

Publication: Catalogue ARS VIVA 07/08
Author: Jennifer Allen

Time Doesn't Go By

In the history of film, there's a tale often told about how the first movie-goers mistook a moving image for reality. In 1895, when Auguste and Louis Lumière screened their silent black & white documentary *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station*, some spectators got up from their seats and ran away screaming in terror. As the legend goes, they thought that the steam locomotive would run them over instead of coming into the train station at the French coastal town glowing on the wall.

A quick century or so later, I had a similar unsettling experience while watching Marcellvs L.'s twin projection *ebbing.flowing*, 2006. Instead of one approaching train, there were two images of the same old dead boat, stranded on a tropical beach and yet mysteriously animated by both the rhythms and the sounds of the tide: rocking back and forth with the tide up on one screen and completely still with the tide out on the other screen, which was squarely facing its volatile double. I stood in the middle, listening to the waves while the two scenes gradually traded appearances with each other: the rocking scene became gentler, and the still shot began to jiggle, although the old dead boat remained stubbornly stranded on both screens. Despite the tranquility of the entire setting – what could be more calming than a sunny beach where boats linger instead of tourists? than the rising and the falling patterns of the tide? the sound of the ocean? – I could not make it to the end of the video. I left, not running and screaming, but feeling tipsy and dizzy, if not vaguely nauseous. Outside with my feet firmly on the ground, I realized that I had been starting to get seasick. Inside a gallery. Hours away from the ocean. How could that be? Had I, like the movie-going pioneers driven from their seats by the Lumières' locomotive, mistaken Marcellvs L.'s moving images for reality?

Yes and no. Like the Lumière brothers, Marcellvs L. used one single shot whose length was determined by the duration of the phenomenon captured by the camera: the train's *Arrival* lasts a mere fifty seconds while the tide's phases *ebbing.flowing* each take sixty-nine minutes. The use of one unbroken shot might well encourage viewers to step into the shoes of the person behind the camera: to mistake the camera's view for their own perspective; the camera lens, for their own eyes; the cameraman's body, for their own. Robbed of peripheral vision, the Lumière film viewers could not tell that the camera was standing on the station platform at a safe distance from the tracks. Indeed, a century later, it took me a while to figure out that Marcellvs L.'s camera had been poised inside a second boat, a short distance seawards from the old dead boat on the beach. It's the camera that's moving to the tide, not the sunny beach captured on video. The water never reached the beached boat, but it ebbed and flowed around the cameraman's boat, which was gradually grounded by the ebb in one projection and then set afloat by the flow in the other. In the sixty-nine minutes of the flowing projection, the camera – and the idyllic scene it captures – remains still until the sixth minute, loses ground until the fiftieth minute and then floats freely until the end; during the ebbing projection, the rocking movement takes fifty minutes to wind down and then ceases for the last six minutes at a full stop in the sand.

Of course, unlike the Lumière brothers, Marcellvs L. could take advantage of sound to create yet another

impact on viewers. If some eyes resisted identifying with the camera's motion (and warded off any queasy feeling in the body), no ear could resist the sound's effects. Four microphones were used to capture the sound of the ocean, incoming and outgoing, around the boat holding the camera; the recording is played back on four speakers set up around the two screens in the installation. Yet this surrounding soundtrack has a unique feature, which can be heard by the ear (and sensed by the body) but cannot be perceived by the brain as an intelligibly discrete sound. Marcellvs L. shifted the frequency of the soundtrack – down as low as 25 hertz, up as high as 15 kilohertz (the human ear can hear from 20 hertz to 20 kilohertz) – between the four speakers; this shift moves at random from one speaker to the next in a circular fashion, much like an object spiraling in a whirlpool. When confronted with a higher frequency, the human ear immediately, naturally searches for a lower frequency and intensifies the low, only to find, in this case, another high point. Searching for lower frequencies but finding higher ones, the ear is losing ground, much like the cameraman's boat in the tide – an aural drifting that eventually unsettles the body's balance, just as waves rock the boat. Our brains are not aware of the frequency wavering in the soundtrack because the sound of the ocean is similar to "white noise," which contains all frequencies; changing a few around, here and there, can be picked up instantly by the ear but not consciously by the mind. Initially deaf to what the ear is hearing, the brain belatedly registers these shifts by that queasy feeling.

To return to the question of mistaking moving images for reality: There was no mistake in terms of representation. I did not believe that the projection was a real boat, magically sailing me across the gallery. But in terms of perception, my bodily senses were indeed tricked, especially my sense of hearing. With *ebbing.flowing*, Marcellvs L. creates a disorienting sensory experience with hallucinatory effects that leave the body reeling. However visually unsettling, the work is not quite an optical illusion but fully an aural illusion, which plays on the foibles unique to the human ear. Distant from the visible contortions of Op Art, Marcellvs L. would remain equally far from an Aural Art, if such a practise existed, since his sonorous manipulations are hidden by an air of naturalism, defined by the biological limits of human hearing. The category of Sound Art seems just as inappropriate since the artist is interested, not in mixing sound, but in finding a composition that will mix up the body of the viewer within a specific space. Ultimately, *ebbing.flowing* is a sound-specific work – a custom-made sonic sculpture – that cannot be played anywhere like the musical score of a symphony or a pop tune but is always being remodeled by its travels. For each new exhibition, the soundtrack must be recomposed according to the architectural particularities of the installation site (its volume, shape, material) so that the frequency shifts in the soundtrack can be fully reproduced with all the physical potential of sound: to create the greatest resonance, the acutest sense of losing ground, the highest degree of disorientation for people standing in that particular space.

Wherever *ebbing.flowing* ends up, Marcellvs L. creates an exceptional experience of temporality. Our intelligible sense of time becomes a visceral one, akin to jetlag. While the duration of the projection is determined by the natural cycles of the sea, the minutes gradually come to be ticked away by the viewers themselves, as their bodies attempt to regain solid ground, to restore their lost balance, to replace the dizzy sluggishness of seasickness with clear perceptions of their surroundings. This duration – the always-too-slow passage from dizziness to clarity – cannot be easily calculated, as some may take more time than others to recover. By forcing the body to measure duration with respect to its own unique sense of balance, Marcellvs L. challenges the artificial durations constructed by cinema. Although most commercial

films last ninety minutes, we readily step into the time machine built by the editing cuts, which can cram days, months, years, centuries – past, present, future – into those ninety-odd minutes and even make time travel backwards, forwards or in both directions. However wide-ranging, these time travels never give movie-goers jetlag, let alone age them. Yet we can travel without moving and without getting motion sick, because we have learned to dull our visual and aural perceptions (and to do without smell, taste and touch) while sitting in front of a movie screen. Split from three senses and most all physiological reactions, we see and hear the glowing screen as an intelligible experience, which suppresses, if not alienates, most corporeal experiences. Indeed, the Lumière's pioneer audience likely did not mistake the train for a real one; unaccustomed to films, they still trusted their sense perceptions and followed their survival instincts, which make the body run upon perceiving a rapidly approaching object. Marcellvs L. attempts to undo the alienation of the body by appealing to senses, such as hearing, which have not yet been fully suppressed by cinema. His use of one unbroken shot – his refusal to construct a time machine with edits and cuts that fuse past, present and future – allows for the exploration of other illusions, capable of producing physical effects in the body. Ultimately, *ebbing.flowing* moves us away from the intelligible illusions of cinema (accepting the fiction of several years taking place in ninety minutes) and takes an uneasy step towards the perceptual illusions of film (sensing time by feeling seasick in a gallery, far away from the ocean).

Videorhizome: The Peripatetic Works

One single shot predominates Marcellvs L.'s earliest efforts: the *Videorhizome* series 2002-, an on-going body of work that has grown to twenty-seven videos in five years. Inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Marcellvs L. treats the rhizome as a device, not as an invitation to illustrate a concept, whether botanical or philosophical. The philosophers shifted the term from botany to philosophy in order to activate a way of thinking and living based on heterogeneous connections; multiplicities (not singularity); ruptures (instead of continuity); and a boundless cartography of mutually-defining encounters between different elements (instead of imitations). Marcellvs L. expands this chain by shifting the term once again, from philosophy to video. As a device, if not a tool for video, the rhizome has an impact on both production and reception. In terms of production, Marcellvs L. did not start with a script and actors; instead, he walked around with his camera and recorded what he encountered by accident, in one shot with the camera poised on a tripod: a man wading across a flooded street (0778, 2004); two moored boats rocking in a storm (0434, 2006); a man ambling down a highway (0667, 2003); a man fishing in a canoe (3195, 2005); people pulling in a massive fishing net from the sea to the shore (0075, 2004); rain falling on a rooftop (0314, 2002); lights from passing cars casting the shadows of a tree on a wall (0696, 2003). Recorded throughout Brazil, these works are intersections where many moving lines meet by chance and in anonymity. In 0778, man + street + flood + artist + camera + sunlight all collide, only to take separate directions that will never cross in quite the same way again. Since walking – a universal act – lies at the heart of these efforts, the recorded subjects tend to have a mythological quality. Yet the numerical titles – the artist always throws the dice to come up with the four digits – are also the result of chance. In terms of reception, Marcellvs L. distributed the videos right back into random and anonymous situations. Connecting the digits in the title to house numbers in the phone book, the artist then sent a copy of the video to the address but without putting his own return address on the envelope. In total, 2,500 copies have been delivered to viewers who cannot know the creator, let alone offer any feedback on

the mysterious creations that one day appeared in their mailboxes.

While made with a video camera, Marcellvs L.'s works collide once again with the history of cinema, namely the medium's origins in the use of still photography to study movement. In 1882, the French physicist E. J. Marey created chronophotography, a method that analyses moving bodies with photographs taken at short and equal intervals of time. His studies of birds in flight recall Eadweard Muybridge's studies of a galloping horse, made around the same period. While each photograph closely resembles the one that immediately follows, they reveal movement, like a film reel, when placed altogether, one after the other, from beginning to end. By 1911, the Futurist photographer Anton Bragaglia reacted with photodynamism: leaving the camera's shutter open to produce blurry photographs that captured all of the intermovemental fractions as a figure passed from one position to another. Marcellvs L.'s seems to operate between these two methods of chronophotography and photodynamism, by both breaking down movement into intervals and recording movement with one extended shot, regardless of the clarity of the results. Like Marey and Muybridge, Marcellvs L. examines movement so closely that motion can hardly be discerned from one moment to the next and emerges distinctly only when the viewer looks at the entire sequence from the beginning to the end. In *0778*, the man wading across a flooded street seems to stand still while making slight waves in the flood water; his displacement and his trajectory become clearer with the video's progression. *3195* begins as an oddly shaped horizon and ends up revealing a man fishing with a net in a canoe at sea. Marcellvs L. produces the impression of intervals – barely distinguishable from each other – by gradually changing the zoom. *0778* zoomed out to the pace of the wading man, thus creating an illusion of stillness. Like Bragaglia, Marcellvs L. not only deploys a single shot to capture intermovemental fractions but also embraces the camera's errors, such as the blurring from exaggerated pixels. Many of the *Videorhizome* appear to be "over-focused," zoomed in so close to their subject that this subject disappears under the scrutiny of the lens, like the forest can't be seen for the trees. With its opening extreme close-up, *0314* looks like an old scratched film before revealing at a greater distance a dance of raindrops.

Perhaps "errors" is not the correct term since Marcellvs L. exploits the impressive technical capacities of the video camera. Indeed, the artist uses these capacities to the point of exaggeration, to the point of creating illegibility and distortion for the viewers. After all, the video camera can often see more than the human eye. In *3195*, a full three kilometers separated the artist from the fisherman; in *0778*, there are seven hundred meters between the artist and the wading man; in *0667*, one kilometer stands between the artist and the man walking on the highway. Our eyes get lost in the camera's zoomed details, changing scales and dislocated sounds before we can get enough perspective to see the whole picture. With *0667*, it takes some time to realize that the man walking along the highway beside the passing cars, buses and trucks is actually quite far from the artist-cameraman; the sounds we hear certainly fit with the image of the highway, yet these sounds do not precisely match the cars, buses and trucks we see passing by the man because these are in fact passing the artist, one kilometer down the road. Like a poorly synchronized dub for a foreign film, the soundtrack in *0667* fits the scene but doesn't quite match the motion; we hear what the ambling man heard but always too late because we are listening to the camera's surroundings. These aural distortions are paired with optical ones, which arise in the one-kilometer zoom between the man and the camera: a wavering that initially resembles waves of heat rising off the road, until we realize that the effect is the result of the pixelization in a digital zoom. In contrast to the lens zoom which moves the camera lens physically closer to the subject, the digital zoom creates the effect of proximity by simply

enlarging the pixels, often with distortions at extreme zooms. Other videos in the *Videorhizome* series are overexposed and unsettle the ratio between colour and black-and-white. In *0075*, the sound of the waves breaking on the shore is the only discernible clue that we are watching fishermen pull in a net, albeit at a distance, since the video shows nothing more than abstract, brightly-coloured spots spreading across a blinding white background, like watercolours dissolving into heavy paper. Marcellvs L. overexposed the view, turning up the white quotient in the camera to challenge the eye. These works – however true to the duration of each event through the unbroken shot – are difficult to identify since they present the eye with a puzzle. The event as an intelligible duration becomes a detective-like process that engages the eyes with a physical challenge. Instead of accepting the fiction of film's time machine, the eye becomes aware of the act of sight through visual frustration. We may watch every single moment in a continuous flow of images, but we register the time that it takes to solve the riddle of what we are actually seeing.

Such illusions – confounding the visceral with the intelligible – gain another dimension in the video installation *untitled:rope*, 2006. The first view seems entirely realistic. We perceive a thick rope, slowly dipping in and out of the water. The boat that must be floating on one end of the rope and the submerged anchor on the other are only evoked and thus always remain out of sight. Moving closer, we see the same scene – as a mirrored reflection – right around the corner. The twin images – always projected on an existing corner, jutting out into the room – create the impression of two ropes tied to each other, instead of one tied to a boat and to an anchor. Dipping in and out of the water, the twin ropes seem to meet at the apex of the corner, without ever actually touching. There is a natural loop to the sequence as the ropes disappear and reappear to punctuate the video. While the illusion of the mirrored projection is easy to decipher, we are caught up by another aural trick. As with *ebbing.flowing*, Marcellvs L. uses sound in a physical way as a sculptural and architectural dimension that can intensify the work's impact on the viewer's body, not without slightly nefarious side-effects. And as with *0667*, there is a disjunction between what we hear and what we see. The soundtrack was recorded under water, namely from the position of the buried anchor instead of from the position of the camera or the rope. To make the fixed point of the anchor shift aurally, the artist moved around the frequencies in the stereo soundtrack. The phases of the right channel have been inverted so that the right and the left channels – like the twin projections – come close to mirroring each other, albeit acoustically instead of architecturally-visually: The left rises when the right falls in terms of frequency, and vice versa. In the very middle of the video's seventy-seven minutes, the two frequency regions of high and low are completely separated, with the right channel reaching its absolute low and the left channel reaching its absolute high. The intensified soundtrack creates an odd aural-physical imbalance, oppressing the ear from one side and lifting it from the other. Although we sense the imbalance – and feel our mood drop and rise accordingly – there is no visible source for these changes. As with the other works from Marcellvs L., we end up marking the passage of time viscerally, with a definite unease. When the body measures duration, the minutes often seem to pass more stubbornly than on the clock.