes in the fabric of the blustery curtains, figuratively pushes Sam Mendes' plastic shopping bag along the footpath,⁹ wheezes amidst the twisting spirals of snow and bitumen and the bitter cold recalling the desaturated palette of a Wim Wenders or even Vincent Gallo. The breathing keeps time, it is relentless, suffocating. In the grooves of the young man's rib cage, in the rise and fall of his chest we can feel the crushing velocity of the present.

What technology and history permit is perspective, if not to learn to at least see the emergent patterns. Emily McFarland's *Zabriskie Point Reversed* (Scotland) takes a sequence from Michelangelo Antonioni's 1970 film *Zabriskie Point* and plays it in reverse. The initial sequence, with the late afternoon light - the fringe of blood orange on glass and steel – belies the ferocity of what has just occurred, and what has yet to reveal itself here in time's new configuration. It is a clever conceit and one we have seen before, yet the reversed soundtrack and the ironic final image assemblage plays much more effectively than in the original in depicting the consumer apocalypse in the final years of the counter-culture movement.¹⁰ This re-edit by McFarland then becomes the perfect companion piece to the fire and brimstone that was the Maysles Brother's 1970 documentary *Gimme Shelter* which documented the Rolling Stone's fateful misadventure at Altamont which had taken place a mere three months previously.

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In a similarly meditative style but with a much more prescient foreboding is Ivar Veermäe's *Crystal Computing (Google Inc., St. Ghislain)* (Germany) in which the artist as observer trains his camera upon a nondescript industrial facility on the outskirts of St. Ghislain in Belgium. The facility, one of the largest in the world, stores Google's cloud computing data on some 300,000 servers. Veermäe's observational images are taken at a distance depicting a desolate frosty isolation - it is cold in this corner of the kingdom, perfect for stable computing. Fog is present in many of the images, there is ice on the ground, steam from the cooling towers hiss into the opaque and expressionless sky. The facility – the gateway to personal, corporate and government data stores – lies innocuously behind barbed wire fencing like a giant white obelisk. This is the moment before the click, the analogue stasis before the algorithm kicks in. Here in Veermäe's view of the cloud we are witnessing the latent velocity of information. While Veermäe watches the watchers, Malcolm Litson (UK) is more explicit with his analysis of the ubiquity of machine vision. *SYNTAX* (the end titles read: "*dedicated to Alan Turing, born 1912*") depicts the inside rather than the outside / information as database object /

information stripped of its virtuality / information with a human context. Here the machine language of communication and digital life is tattooed across the screen, the cameras point back, examining, recording, archiving. There is acceleration here too, values change and coordinates shift as we go about our business filling the data stores building up an expansive replicant profile within the obelisk.

There is a recognised need¹¹ emerging within society to map the velocity and economies of Big Data with a view to not only creating it and controlling it, but comprehending its implications. Its origins and its destination are important but visualising this is beyond most of us and possibly only the preserve of the machines and their masters. Antoine Schmitt's *7 billion pixels* (France) attempts to visualise the impossible. How do we understand the human species as a number on a screen? Anecdotes abound: if you counted to 7 billion out loud it would take you 200 years to complete the task / 7 billion is the number of text messages sent in the United States every single day / 7 billion steps will get you around the globe 133 times. According to the United Nations we theoretically crossed the 7 billion mark on Halloween in 2011.¹² But what does this look like? How do we understand a concept such as 7 billion, let alone that figure in terms of people's lives?

Schmitt's approach is deceptively simple; he uses the humble pixel to represent each person on earth. The rest becomes a calculation based on the preferred contemporary standard for digital image display, 1080P. If each pixel represents 1 person, then a 1080P pixel display can present one million people per second moving left to right in a silent march of white noise. It takes Schmitt's *7 billion pixels* one hour and fifty-six minutes to display a pixel for every living human on the planet for a minuscule fraction of their existence. This is a very big number which only hints at the incalculable value that lies behind it. The aggregation, licensing, security and privacy of our data will be at the core of much of our relationship with the future of technology in the decades ahead. It is the one thing that can touch us, explain us, find us and see us. As Sandy Pentland, a believer in Big Data and Director of the Human Dynamics Lab at MIT, observes:

If you could see everybody in the world all the time, where they were, what they were doing, who they spent time with, then you could create an entirely different world. You could engineer transportation, energy, and health systems that would be dramatically better. It's this history of thinking about signals and people together, and how people work via these computer systems, and what data about human behaviour can do, that led me to the realization that we're at a phase transition. (Pentland, 2012)¹³

As we move forward, we change. As our lives take on new ideas and new demands and new ambitions we shift gear, we change direction, we close off circuits and where possible re-route new ones. We manoeuvre our way through the slipstream of those who came before us and in turn we disrupt and alter the information flow for others. This is the great velocity of things of which we are all a part. Here on the screen is but a fraction of that story.

Mitch Goodwin 02014*

Screengrab Founding Director and Curator

END NOTES & LINKS

- ¹ Virilio, P. (1994). *The vision machine*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press ; London : British Film Institute. (P.109)
- ² The icon of the windmill is often used to symbolise motion and change but also idealistic notions of freedom, progress and futurity. We can see this in the memes of Julie Andrews' iconic image from the *Sound of Music* which has been jammed with machine guns and Motorhead lyrics (Google image search: "Sound of Music graffiti"). The iconography is even more explicit in Jamie Hewlett and Damon Albarn's imagined universe from the Gorillaz 2005 video clip, *Feel Good Inc*. For more on the emerging aesthetics of solarpunk see recent posts by Miss Olivia at <http://missolivialouise.tumblr.com/>.
- ³ For more information on aeropittura, including Filippo Maseroero's aerial photography experiments, see the Guggenheim Museum's mini-site, *Italian Futurism: Reconstructing the Universe* : <http://exhibitions.guggenheim.org/futurism/aeropittura/>. For more on the Baumgartner space jump, see *Mission to the Edge of Space* at <http://www.redbullstratos.com/>. And for an account of the politics which embroiled Robert Drew's photograph see Tom Junod's 2009 *Esquire* article, *The Falling Man*, <http://www.esquire.com>.
- ⁴ Wolfgang Ernst notes a separation between the medium and the cultural product - that the cultural artefact is entirely separate from the medium's channels which allow its passage. Content operates on human historical time while the signal, and the channels which permit passage, are operating on machine time. For more on this see: Ernst, W., & Parikka, J. (2013). *Digital memory and the archive*. University of Minnesota Press. For works which explore and challenge this hypothesis see Nam June Paik and Jud Yalkut's 1966 collaboration, *Beatles Electroniques*. Also see Chris Cunningham's *New York Is Killing Me* (2010) and McLean Fahnstock's *Grand Finale* (2010) both of which challenge the form of the screen and the substance of the signal.
- ⁵ In particular see Bill Viola's 1996 work, *The Crossing*, archived at <http://www.sfmoma.org>. Also see Viola's more recent experiments with the vertical form at <http://billviola.com>.
- ⁶ *Vertical Cinema* is a series of large-scale, site-specific works presented on 35 mm celluloid and projected vertically with a custom-built projector in vertical cinemascope. See: <http://www.verticalcinema.org/>. For more examples see Josh Lowensohn's article, *If portrait video is wrong, these artists don't want to be right*, <http://www.theverge.com/>.
- ⁷ For more on the resurgence of the GIF and the growing proliferation of the cinemagraph see the author's article *The Death of the GIF?* here: <http://mitchgoodwin.com/2013/06/10/the-death-of-the-gif/>. Further to this see *The Good, the Bad, the GIFs* (<http://www.theatlantic.com/>) and Liz Lanteri's article, *Tony Soprano Gifs Proving He Was Boss*, (<http://www.buzzfeed.com>).
- ⁸ See Olivier Ratsi's *Anarchitecture* series here: <http://www.ratsi.com/works/wysi-not-wyg>.
- ⁹ For the scene in question from Sam Mendes' *American Beauty*, see: <http://youtu.be/uDrSMnkth0o>.
- ¹⁰ For an historical account of Antonioni's film see Vincent Canby's review after the film's original release in February 1970 in *The New York Times*. Search "Zabriskie Point" at <http://www.nytimes.com>.
- ¹¹ See Evgeny Morozov's article in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, *What you whistle in the shower: How much for your data?* Which has been reproduced here: <http://cryptome.org/2014/08/morosov-how-much-your-data.htm>. Also see Sandy Petland's *Social Physics* (Penguin, 2014) and Jaron Lanier's *Who Owns the Future* (Simon & Schuster, 2014).
- ¹² For more on this population milestone see the National Geographic mini-site, *Seven Billion*: <http://video.nationalgeographic.com.au/video/news/7-billion/ngm-7billion> and *The Guardian* mini-site, *Crowded Planet*: <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/interactive/2011/oct/28/world-population-growth-7-billionth-person>. For the latest world population estimate see: <http://www.worldometers.info/watch/world-population/>.
- ¹³ Pentland, A. S. (Producer). (2012, 30/08/12). *Reinventing Society In the Wake of Big Data*. [Interview Transcript] See: <http://www.edge.org/conversation/reinventing-society-in-the-wake-of-big-data>.
- * *The Long Now Foundation uses five-digit dates, the extra zero is to solve the deca-millennium bug which will come into effect in about 8,000 years. The Long Now Foundation was established in 01996 to provide a counterpoint to today's accelerating culture and help make long-term thinking more common. See: <http://longnow.org/about/>*