



ART

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Lucy McKenzie
Interviewed by Saim Demircan

Looking Back in Anger
Morgan Quaintance

Empire, Extinction and Ecstasy
Izabella Scott

Eimear Walshe
Profile by Gwen Burlington

human cognition meshes with an equally distant future that likewise evades rationalised chronology. This deep past/future is seen from a present without human witnesses; instead, the human eye has been supplanted by automated camera-vessels, potentially activated by a snake in an abandoned control room and ocelli-like marine creatures. Škarnulyė's dark ecology removes humanity, as well as perhaps nature, from the equation.

'To Dream Effectively' is an exhibition networked amid varying spaces and conditions of viewing. In addition to the gallery spaces, Focal Point's big screen shows other films aligning with the curatorial theme. Himali Singh Soin's *We Are Opposite Like That*, 2017, parallels Škarnulyė's work through its own desolate environments, this time the two earth's Poles. These blank topographies are apprehended through the Victorian fascination with future intercontinental glaciation and, one might add, the belief that the Poles offered portals into unknown civilisations. Again, the landscape is witnessed as if by an inhuman presence, hinting at the very absence, or perhaps eradication, of humanity. Extending the catalogue of possible environmental catastrophes, Sophia Al-Maria's two-part video *The Future was Desert*, 2017, provides the pendant to Soin's frozen landscape by imagining absolute futural desertification.

For all its emphasis on the future, there's a distinct historical consciousness dominating this exhibition. Undoubtedly this reflects current debates taking history as their theme. Lately, we have been reminded by battles over monuments and the need to decolonise the curriculum that our inherited history is one that we don't know how to own. It's in this vein that the dreamworlds in this exhibition of Larry Achiampong, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, Tabita Rezaire and Rosie Grace Ward all intervene in questions of historicity. Achiampong's *Relic 2* and *Relic 3*, 2019, visualise African archaeologists piecing together the fragments of white civilisations (Profile *AM427*). This reverses the classic ethnographic impulse alloying the non-European 'over there' with a pre-European 'back then' that privileges European culture; this time, white society becomes geographically, culturally and historically remote. Yet the strength of Achiampong's fantasy stems from its refusal to duplicate the structures of segregation labouring in typical ethnology.

In this context, Brathwaite-Shirley's *Resurrection Lands*, 2019, can problematically appear more exclusionary. Consisting of a computer game, the player can choose to visit a future archive of black trans people by either joining a team sympathetic to those people or another team, dubbed 'the consumers', who possess more ambiguous motives. Joining the sympathetic team gives the player access to tragic experiences of black trans people. In some ways, however, the game is more fun if you play as one of the consumers, whereby manifold micro- and macro-aggressions are revisited upon you through denial of access, being cursed, and even ejected from the archive. This, however, potentially inverts and reinforces the binarism that prefigured the hatred directed against the black trans community, though there is a humour and poignancy here that prevents the binary becoming disabling. If *Resurrection Lands* explores the past from a future perspective, then both Rezaire's and Ward's own history-as-dreamworld are rooted in the present. Rezaire's Afrofuturist *Premium Connect*, 2017, not only links scientific concepts from computing and physics with Nigerian spiritual practices of divination, but also

seeks to overcome the Eurocentrism of our received ideas about science. Ward's works, placed in cabinets in the gallery space, virtually comprise a corresponding Anglo Saxon futurism.

Inevitably, the sceptical question arises as to whether adopting sci-fi genres as speculative fictions risks devolving into escapist tendencies failing to reflect concretely upon the present. One could respond by claiming that no such escapism is possible, that within the world of a computer game, say, we always rediscover the social structures we thought or hoped to be briefly escaping from. But it is worth heeding the sceptic's worry and redirecting it. These genres are escapist disavowals of present realities and, because of that, they unfetter behaviours and thoughts normally occluded from others - or even oneself. Hence they reveal something like our true circumstances.

If 'To Dream Effectively' is an exhibition about historical consciousness rather than the future, it resonates with Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, which sought to excavate the fossilised dreamworlds of Parisian consumerism. His words on the temporal complexity underscoring that project seem apposite here: 'For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognise itself as intended in that image'. Similarly, this exhibition's fascination derives from its generation of images intended as histories for the future.

Matthew Bowman lectures at the University of Suffolk.

Sunil Gupta: From Here to Eternity

The Photographers' Gallery, London
9 October to 24 January

In 1969, coming out in North America was not merely an act of self-disclosure, it was a political statement. The then radical newspaper, the *Berkeley Barb*, urged 'Homo Revolt: "Don't Hide It!"; encouraging gays and lesbians to join a broader coalition with the left movement, a maxim Sunil Gupta - then aged 16 and freshly relocated to Canada - took to heart.

Spanning five decades and 16 photographic series, 'From Here to Eternity' is the New Delhi-born, London-based artist's first, long-overdue UK retrospective. It opens with 'Friends & Lovers', 1970-72, a recently rediscovered series from the artist's archives which transports us into Gupta's formative years in Montreal. In one black-and-white self-portrait, the young Gupta



Sunil Gupta, *Untitled #7*, 2008, from the series
'The New Pre-Raphaelites'

is curled up in bed, bare-chested in white briefs, one hand holding a cigarette and the other flicking through the *New York Review*. On the adjoining wall, a grainy photograph shows moustachioed protesters brandishing a placard which reads: *TRAVAILLEURS GAIS SOLIDARITÉ* ('solidarity for gay workers'). These thoughtfully composed works, if somewhat naive in sentiment, set the tone for the rest of the exhibition: for Gupta, the personal remains political.

Across the room, the black-and-white series 'Christopher Street', 1976, captures the emancipated atmosphere of the West Village in the wake of the gay liberation movement. Promenading down the Stonewall Inn's infamous street, the jocks, bears and clones portrayed in these street-style photographs display just about all of Hal Fischer's 'Gay Semiotics' signifiers: from chevron moustaches to satin gym shorts and leather chaps (Profile *AM432*). This series also marks Gupta's second coming out: this time as an artist. That year, he abandoned his business degree in favour of the New School's photography class, then taught by documentary photographer Lisette Model (whose alumni include Diane Arbus and Peter Hujar).

The following room brings us to the 1980s, which coincides with Gupta's move to London. After graduating from the Royal College of Art, he soon became involved in the capital's grassroots scene, including his work with the Association of Black Photographers, Autograph, induced by his 1986 series 'The Black Experience' (originally exhibited as part of a group show at the Brixton Art Academy). That period is also marked by a visible shift away from the documentary tradition and towards fictional narratives, addressing postcolonial preoccupations against the backdrop of the AIDS epidemic (Gupta's own diagnosis instigated the 1999 series 'From Here to Eternity', which lends its title to the retrospective).

This shift becomes apparent in 'Exiles', 1987, a high-contrast colour series in which local gay men re-enact encounters across Delhi's popular cruising spots, including a park, a war memorial and outside a mosque. Mostly, these men turn their back to the camera, occasionally gazing affectionately at one another. These theatrics allow Gupta to overcome ethical issues of privacy and consent while rendering the experiences of Indian gay men visible. Looking through these works, one might say that Gupta's series is an act of fabulation, bringing the Deleuzian phrase 'the invention of a people to come' to mind.

Adjacent is Gupta's 'Trespass' trilogy, 1992-95, which marks his first experimentation with digital techniques. In its final iteration - originally commissioned by Southend's Focal Point Gallery - South-Asian iconography is juxtaposed with imagery found in Essex, a historic gateway into England. Stemming from the postcolonial critique then advocated by the late theorist Stuart Hall - who once famously claimed to be 'the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea' - Gupta's photomontages evoke the residual imperialism which contemporary Britain continues to feast on.

"Pretended" Family Relationships', 1988, defies the Thatcher-era Section 28 law with tenderly staged portraits of multiracial queer couples, incorporating black-and-white protest shots and poetry (written by Gupta's then partner Stephen Dodd). But the show's fictional climax is reached in 'Sun City', 2010, a speculative series inspired by Chris Marker's 1962 experimental film *La Jetée*, famously constructed from still photos. In Gupta's revisited plot, however, the ravaging

impact of the nuclear war has been replaced with that of the AIDS crisis. Throughout some 16 photographs, we follow the journey of an Indian migrant, from his arrival at Paris Orly airport to the dramatic setting of a gay bathhouse, evoking at once religious iconography and Wilhelm von Gloeden's 19th-century homoerotic nude studies. We are far from the truth-claim of the photographer's early works - as if indexicality had revealed itself to be inadequate to chronicle queer life in all its complexity.

At once timely and timeless, Gupta's photographs appear as an antidote for the distancing the gallery signage reminds us to observe. His practice is more than one of encounters - by chance or by political will. It is an exercise in togetherness.

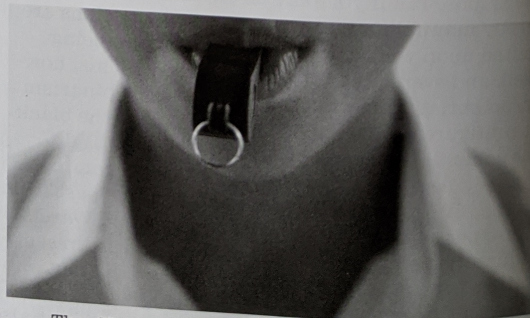
Benoît Loiseau is a writer and critic based in London.

Thao Nguyen Phan: Becoming Alluvium

Chisenhale Gallery, London
26 September to 6 December

'Why did the stream dry up? I put a dam across it to have it for my use, that is why the stream dried up,' reads the 52nd lyric of *The Gardener*, 1913, by the Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. The words appear as subtitles in the opening shot of Thao Nguyen Phan's video *Becoming Alluvium*, 2019, a close-up aerial view of rippling water, with a narrow boat gliding slowly up the screen. The water, we soon learn, is the Mekong River, whose colonial history, ecology (and extractivism's disruption of it), folklore and mythology constitute the subject of the Ho Chi Minh City-based artist's painstakingly researched and highly lyrical 16-minute video, which is the focus of this exhibition, appearing along with a sculptural lacquer cabinet framing a series of watercolours (*Perpetual Brightness*, 2019) and, on the adjacent wall, a single panel of Vietnamese-lacquered wood (*Delta*, 2020). The rare combination of research and lyricism - the former usually associated with academic discipline, the latter with affect, instinct and spontaneity - is one of the show's more remarkable strengths.

Dams pose a huge threat to the ecology of the Mekong. The title of the video (as well as the exhibition) honours the nutrient-filled sediment characterising the Mekong's water, which is necessary for the river's survival as a functioning ecosystem, on which depends the livelihood of more than 60 million people. Thus, the film takes as its point of departure the disruption caused by the building of dams and hydropower plants 'upstream' (most of which are in China, which operates



Thao Nguyen Phan, *Becoming Alluvium*, 2019, video

No. 442
December 2020 - January 2021

Cover
Lucy McKenzie
Olga Korbut, 1998

Features



- 1 **Pinboard Wizard**
Lucy McKenzie interviewed
by Saim Demircan
- 6 **Looking Back in Anger:
Ten Years On**
Morgan Quaintance identifies
an ever-widening gap in the
UK art world between social
realities and the concerns
of the curatoeracy
- 10 **Empire, Extinction
and Ecstasy**
Izabella Scott observes how the
US has long been both in denial
and in thrall about the concept
of empire and colonialisation

Profile

- 14 **Eimear Walshe**
profile by Gwen Burlington

News & Comment

- 17 Editorial
- 18 Artnotes
- 23 Obituary
Anthony Hill 1930-2020



Reviews

Exhibitions

- 25 **Global Resistance**
Virginia Whiles
- 26 **To Dream Effectively**
Matthew Bowman
- 27 **Sunil Gupta:
From Here to Eternity**
Benoît Loiseau
- 28 **Thao Nguyen Phan:
Becoming Alluvium**
Tom Denman
- 29 **Heba Y Amin: When I see
the future, I close my eyes**
Kathryn Lloyd
- 30 **Towner International**
Paul Carey-Kent
- 31 **Robert Smithson:
Hypothetical Islands**
Phoebe Cripps
- 32 **Nalini Malani:
Can You Hear Me?**
Maria Walsh
- 33 **Glenn Brown:
And thus we existed**
Mark Prince
- 34 **Bruce Nauman**
Adam Heardman

Books

- 35 **Ken Hollings: Inferno
- A Compendium
of Trash Culture**
Laura Jacobs
- 36 **On Care**
Frank Wasser

Film

- 37 **BFI London Film
Festival: Experimenta**
Colin Perry
 - 38 **Jasmila Žbanić:
Quo Vadis, Aida**
Jasmina Tumbas
- Polemic
- 39 **Lottery Lives**
Michaële Cutaya

Reports

- 41 **Letter from Dar es Salaam**
Jesse Gerard Mpango
- 43 **Letter from Dubai**
Nadine Khalil
- 45 **Artlaw
Private Parties**
Henry Lydiate
- 46 **Listings**

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