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Press release

Julian Charrière: Pitch Drop

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A Great Acceleration, first exalted by the avant-gardes; lauded as the ‘racer’s stride’ and the ‘new beauty’ of ‘eternal, omnipresent speed’. ‘Hymn to the man at the wheel and the sleek flight of planes’ – where, today, instant coffee is already hot and being served. Burning jet fuel. Instant messaging. A ‘flash’ crash in the market. Moore’s Law. Server farm CO2 emissions in millions of kilos per second...

But acceleration only seems *eternal*, or unshakeable, when we are unduly fixated upon points of reference that are moving along the same vector. A diver, drifting in a water column, moves but experiences a sense of stasis. We must pull our critical faculties out from this amber before it sets around us, for the present ecological crisis is a function of acceleration itself.

There is something cloying and dense about the speed of contemporary culture. It threatens to bury our options, to enclose and subsume them, like minor particles set within *plastiglomerate* – that profane pseudo-geology of tar, stone and e-waste. On the archival plane, layers of information sediment within our collective (material) consciousness – in hard drives made from rare earth elements and conflict minerals. In mass culture, hoary mysteries, rumours and cynicisms are pressed together into new compounds – tombstones for the liberal ideal. We must *de-encrypt* those aesthetic gambits most suited to addressing the generational challenges that we have inherited. Today’s most relevant *chronopoesis* is also, undoubtedly, a *chronopolitics*, and *eco-aesthesis* too. It emerges from muck, from innermost recesses, from ungrounded earth. It moves not at the speed of our time, but invokes an altogether different velocity.

The oldest ongoing experiment in the history of science began in 1930, in a laboratory in Queensland, Australia. The Pitch Drop Experiment records the fluid dynamics of tar, a petroleum by-product that is – to everyday observation – solid and rocklike, but which – over the course of decades – behaves like a fluid. Appropriating the technical format of this slow-motion theatre, Julian Charrière’s performing-sculpture changes and drips, once every decade or so. It is a time-based artwork that – conceivably – plays out at the rate of centuries, beyond the individual human lifespan. It gestures towards a geological timeframe and, as such, invites an aesthetic toggling away from the here and now. That the work’s key media is the same substance that paves our roads, that burns in engines and coats our lungs, is no mere coincidence. If hydrocarbons are the basis of liquid modernity, they are also the prime *accelerant* of the Anthropocene – the unfolding biophysical disaster that may yet engulf humanity.

Pitch Drop is a token for deep time. It reframes contemporary culture’s instantaneous drift by zooming out, locating its temporal (liquid) column in another, bigger, current. Interpreting the work’s title according to the acoustic sense of the word pitch provides a further way to conceptualize this operation: *Pitch Drop* sets the *high frequency* of the object’s apparent stasis to the individual viewer (a condition whereby, most of the time, everything seems unchanged) against its categorical development, perceivable only by *low frequency* observation. We require such a pitch drop in our public imaginary in order to grasp the scope of the global emergency.

Charrière’s borrowings from the outer reaches of the empirical-temporal field, to displace the high frequency aesthetics of speed/acceleration with the bass hum of deep time, were first manifest in his early work with core samples. One of his newest sculptural pieces, features a large lump of the oldest rock in the world – extant some 4 billion years; 3 billion before the advent of multicellular life – being ground into a sphere by a juddering machine grinder. In this violent mechanical operation one recognizes a stark image for industrialization’s morbid embrace of the globe. But the work also foregrounds a distant past, before mankind. As a conceptual gesture, this sculpture-as-*arche-fossil* complements *Pitch Drop*’s nod to times long after the moment of viewing – and perhaps after humanity. Between these two sculptures the artist plots the broadest *contemporary* wavelength imaginable.

If sculpture is slow, today’s lens based culture is paradigmatically accelerated media. Whereas once photographic negatives took time to develop, and prints more still to distribute, their current modes are instant. Digital photography and video, along with live streaming, give the impression of a frictionless relationship between image making and the world that is being depicted. It is as if photographs are lighter than air, floating in The Cloud, rather than any kind of physical imposition on the earth – or eruption from its depths. But we must acknowledge the *Geology of Media*: For every digital image there is a corresponding geophysical register – however minute – in an oil well or open pit mine. The speed of digital photography is like a flame dancing atop an age-old pool of petrochemicals. A new series of photographic works by Charrière employ the medium’s oldest technique, developed by Nicéphore Niépce in 1822: Polished steel plates coated in photosensitive asphalt solution record, by way of Camera Obscura, the landscape surrounding the tar sands of Northern Canada. The series stands as a conceptual *mis en abyme*; a view of and from of the flow of hydrocarbons, addressing their impact on our modern powers of visualization through a return to material sources.

In much visual culture concerned with ecology – such as documentary images of profaned landscapes or, alternatively, valorizations of pristine ones on the pages of National Geographic – the status of the medium as a symptom of despoil goes unacknowledged. That is to say, its implication within the anthropocene’s geophysical overlay is repressed. One of Charrière’s key moves is to retool artistic formalism so that it may contribute to the developing materialist (environmental) imaginary. However, his objects solicit a degree of ethical discomfort. Employing toxic chemicals and – qua acceleration – unsustainable methods, such as long haul flights to collect stones from remote

regions, his practice is inherently polluting. In fact, it seems to wallow in such mire – theatricalizing it in gallery displays, through walls smeared with tar. How to respond? In considering whether his artistic ends justify the means the audience is well advised to consider the question's bass frequency. Beyond the individual artist, we require a regime of images, their corresponding technologies and geophysical interventions, to approach both the problems (including aesthetic education) and solutions to our environmental crisis. But not every image, or process, is created equal. Mimesis, too, requires ecological critique. As his oeuvre further asserts and develops the implications of this idea, Charrière may yet prove an artist for this age and, perhaps, the next.

Text by Nadim Samman

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