

Off Screen

BILL HARRIGAN AT THE ROTTERDAM FILM FESTIVAL

DURING THE LAST TEN DAYS of January, anyone wandering the rainy streets of Rotterdam at night could savor the spectacle of Isabella Rossellini being electrocuted, repeatedly and ecstatically, in a seven-minute looped film projected onto the top four floors of a skyscraper. Conceived collaboratively by Rossellini and director Guy Maddin, *Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair*, 2009, was among the large-scale projections commissioned by the Thirty-Eighth International Film Festival Rotterdam as part of "Size Matters," one of its many themed sections of adjunct programming. More substantially than other festivals' merely gestural offerings of sidebar events, Rotterdam has for well over a decade conceived of its festival as exploded. It has acted inventively and deeply on the belief that film culture has irrevocably moved beyond the walls of conventional cinema venues, and, through partnerships with the city's other cultural institutions, has folded into the screening schedule a roster of off-site exhibitions and artists' projects that extend the march of cinema by other means. That the festival has remained committed to this programming philosophy despite regime changes within both its own directorate and those of the collaborating institutions of the city's Witte de Withstraat museum corridor continues to sustain Rotterdam's status as the global film festival most attentive to the phenomenon of the moving image as such, beyond its obvious centrality to commercially produced cinema.

The Rossellini-Maddin collaboration (and to considerably dimmer effect the two other large-scale projects, by Mexican director Carlos Reygadas and the Dutch team of Nanouk Leopold and Daan Emmen, both less well situated within the city center) provided the most spectacular assertion of the "Size Matters" curatorial imperative. Doing away with the screen altogether and simply asserting itself onto the urban field of a skyscraper wall, the work by its very presence underscored the assumption that what's at stake now has less to do with a narrow film culture than with a juggernauting screen culture, the ubiquitous delivery systems with which human beings now daily interact, moving images addressing us at every conceivable turn. That's a commonplace of twenty-first-century urbanism

no less than of any given person's day-to-day experiences, which allowed for the "Size Matters" thematic to ponder our new situation from angles both more provisional and refracted.

In previous years, programming at Rotterdam has focused on such specific phenomena as light and speed, and on the manifold implications of digital imagemaking and communication systems. By isolating size this year as a key zone of inquiry, the festival implicitly acknowledged that the relatively fixed and stable dimensions of the classic cinema experience have long since ceased to hold, and within the TENT exhibition space, the thematically organized "Aspect Ratio"—also part of "Size Matters"—teased out the

implications of scale and dimension within moving-image production according to some more speculative gambits. As conceived by curator Edwin Carels, the exhibition was explicitly inspired by Charles and Ray Eames's still-astonishing short film *Powers of Ten*, 1977, which visualizes the relative scale of the uni-

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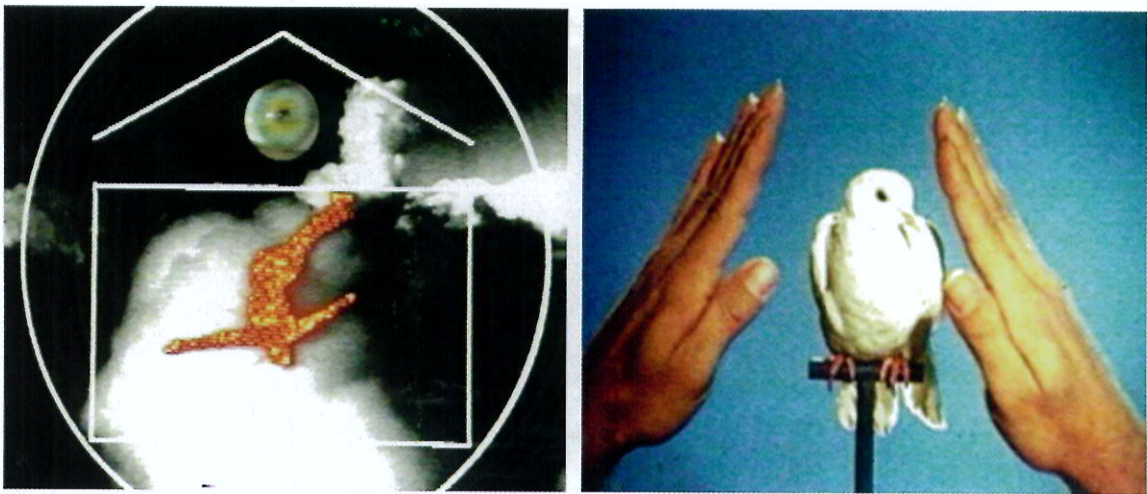
verse by zooming out from a shot of a couple on a picnic blanket by one power of ten every ten seconds, until we're at the outer reaches of the cosmos, then progressively zooming back in until we're inside the man's skin. The Eameses took their premise from Dutch educator Kees Boeke's 1957 book *Cosmic*



Guy Maddin and Isabella Rossellini, *Send Me to the 'Lectric Chair*, 2009, black-and-white film in Super 8 and 16 mm, 7 minutes. Installation view, Coolsingel and Blaak, Rotterdam. Photo: Rene Passet.

View: *The Universe in 40 Jumps*, and their film in turn encouraged Carels to mount this exhibition in order to demonstrate, as he writes, "how visual art and science enter into a dialogue around the central issue: the human being as the measure in a constantly expanding technological universe."

Bringing together works by eleven artists and collaborators, "Aspect Ratio" made deft use of the size-mattering mandate. Spectacularizing the unrepresentable, Simon Starling's 35-mm projection loop *Particle Projection*, 2007, offered a commanding image produced by an electron microscope of a silver particle from the negative of a photo of Brussels's signature Atomium pavilion, taken during its recent restoration. The relative enormity of this installation, with its exposure of the very body of theatrical cinema's projection device whirring away in the gallery, produced an attraction equal to that of the inscrutable projected image itself, with as many viewers as physically drawn to the machinery as to the spectacle it projected onto a large screen. Elsewhere in the show, provocatively



Stefaan Decostere, *Warum wir Männer die Technik so lieben* (Why We Men Love Technology That Much), 1985, stills from a color video, 65 minutes.

counterpointed to Starling's will to explode, was the impulse to miniaturize—for example, in Carlo Zanni's brief narrative film *The Possible Ties Between Illness and Success*, 2006–2007, which was presented on a sculpturally enhanced iPod and demonstrated what he terms “data cinema,” in which the film had been visually altered by data feedback from its accompanying website, www.thepossibilities.com, where the resulting films can currently be viewed.

Posing differently the question of where, literally, we should stand to take a view were four pieces from filmmaker Morgan Fisher's “Aspect Ratio” series of 2004, elegant mirror-faced sculptures reproducing the rectangular variations of conventional cinema presentation, perforce “framing” any gallery onlooker within a motion-picture template. The exhibition's light back-and-forth between inner and outer space was further manifest in Simon Norfolk's 2007 photo series titled *The Spirit of Inquiry*, nearly abstract renderings of the CERN particle accelerator, and in Joachim Koester's *My Frontier Is an Endless Wall of Points*, 2007, a 16-mm looped projection of Henri Michaux's mescaline drawings enlivened via animation into a “venture into foreign territory.”

Unusually for an exhibition attached to a film festival, “Aspect Ratio” paid cinema the compliment of seeking to illuminate it by highlighting its affinities with other practices and fields. Hence the inclusion of sculpture (Louis De Cordier's *Yota*, 2007), sculpture-plus-Internet projects (Jodi's *Geo Goo*, 2008, combining Google Earth projections alongside a scale model of the Parc de Bruxelles), photography (Roman Ondák's *His Affair with Time*, 2003, a touching diptych documenting his son's growth over time and in space), and such hybrid one-offs as Roy Arden's *World as Will and Representation*, 2007, an evolving video documentation

of his vast collection of stock imagery drawn from online sources, and veteran avant-garde filmmaker Ken Jacobs's first looped video installation, *The Surging Sea of Humanity*, 2007, a leap back to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, digitally enlivening a stereograph still image of a crowd of bowler-hatted men. Jacobs's inclusion in the show was the most literal admittance of canonical film history (albeit its experimental wing) into the gallery, a fitting recognition in view of his work over decades in interrogating the mechanics and metaphysics of the projected image, its infinitely pliable nature, as often duplicitous as redemptive.

Within the festival's screening schedule itself, there were dozens of shorts and features raising issues with every bit as much conviction and rigor as the “Aspect Ratio” show endeavored to bring to its inquiry into scale and representation; yet the gallery exhibition provided set-aside space for ideas to be pondered within another time frame, in a different kind of shared social space from a cinema venue, running with a different rhythm and sense of momentum. The same held true for two further projects sponsored by the festival. In the otherwise vacant building of the former Netherlands Photo Museum, “Haunted House” beckoned, a succession of squatlike, variably darkened chambers in which six young Asian filmmakers had been given carte blanche to render physical demons everyday and exotic, a gesture that encouraged them to move their visions from the cinema screen into the spaces we inhabit bodily, if fleetingly, together, still in the dark but not in our seats.

In a building just around the corner from that was V2_Institute for the Unstable Media's presentation of Stefaan Decostere's *Warum 2.0: Image-War-Impact*, 2008, an installation with a 360-degree panoramic

scrim (beyond which viewers could venture “behind the screen”) and four interactive stations allowing participants to manipulate the image environment. The installation reimagines the 1985 documentary Decostere made with philosopher Paul Virilio, artists Klaus vom Bruch and Jack Goldstein, and curator Chris Dercon, among others—*Warum wir Männer die Technik so lieben* (Why We Men Love Technology That Much), an inquiry into the vortex of war, speed, and technology. The original documentary was screened separately in the festival; the updated installation version consisted of new footage from Haiti, Iraq, Gaza, Lebanon, Darfur, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, shot for ITN and Doctors Without Borders by Daniel Demoustier, while on the four stations on the perimeter of the projection, viewers could upload videos, operate the on-site surveillance apparatus, and enter into the Second Life version of *Warum 2.0*. A model for what might be understood as itinerant, unfixed spectacle, *Warum 2.0* made good on advancing Virilio's take on the task at hand: “Today, faced with what's happening in science and knowledge in general, not only science but philosophy too, political philosophy, we need people who are not afraid of tragedy but who interpret, analyze, dissect, talk about things. It's the opposite of story-telling. It's something much more modest and in my opinion more useful today than grand spectacles.”

But modesty is a temperamental setting, an inclination; and spectacle in itself need not be a diversionary distraction. Nothing I saw in Rotterdam succeeded in uniting the two more than a feature film, projected in a conventional cinema to a capacity audience: Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin* (2008). Shot and projected on digital video, it is a patient sequence of static close-ups of women, 113 in all, seated in a theater watching a film we hear but never see (a romance based on a twelfth-century Persian poem), staring slightly over “our” shoulders as they respond to the unfolding narrative, by which they're alternately enraptured, bored, and amused. Through apparently effortless exertion, Kiarostami's transfixing *mise en abyme* distilled the festival's themes into a single proposition: The screen is you. □

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EDWIN SCHLOSSBERG, YOU ASKING WHY, 2008, ACRYLIC ON ALUMINUM, 36 X 48 INCHES

