

Oddly Satisfying Art

Ours the culture that calls weeds unwanted things, here: let me manipulate the scene.

Nightlife (2015), a work of three-dimensional video art by French artist Cyprien Gaillard, takes 15 minutes to loop. There's no text, except the lyrics of a burnt-out, submerged dub refrain that comes up, sinks down: "I was born a loser," then "I was born a winner." It is a nocturnal work. When I entered, the camera pushes into the tops of fireworks, which glitter and sizzle green and white, then turn to wiry fronds of smoke. The camera moves past, in, around; the bursting carnations look close enough and full enough to touch. Next, birds of paradise nod to the beat; junipers flail their shaggy, cloudy leaves in slow motion, pounding against a chain link fence. Then a helicopter spotlight turns the branches of an oak tree into white threads. After that abstract ridges of patinated bronze rotate back to reveal a copy of Rodin's *The Thinker*, only blown open and twisted at the base.

Each of the four scenes fell forward into my 3D glasses, like the out-of-body visions of a pair of transparent eyeballs. I didn't know what this was. I didn't even know if "this" was real—captured, or generated. I liked this uncertainty, this vertigo—the falling meaning of a vision or a hallucination that seems to say everything there is to say, until you try to transcribe it. I didn't want this video transcribed. I didn't want it to stop.

But Gladstone Gallery closed at six.

On my way out, I reached for a book on the front desk. It fell open to a text about the artist and his work that revealed the direct, hidden meaning of each scene in the video. The mangled Rodin statue was bombed by the Weather Underground in 1970; the dancing palms and junipers are meant to be understood as invasive species in Los Angeles; the stunning push through 3D fireworks takes place over the Berlin stadium where Jesse Owens won his gold medals during Hitler's Olympics; and the oak tree, lit like a criminal on the run, was planted by Owens at his high school in Cleveland, one of four oak saplings given to him by the German Olympic Committee in honor of his victories. It was not only this text; with every press release, book, review, and profile I read, I felt more like Gaillard had laid out these four lite, satisfying sequences as a trap, accomplishing exactly what repentant French poststructuralist Bruno Latour describes as pulling "the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers."¹

This is not to say that I want to keep my ignorance. But if every image is plugged neatly into its corresponding meaning, the result is self-satisfied and inert. When Susan Sontag is *Against Interpretation*, she means that allegory bores her.² Red is for blood and bravery; white for purity and peace; blue for vigilance and justice. This is why the American flag isn't a very good work of art, but a Jasper Johns painting or a Robert Frank photograph—the flag in its unruly context—is. Contrary to the prevailing critical method, truly vital artworks can't be cracked like codes. And yet every text on Gaillard's *Nightlife*, whether by critic, gallerist, curator, or reporter, focuses on "what it means" rather than "how it is what it is."³

There is a genre of short, anonymous, widely distributed videos called "oddly satisfying videos." Across Instagram and YouTube, witness the strokes of a calligraphy pen at high zoom; the squish of a fresh wax seal on a letter; paper-thin slices of apple coming off of a knife. One theory behind their popularity is that people

1. Bruno Latour, "Matters of Fact, Matters of Concern, or: Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004): 246.

stuck at their computers all day, touching nothing but a keyboard, can get a proxy sort of haptic workout through these clips. Another reason, though, is surely that they don't "mean" anything specific; they don't peddle allegory or deliver facts. Relax your critical faculties, take a break from the task of quantifying the world, by watching hands folding colorful goos, slimes extruding through clenched fingers, or the wringing of perfect worms of lather from a cloth. The satisfying videos can't be interpreted individually, one to one, but only as a social phenomenon or vernacular form, and this orderly, anti-allegorical character is also the clips' appeal.

Nightlife's richly textured, 3D scenes of slow-motion trees and pulsing lights could be, and are, satisfying. But the misgiving is there: that, in this world, we don't deserve pleasure without guilt. If Jesse Owens' struggle is real, then it is only ethical to let this knowledge blunt our enjoyment. If footage of spools of thread being cut with razors distresses workers in their cubicles, then even this relief is predicated on soul-numbing work. And so, several click-throughs later I arrived at *Fast Workers GOD Level #1—PEOPLE ARE AMAZING 2016—Life Awesome 2016*: witness a man heaving propane tanks perfectly upright on the back of a truck, another quickly, dexterously butchering pigs on a band saw. Satisfying, it must be said, that white collar peons might find relief in the spectacle of more physical kinds of repetitive, low-wage labor. It's almost magic how the guy at the juice stand can pour smoothies between two cups while spinning and dancing, or the way that, in a heavily compressed clip of a man chopping tomatoes at high speed, the slices pool on the table in a slurry of red pixels. Pick an action, no matter how rote, and keep doing it until it turns sublime.

These naïve videos and their mood-enhancing music resemble, more than a little, some of the first video artworks from the '70s and '80s: artists filming themselves exercising their fingers, bouncing rubber balls,

doing tabletop tricks with spoons and eggs and matchsticks. I'm thinking here of Bruce Nauman, Yvonne Rainer, William Wegman, Fischli and Weiss, but especially Terry Fox and his *Children's Tapes* (1974). My favorite of this subgenre isn't actually a video, but a short 16mm film by Richard Serra called *Hand Catching Lead* (1968). It is just that: a white, grimy, work-worn, open hand is all you see—that and the rough lead billets that fall, every couple of seconds, from the top of the frame to the bottom. The hand clenches as the lead passes, trying to catch it, squeeze it, crush it. Sometimes the metal hits the hand but keeps falling. Catching lead for art must be a tough, dirty job (your hands get sore, your arm tired, your blood poisoned). Part of that film's poetry is its tedious senselessness, a routine striving with an indifferent outcome, where neither catching nor not-catching seems like a gain. Serra's piece represents industrial labor and its psychedelic drudgery but does not illustrate it. Today an artist making a film this entrancing would likely feel the need to cite current or historical events—yet Serra does not drop and catch the lead to call attention to the brutal repression of a 19th century lead miners' strike or the atmospheric evils of leaded gasoline. Or, if he does, I don't want to know. Like Gaillard's video, *Hand Catching Lead* is better received, not unraveled; interpolated, not interpreted.

Against interpretation!
Interpreters use the back door! But isn't it a moral bind when, retrospectively, the imagery in question is entwined with some catastrophe, an epochal injustice or a genocide? The total alternative to didacticism, indeed—the imaginary version of Gaillard's beautiful, frivolous film where nothing on screen is ever specified, or justified, by real events—is a re-mystification of the blooming world, and therefore its denial. Gaillard's film is both a break and a burden—an art "work" after all. It offers relief from the very task it presents, that of interpretation.

2. Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation," *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966). Chris Sharp argues for something similar in his essay "Theory of the Minor" (*Mousse Magazine*, no. 57, Feb.–March 2017) which

updates Sontag's thinking.

3. *Ibid.*, 14.



22

Describing what art means (not, again, what it *does*) is like taking a monocular photo of a stereographic film.

The world goes flat. I dare you not to get satisfied. The gallery closes at six.

I had to leave that satisfying video behind for a gray street in Chelsea. The roadbed had been scraped into little furrows but not yet repaved. The air was clear like a lens. It started to rain out of a monochrome sky so pale and uniform that I couldn't make out the drops until they struck. I want art to be like this: an interface that might change the way you see, but that does so flexibly, without being fixed, and without fixing.

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Bruce Nauman, *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square* (1967–1968). 16mm film, black and white, sound, 400 feet, approx. 10 minutes. © 2018 Bruce Nauman / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image courtesy of Sperone Westwater, New York.



Cyprien Gaillard, *Where Nature Runs Riot* (2018) (installation view). 3D motion picture, DCI DCP, 14:56 min. Image courtesy of the artist, Sprüth Magers, and Gladstone Gallery, NY. Photo: Timo Ohler.

Cyprien Gaillard, *Nightlife* (2015). 3D motion picture, DCI DCP, 14:56 min. Image courtesy of the artist, Sprüth Magers, and Gladstone Gallery, NY. Photo: Timo Ohler.