REVIEW

Jesper Just
JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Even before we digest the action in Jesper Just’s video installation This Nameless Spectacle, 2011, the work strikes us as visual experience. Its setup is literally encompassing in that it is projected on two long facing walls between which its viewers must stand. Other film and video artists have explored this device, for example Shirin Neshat, who, however, used smaller projections and set them apart on the short rather than the long walls of a long room, making it impossible to see both at the same time—the viewer had to turn from one to the other. Just works instead on the room’s long walls so that both projections are visible simultaneously, at least in part, almost everywhere in the space, unless we actually turn our backs, on one of them. His extension of cinema’s ability to swallow us in its world may also recall, for example, Pipilotti Rist’s Pour Your Body Out (17:34:28, Color, Double, 3.3 remotes), her 2008 installation at the Museum of Modern Art. The comparison reveals an inverse logic, though, for while that work aimed at hallucinogenic sensory overload, Just rigorously restricts his viewers to themselves.

The video begins with a woman rolling herself in a wheelchair through Paris’s picturesque Parc des Buttes Chaumont. Just alternates between shots from her point of view—with the two screens showing the scenes to either side of her, as if we too were in her chair—and shots that describe her, whether close up or from afar. This fluctuation will continue in carefully deliberated ways throughout the piece, heightening the cinematic devices of shor and counterpoint, our identification with the characters and our voyeurist viewing of them, to engage us in a game of construction and interpretation (in which we are constantly piecing together the environment of the video and where and who we are in it). As the woman leaves the park and heads home, a teenage boy follows her in a perhaps threatening chase, but she safely reaches her apartment in a high-rise housing block. Here she steps out of her wheelchair—at home, apparently, she can walk fine—only to be stricken by a beam of sunlight reflected from the glass of a distant apartment window, which her young pursuer, having himself also returned home, is manipulating. This produces in her an ambiguously epileptic or orgasmic fit before the sun passes from the window and the video ends.

In an essay catalogue essay on This Nameless Spectacle published by the Musée d’Art Contemporain du Val-de-Marne, Giuliana Bruno ties the work to a precinematic history of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century panoramic spectacles. One of these, the Marciotti—kind of amusement-park ride evoking an ocean voyage, installed at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900—involved exactly the same structure as Just’s piece, sandwiching its viewers between two screens of moving images that shut away the outside world. There, however, the images moved physically, being permanently marked on the eight-hundred-yard-long screens, which were cranked past on rollers instead of standing motionless to receive Just’s beautifully defined light. To the extent that contraptions such as this were part of the same visual program that birthed the work of cinema, This Nameless Spectacle evokes the history of the medium. Bruno likewise argues that the wheelchair of Just’s protagonist is also a reference to cinema, which can make us experience movement while sitting still.

So This Nameless Spectacle is embedded in metacommunicative, in cinema’s reflection on itself. The video’s external and internal setup counts as much as its characters’ actions, and indeed Just has spoken in interviews of wanting to escape the conventional forms of movie narrative. But what happens to his characters surely matters, particularly since Céramique, 2010, one of two other videos in the show, shares the same theme: an interpersonal, even erotic experience at a remove, between characters separated by distance, by walls and windows, or by all three. Just’s locations, too—in Céramique, a once-grand Detroit cinema, now a dilapidated parking garage, is the site of elliptical interactions between a woman inside and outside a car—are always carefully chosen, and suggest an opening out of his work into social awareness and analysis. Indeed, one wonders whether what may be preventing his characters from connecting is cinema itself.

—David Frankel

“Times Square Show Revisited”
THE BERTHA AND KARL LEUSDORF ART GALLERY AT HUNTER COLLEGE

Were we to have the beer-stained napkin upon which was scrawled the brainstorming list of the participants in, say, the Salon des Refusés or the first Impressionist exhibition (perhaps we do, but I’ve forgotten my Rewald), imagine how precious such scraps would be. It may yet seem a stretch to square the Times Square Show of the spring and summer of 1980 with these epochal undertakings—though posterity, such as it is a little more than thirty years on, appears to be taking a bullish view. But it seems to me that the ephemera generated by this sprawling Pictures-era conclave, from handbills to broadsides to stray snapshots and videos, are inflected with the same talmicital quality.

To scrutinize the working floor plan by John Ahearn and Tom Ottenness—with its line of some 150 (more or less) inclusions—is to set memory afame, for scattered across the yellowing paper are names such as David Hammons, Keith Haring, Mike Kelley, Kenny Scharf (then called “Jet”), Mimi Gross, James Nares, Walter Robinson, Fred Brathwaite (aka Fab 5 Freddy), Judy Rifka, Wolfgang Staehle, Alan W. Moore (who once interned as my assistant at Artforum), Rigoberto Torres, Mike Glier, and, obviously, dozens more. This reprint of the TSS at Hunter College also included video documentation of often-nude performance—footage of the installation, the fashion show, and a concert.