

Christiane Baumgartner: Freed from Speed

"The truth of a phenomenon is always limited by the speed at which it emerges".
Paul Virilio

Just as the starry heavens have vanished from the lives of urban dwellers, dissolved by the glow of city lights, and the sound of birdsong is submerged by the clamour of traffic, so our sense of distance and perception of time are being compressed and consumed by our immersion in cyberspace. In his book 'The City of Bits', William J Mitchell writes, "Cyberspace is opening up and the rush to settle it is on"[1], and in this process the idea of the remote, the unobtainable, the inaccessible, is being consigned to history. Paul Virilio, the French writer and philosopher, wrote, "While the topical city was once constructed around the 'gate' and the 'port', the teletopical *metacity* is now reconstructed around the 'window' and the teleport, that is to say around the screen and the time slot." [2] Thus distorted, our consciousness of the passage of time and of the distinctions between the distant and the proximal become mediated by their electronic interpretation, through digital technology working at very different rhythms to those of our nervous systems. Our parameters for speed constantly change as our expectations for immediacy and contiguity escalate. Inspired by the writings of Paul Virilio, Christiane Baumgartner sets out, in her work, to transform and demystify our love affair with speed and its distortion of distance and time.

Extending what photography had achieved a century earlier – putting the brakes on the irrepressible tyranny of time – video has given us greater facility to penetrate and transcend the parameters of time. Whereas the photograph freezes and captures a moment in time, video plays with it, offering a whole series of permutations on a particular stream of moments, giving us the power to fragment, accelerate or decelerate its passage, stretching or compressing the temporal frame at will. Digitalisation of video has further enhanced these capacities. To freeze moments that passed our attention by, to pluck them out of this stream, to isolate them to uncanny effect, and to empower the dead hand of history to magical effect is thus easily achieved. Baumgartner uses video stills that evince our addiction to speed – images of traffic on a motorway or of countryside flashing past a car or train window – these two-dimensional, sliced, moments have been snatched back from the invisibility of the past, denying speed its apparent hegemony, offering an antidote to that addiction.

She graphically interprets these video stills using the traditional and time-tested technique of woodcut printing, an edgy juxtaposition of the new and the old. So, plucked from the realm of electronic imagery, these images become absorbed into an intricate, labour intensive and time-consuming process that totally de-constructs their relationship to the passage of time or attainment of distance, which in turn changes the dialectic into the didactic. These images tell us something, in no uncertain terms about what we have lost – and how we might regain it – through our electronic by-passing of time and distance.

Woodcuts are traditionally monochrome, so it seems entirely appropriate that Baumgartner's images are monochrome. In this regard it is also interesting that in 1937, Paul Morand wrote "Speed destroys colour, when a gyroscope is spinning fast, everything goes grey", the mien of her images thus echoes the effect of speed. Traditionally woodcuts were small format, often being reproduced in books, so her large format prints, in transgressing this tradition, entreat us to look at the woodcut print through fresh eyes. What was an intimate visual experience has become a spectacle, what might once have been the graphic interpretation of some pastoral or rustic scene has here become the tamed and transmuted energy of brutal technology. Each of these woodcut prints takes weeks of intense and concentrated work as, simulating the horizontal defining lines of the video monitor image, her linear knife-cuts into beech plywood convey the scenes encoded on those video-stills, simply by varying the width of the lines. The work is exacting, the results mesmerizing. The viewer's eye

synecdochically completes these disjointed images even down to compensating for any slight glitches or variations resulting from the manual interpretation of these electronic images, so they become a collusion between artist and viewer. Completion, closure, is something the eye is compelled to do given the merest of visual clues, but the closer we get to these images, the more confusing become those clues, the greater the challenge to the eye, until at close range they fragment into abstraction, reverting to the physicality of those hand-carved lines.

A motorway near Lisbon that Baumgartner crossed everyday by a footbridge becomes captured, in the series of woodcut prints titled 'Lisbon', as a halted choreography of machinery. The shifting constellations of cars and trucks, by being abstracted as a disjointed sequence of moments become signifiers of events we can only guess at, no matter how hard we try we remain disassociated from these scenes, their energy dissipated, their speed annulled they have been disempowered as if some giant plug had been pulled. Lacan's concept of the 'screen' – the interface between perception and cognition – becomes exacerbated here by the complexities of process. The initial interface between the lens-gathered light and its electronic encodement in the video camera is succeeded by its relay to and freezing upon a screen which feeds that manual interface of hand-eye co-ordination as Baumgartner interprets video still into linear carving, to be once more succeeded by that interface where hand-laid paper meets ink-laden plywood to create the penultimate image which is ultimately completed by the eye of the viewer. Each stage here seems to incrementally discharge the vital energy of the original scene whose 'presence' is serially weakened by a gradual process of dissipation where the essence of speed has undergone an irreversible deceleration process. Like Alice in Wonderland and the 'Take me' and 'Drink me' bottles, whose imbibing resulted in a confusion of scales, the temporal shifts and slippage which result from Baumgartner's manipulation of the signifiers here inexorably alter our perception of the signified, veiling and neutralizing it.

Roy Exley April 2004
(for East International catalogue)

Notes

[1] William J Mitchell 'City of Bits: Space Place and the Infobahn' MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1996. Page 167.

[2] Paul Virilio 'Open Sky' [Translated by Julie Rose], Verso, London. 1997. Page 26.