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Hiraki Sawa's latest screen based installation, *O* (2009) is a feature of the 6th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane. Sawa was commissioned by GOMA to create *O*. This installation represents an extension of early cinematic experiments with chronophotography into the digital age. *O* is Sawa's twentieth video work and it extends from his earlier investigations with time and movement using digital video and multiple screen projections. Across the triptych, *O* creates dynamic narrative collisions between interiors and exteriors, landscapes and lunar landscapes, the present and distant past. In this digital video installation, Sawa presents an exploration of scales of time, identifying time as contingent and cyclic. In *O* time is conceived less as a quantitative chronology or sequence, (kronos time), and instead as kairos time which is cyclic, rotating and qualitative. Kairos time refers to fleeting moments and extraordinary experiences where time is felt through sensation. Sawa exploits the potential for digital technologies, multiple screens and the specific conditions for the installation and reception of moving images within the gallery space to apprehend time through the senses.



Japanese born, London based video artist, Hiraki Sawa came to prominence with his captivating triptych that features animated miniature worlds emerging from the edges, crevices, textures and surfaces inside a home in London. *Going Places Sitting Down* (2004) (1) includes miniature rocking horses riding the choppy waters of a bathroom sink, a tiny forest that emerges from the cool edges of a porcelain bathtub and a winter landscape (which includes snow) thriving between the strands of a flokati rug next to the bed. Prior to this installation, Sawa produced the astonishing illusion of miniature aeroplanes in flight over interior apartment spaces in *Dwelling* (2002) and *Spotter* (2002). Writing

on *Dwelling*, Barbara Maria Stafford writes that the animated miniature details rupture the experiential stream, "creating little pieces of infinity". (2) She describes the rhythms of the composited montage of static backgrounds and gliding aeroplanes as an "aquatic flow of still shots". (3) Stafford perceives Sawa's animation as reminiscent of the astonishment and "mysteriously performative" effect of the automaton and a return to early twentieth century filmmaking, specifically to Charles Pathé's *ciné-romans* where dreamlike narratives are interrupted with inlaid detail. (4) Details of virtual movement inscribed over photographs of actual backgrounds result in a spatial dynamic that allows for imaginary travel, voyages and journeys within the home.

A key theme of Sawa's video work is the revelation of miniature spectral worlds and imaginary environments creating a bridge between otherwise disparate spaces and time zones. These imaginary worlds illustrate the potential for still backgrounds to provide spaces for the projection of microcosms and a connection to imagined histories, narratives and distant locations. Sawa's experiments with scale have resulted in screen projections that draw attention to the periphery of still spaces by animating these spaces with traces of movement. Reminiscent of Eadweard Muybridge's pre-cinematic experiments with chronophotography, Sawa's videos *Migration* (2003), *Elsewhere* (2003), *BlueFloor* (2005), *In Here* (2004), *Eight Minutes* (2005), *Trail* (2005) and the six screen installation *Hako* (2006) use digital technologies to revise the illusions of pre-cinema. (5) These videos range from the revelation of an imaginary miniature



world inside a fish bowl, to the exquisite circular journey of a camel train wandering around the window of a front loading washing machine. With *Unseen Park* (2006) Sawa worked with Tomoyuki Washio and children from Taipei to explore the effect of compositing magical miniature worlds on exterior landscapes. In 1926 the documentary filmmaker Dziga Vertov noted the deficiency of sight in contrast to the visionary properties of early cinema, describing it as: “the microscope and the telescope of time”. (6) It is the magnification of the miniature, the juxtaposition of stillness and movement, the conception of time as cyclic and the focus on actual and imaginary worlds that Sawa reinvents within an Australian context in *O*.

A small screen placed just outside the entrance to the exhibition space introduces *O*. Chimes and rotating sounds of a spinning brass bell lure the visitor towards the installation. This screen provides the first indication of the cyclic movements that will prove to be significant within this installation. An orange light encased in a wire frame hanging inside the entrance invites the audience to step inside, its circular form accentuating light and cycles as dominant themes.

The orange light projects a warm glow to illuminate what is otherwise quite a dark space. Inside the installation illusions of movement and stillness emerge from five spinning speakers, ten small screens mounted on the walls and three large tilted screens situated on the floor. Whilst the smaller screens focus on spinning objects, the larger screens feature poetic impressions of landscapes and interior spaces. These larger images appear as still lives inscribed with a subtle, rhythmic flow. Sawa



describes this as “active stillness”, a study of movement across spaces, depicting time as both enduring and evanescent. (7) Such active stillness establishes a dynamic connection between spatio-temporal zones. The distant past is felt in black and white landscapes, cycles of time are depicted in the rotation of the blades of wind turbines, the presence of the moon and in the illusion of flight. These illusions reveal the indelible effect of the present on the past across a range of disparate spaces. All screens and speakers are synchronised to begin and end simultaneously. Projected light, multiple screens, directed sounds and synchronisation are the devices that Sawa uses to explore the intersections between real and imaginary worlds in *O*, expressing time as cyclic and contingent.

In the darkness, the three large screens light up with images of whitewashed brickwork. Two of the screens illuminate black and white images of the landscape surrounding Alice Springs whilst the right screen exhibits fragmented views and muted tones of a desolate interior of a three hundred year old house in the south of France. The house had been abandoned for the past thirty years. Throughout the screens and spaces of this installation, complex temporal cycles, instants and histories are connoted by images and experiences of stillness and movement. Ancient and virtual landscapes are rendered in black and white whilst the home is depicted in subtle colours. These eight minute sequences end with an image of the desert in Alice Springs. It is in the synchronisation of all large and small screens, and in the repetition of the images that frame the sequences, that the first hint is offered about the importance of contingency to the disparate spaces projected

in *O*. Contingency is implied in the connections between interiors and exteriors, time, travel and the global connections that emerge from the three large screens.

A circular symbol begins the films, counting down the moment for each of the three screens to synchronise and illuminate. Spheres, rotation and spinning are significant elements of *O* and can be detected in the holes in the rocky Australian landscape, in images of the moon hovering in the sky emitting beams that glisten in rippling water, and in a miniature moon that hovers inside the home. The circle is incarnated in the design of the exhibition with Sawa positioning the larger screens in a semi-circular pattern. Dale Berning's soundtrack created with bells and amplified by spinning speakers, provides a subtle soundscape that encircles the exhibit. The sound of bells, balls dropping, objects rotating and spinning offer a dispersed, yet homogenised soundtrack for the installation. Small screens carry images including a bottle, spinning top, jug, tea cup, piston rings and a screw in light globe. The heavier objects (like the jug and the bottle), spin slower and produce deeper sounds. The rhythm and increasing frequency of these rotating objects eventually ends with stillness. However, *O* looped, so not long after the darkness descends, the video begins once again.



In *O* time is depicted as both diachronic and contingent. Divergent temporal registers are linked by chance and contingency, a relationship that Mary Ann Doane in *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*, suggests is characteristic of the cinema. (8) Time is imagined in diachronic impressions that feature history through ancient landscapes on the left, flight and movement designating shifting instants on the middle screen and elapsed time in the abandoned home on the right screen. In a floor talk given by the artist, Sawa suggests that this installation explores scales of time.

(9) All screens offer divergent, yet related impressions of time and history. Contingency is also expressed with constant reference to the immediate experience of the exhibit. Whilst the images within *O* feature a range of temporalities, the installation is screened and received by spectators in the present. As Doane argues, cinematic projections become an experience of the present. (10) Drawing from the work of Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze identifies the proximity of present and past, suggesting that the past coexists with the present that it has been. (11) Referring to the crystal image, Deleuze writes that time “has to split at the same time as it sets itself out or unrolls itself: it splits in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves the past. Time consists of this split, and it is this, it is time that we see in the crystal”. (12) The blurring of tense is integral to *O*. The present quickly becomes the immediate past as spectators engage with the layered projections on large screen. This is complicated when the exhibit is experienced repeatedly. The proximity between past and present is accentuated in both the imagery and the experience of interacting with *O*.

The left screen displays the impact the environment over tens of thousands of years etched in the lunar-like surface of Central Australia's landscape. Rocks are chiselled by thousands of years of winds carving parallel, curved ridges into their hard surfaces. Black and white impressions of the earth equate Central Australia with the surface of the moon, radiant but desolate. Cracks, holes in the land and craggy, weathered cliffs indicate an extension of time into a deep past. The dominance of the horizon line combined with the landscapes, clouds, rocks and cliff faces offer an impression of the land as enduring and timeless. Across this landscape Sawa reveals subtle traces of movement. Hard surfaces are juxtaposed with low angled shots of more delicate foliage, gently wavering in the breeze. Sawa's images depict the ancient existing alongside the recent, a combination of permanence and ephemerality linked to the effect of the weather. Against the

senses of cinema

distant past, present time is suggested in the subtle movement of shadows, reflections on water and in the ephemeral, wispy clouds that seem to hover above the land. The illusory movement of shadows is intensified in time lapse cinematography producing a metonymic condensation, implying the expansive history of the land and Indigenous cultures. In the traces of movement across an ancient landscape, this screen offers images that associate the present with an immediate and distant past, a dream time.

Black and white images of the Central Australian Desert on the left and middle screens render the landscape poetic. Sawa's reduction of the colour palette references the temporal distance of realist historical imagery. Images on this screen are striking in their avoidance of the intensity of colour that conventionally mark impressions of Central Australia. Across film history, the outback has often been animated by a brilliant colour palette. Nicholas Roeg exploits the vibrancy of the orange desertscares and contrasts this with deep blue skies in *Walkabout* (1971). Philippe Mora highlights sandy yellow exteriors in *Mad Dog Morgan* (1976). Tracey Moffatt remakes the desert on a studio set, intensifying the orange and purple hues in *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* (1989). In contrast, Sawa maintains a black and white spectrum to depict the Australian landscape in *O*. Although these images were created in 2009 and reflect Sawa's journey, the choice of black and white aligns the landscape with traditions of photorealism and documentary cinema. Rendering the desert in black and white implies the observational distance of the traveller. Sawa depicts this apprehension of cultural difference in the poetic, denaturalised landscapes and in the detail of the vast desert spaces.

The left and the middle screen feature indexical images that point towards the past. Writing on cinema's unique expression of time, Doane identifies the potential for cinema to contain indices, indications denoting direction, existential bonds that bridge the sign and its object. (13) Doane quotes Charles Sanders Peirce who argues that the index "takes hold of our eyes ... and forcibly directs them to a particular object". (14) Indices direct attention by "blind compulsion" and according to Doane, they function as signposts, or pointers marking direction. (15) Doane describes indices as "traces of the forces of the natural world (tracks, a weathercock)", or wind blowing in a certain direction, traces of a footprint. (16) Indices are direction oriented signs that efface the dimension of subjectivity whilst haunting and modifying its object. (17) Roland Barthes and Doane theorise indices in relation to the photograph and the moving image respectively, but in *O* Sawa uses black and white imagery, complex spatial arrangements, multiple screens and pixels to create multiple indices.



O, Hiraki Sawa (Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2009)

In *O*, an intensification of rhythmic movement forms the focus of each screen. The effect of the wind rustling through reeds and ripples on the surface of an inland lake are sped up slightly on the left screen, whilst on the middle screen, images of birds in flight are slowed. This compression and elongation of time produces a subtle contrast between the left and middle screens. On the middle screen, Sawa's camera pans laterally to frame the pace of black cockatoos as they glide above the trees and across the landscape. The contrast is highlighted with the darkness of the bird's plumage set against a white sky. This highly exposed image could almost be a negative. The birds become a dominant presence in this screen with Sawa's camera gradually zooming in to increase the focus on the flight of the black cockatoos. The rhythm of the wings reveals time as slowed and distorted by a process of step printing where frames are excluded to highlight a

subtle disruption in the continuity of flight. The slower pace and distorted movement promotes a mesmeric gaze at the wonder of flight, a theme that is reflected in the pace of the miniature objects on the right screen.

The complex layering of imagery on the middle screen accentuates the effect of time on space. Here space is often divided into three horizontal layers comprising land, water and sky. A surprisingly small tug boat sails in the foreground, its quiet presence defamiliarising the space by manipulating the foreground perspective. The scale and pace of this small ship draws the eye towards its lateral movement. Three fingers of clouds pass over the moon. The horizon separates water from sky, but the moon radiates beams down onto the water complicating depth cues by shifting the perspective vertically. The moon on the middle screen reflects on water, reminiscent of the German Expressionist aesthetic and the illuminated reflections in F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise*(1927). Successive images bleed onto one other as the residue from the illuminated water dissolves into the succeeding shot. Space on this screen is layered horizontally, divided vertically and the emerging montage produces a rhythmic composite of dissolves.

The screen on the right begins with the familiar image of whitewashed bricks and mortar, but soon the focus shifts to the interior of a desolate house in the south of France. On this screen the history of the house provides the backdrop for the cyclic temporality of a miniature imaginary world. The home's history is implied by a range of discarded objects, including a mountain of blankets, dirty plates in the sink and beautifully rounded brass light switch, untouched for more than thirty years. Sawa's camera records traces of history by focussing on fragments and details which the viewer uses to reimagine what might have been once a vibrant home. Peeling floral wallpaper, stained ceilings, untouched books sitting on shelves, patchwork quilts and a French calendar from the 1950s form traces of a past life. More than any other, this screen accentuates the duality between the stillness of the background and the wonder of animated miniature worlds. Animated objects introduce movement and an imaginary temporal realm to the house. Details from the house converge with the world that Sawa creates from seemingly magical layers and impressions of circuitous time on a miniature scale. Shadows of white birds (contrasting with the cockatoos) glide throughout rooms set against the patterned wallpaper. A tarnished mirror highlights the illusion of flight by limiting the depiction to the reflection. Other miniature objects include a revolving Ferris wheel sitting inside a soup bowl, a lighthouse, a ship sailing in the sink and a beautifully illuminated moon which hovers above, and is later discovered beneath the seat of a chair.

It is on this screen that themes from all screens converge in an actual and virtual environment. Such a duality invokes Henri Bergson's insistence that the present is invaded by memory and by the past. (18) Time as virtual and multiple extends on Bergson's conception of ontological duration. Sawa's work invokes the present moment to highlight the instant as an aspect of the continuity of time. Moments depicted across the triptych identify the present as dependent upon and blurred with the past. The present, as Doane contends, illuminates a point of discontinuity in an otherwise continuous stream of time. (19) Across three large screens, Sawa's *O* shows the impact of the present on the past of exterior landscapes and interior spaces at distant geographic points on the globe. *O* makes time visible in movement, in patterns and textures, in movements and by compositing the virtual over the actual.

Whilst Doane suggests that time in modernity became mechanised and increasingly felt as a weight, as a source of anxiety, and literally as it was worn on the body, (20) time depicted on multiple screens in the gallery space facilitated by digital cultures is experienced as a kaleidoscopic range of spatio-temporal options. As experiments in the chronocyclograph have shown, and as Doane notes, in its division into instants into frames per second, film has become the key medium for presenting an illusion of time. (21) Time and movement are inherent to the progression of cinema. Film is focussed on progressing through to the end, evidenced by cinematography and the dominance and consequent invisibility of continuity editing. *O* is non-linear, but dependent on synchronisation and the use of identical framing images. Progression

results from the continuation of the film across cuts and the dissolves of the montage, but also from the potential for the viewer to draw on the details to create their own narrative sequences. Within the installation, the spectator is not limited physically. Viewers can walk behind and around the screens, gazing at the screens laterally, or focussing on each large and small screen individually. This mobile, kaleidoscopic view incorporates the spectacle of the spinning speakers, all screens and their sounds. A lateral view produces a looped experience of the installation where paradigmatic associations are open to engagement. As Lev Manovich notes, new media intensifies the paradigmatic, oscillating between all possible combinations and including the seduction of the illusion and the revelation of its construction. (22)

The rupture that Stafford identifies resulting from the inscription of miniature worlds over still backgrounds in *Dwelling* is also evident in the movement of natural forces and miniature cosmos across the textured surfaces that comprise *O*. Such subtle movement is also a feature of the natural world in the images of *Alice Springs*. For Stafford, repetition and accentuation provoke a haptic engagement with dense images where textures rush towards the retina of the eye and can be ‘felt’ through vision. (23) This privileges an embodied, experiential engagement, an idea that has also been explored in the work of Laura U. Marks. Marks describes haptic optics as rejecting paradigms of the visual distinguished in terms of distance, mastery and domination, exploring instead, “a bodily relationship between the viewer and image”, which focuses on the surface, textures and impressions of film, allowing for an interrelationship, a flow, between vision and touch. (24) Stafford notes that the world in *Dwelling* only makes sense to the beholder through salient motion and haptic interaction. (25) Sawa wants the audience to feel the work physically. This is made possible by the intricately detailed depth cues and illusory images within the images, but also by the design of the installation. Situating the large screens centrally allows the spectator to walk in front, around and behind. The five spinning speakers also project audio waves into the space, animating the sound. In *Creative Evolution*, Henri Bergson argues that time is unrepresentable because it is flux, indivisible. Bergson’s distinction is that “time is not space”, (26) but across Sawa’s triptych, time can be seen in the detail of the images and felt as an effect of space.

Hiraki Sawa reveals that since 2004 he has been interested in space and in the installation space specifically. (27) *O* illustrates the connection between the gallery space at GOMA and the illusions projected across the thirteen screens. Images in this installation depict scales of time that connect time on a cyclic spectrum, collapsing the contrast between tenses. The effect of time is also dependent on the movement of the viewer inside the gallery space and it is expressed in the infinite movement suggested in the minute details and rotation of images on large and smaller screens. Without an expression of human presence, *O* implies the presence of people at the edges of the frame, or just beneath the surface of the image. Multiple screen exhibits create spaces in between projections that can be filled by connection and contrast. Throughout the installation Sawa’s images, design and technologies create indices to direct attention to the relationships between places. Across the triptych, Sawa’s images of Central Australia, the south of France and the imaginary miniature worlds suggests global spatio-temporal connection, one that would include the earth and celestial bodies. With specific reference to the journeys, spaces and cycles of *O*, Sawa suggests that “coming full circle is movement without displacement. In that time you simply are and all the change is in the looking”. (28)