

the surface of the world

ARCHITECTURE AND THE MOVING IMAGE

ARTISTS

TACITA DEAN
JOHN GERRARD
DIONISIO GONZÁLEZ
ISAAC JULIEN
COCOY LUMBAO
SASKIA OLDE WOLBERS
ELIZABETH PRICE
JÓZEF ROBAKOWSKI
JULIAN ROSEFELDT
ZBIGNIEW RYBCZYŃSKI
JOHN SMITH
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Architecture has nothing to do with art; it is something completely different and is better because of its wider communicativeness.
-Tony Fretton

What is the relationship between the built environment and the moving image? How have recent developments in building and imaging technologies been addressed in contemporary art, and what differentiates them from the reflections of mainstream film? To what extent is the moving image complicit in modern and contemporary architecture's privileging of image over design? What conditions and limits the filmic representation of distinct building types such as civic institutions, social housing and informal squatter settlements? How have contemporary artists used film to 'read' the built world? What worlds have they built, demolished, parodied and investigated with moving images?

Through the presentation of moving image work produced over the last 40 years by an international selection of artists and filmmakers, *The Surface of the World* explores these questions and others by examining how built space and moving image space collide, inform and reconfigure one another. Acknowledging the architectural sensibility and minimalist style of the Italian film director Michelangelo Antonioni (who also spoke of film as the 'architecture of vision') the works in this exhibition have been selected on the basis of their intense concentration on the appearance of the built environment and rejection, or in some cases subversion, of explanatory narrative. Together they suggest that it is precisely

You see a lot of buildings in the world and they trigger ideas.
-John Smith

through the opacity of built and filmed surfaces that psychological, social and political situations can be most potently conveyed. Simultaneously, they point to the fact that contemporary trends towards exponential population increase, accelerated urban development and the ubiquity of imaging technology are producing to a situation whereby the planet's surface of oceans, mountains, forests and cities is increasingly navigated as a wrap-around layer of endlessly circulating built and moving images, the seams and borders of which are becoming ever harder to distinguish.

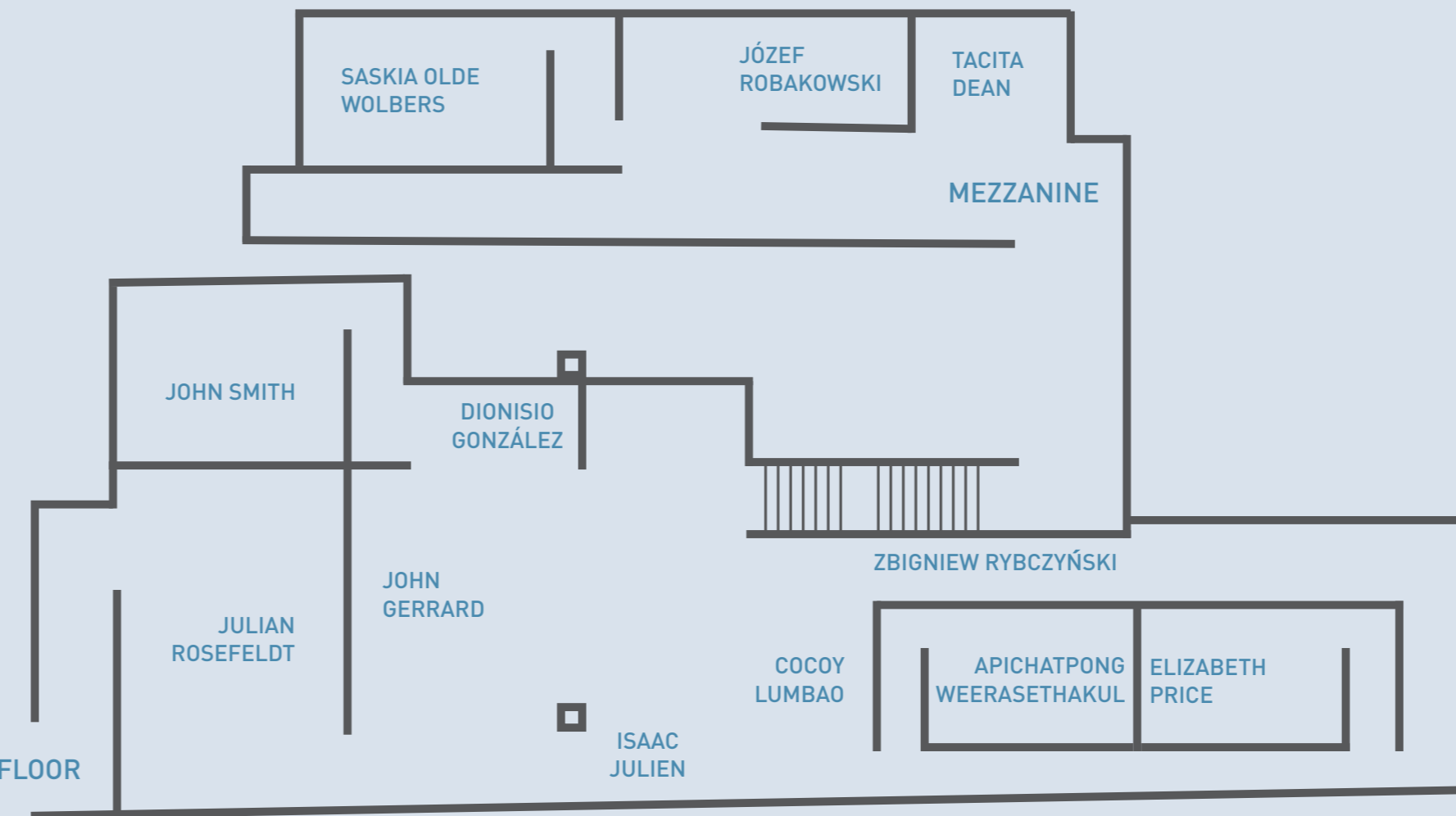
Unlike landscapes, figures and most other subjects of representational art, buildings are generally static. They change only minimally over time and their construction and destruction can provide the focus for episodes of intense scrutiny or spectacle. Perhaps inevitably the subjects of the first fixed photographs were architectural. In Nicephore Niepce's *View from the Window at Le Gras* the necessary exposure time resulted in an image in which sunlight simultaneously illuminates opposites sides of the same building: a still representation of both (built) space and time. A century later in the 1920s, Russian film theorist Dziga Vertov characterized the new technology of the *moving* image in unambiguously architectural terms: 'I am a mechanical eye. I am a builder. I can place you whom I have created in an extraordinary room, which did not exist until just now when I also created it. In this room there are twelve walls all shot by me

*I am a mechanical eye.
I am a builder.*
-Dziga Vertov

in various parts of the world.' Vertov's characterization of film as a potent creator of alternative realities, and the camera as an endlessly perfectible, and therefore superior surrogate for his own fallible vision seems incredibly prescient in today's world of visual prosthesis where geographical distances and individual identities can be casually collapsed through digital technology.

As has been widely theorized, 18th and 19th century developments in optics produced a totalizing re-organisation of vision whose impact on the design of cities, civic institutions and domestic space is still clear. Similarly, Modernist architecture's development is inextricable from its photographic and filmic portrayal. The characteristic spatial and visual experiences of the 20th century city can be summed up as a series of simultaneously architectural and filmic tropes which appear in various works in this exhibition and its accompanying film programme as a series of leitmotifs: the travelling shot along the street from a moving vehicle; the vertically ascending prospect from inside a glass fronted elevator; the panoramic sweep over parks, squares and buildings from a lofty vantage point; the static scene of the banal domestic interior; or the view from a window where the passing of time is visible only through changing light conditions and the movements of the city's inhabitants.

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EXHIBITION RUNS FROM 6 JUNE - 31 OCTOBER 2014





Tacita Dean

Born 1965, Canterbury, UK
Lives and works
in Berlin, Germany

Palast, 2004
16 mm film installation,
10 minutes, 30 seconds

“It is the building that always catches and holds the sun in the grey centre of the city: its regime-orange reflective glass mirroring the setting sun perfectly, as it moves from panel to panel along its chequered surface, drawing you in to notice

it on your way up the Unter den Linden to Alexanderplatz. For a time, when Berlin was still new to me, it was just another abandoned building of the former East, that beguiled me despite its apparent ugliness, tricking and teasing the light and flattering the sensible and solid nineteenth century cathedral opposite with its reflections. Only later did I learn that it was the Palast der Republik and former government building of the GDR, a contentious place that concealed

its history in the opacity of its surface, but had now been run-down, stripped of its trimmings and was awaiting the verdict on its future.”

–Tacita Dean



John Gerrard

Born 1974, Dublin, Ireland
Lives and works in Vienna, Austria

Cuban School (Sancti Spiritu), 2011
Computer generated simulation,
Infinite duration

Cuban School (Sancti Spiritu) is a virtual portrait of an existing school, situated in the countryside in Southern Cuba. The project is a faithful, virtual representation of the site created using computer gaming software. Although the building is

still in use, Gerrard chose to remake the scene empty of people, with a particular focus on the architecture. There is, however, a caretaker character, who appears to switch on the building's neon lights each day at dusk, returning to switch them off some hours later. This illumination allows the cartoons painted on walls within the school to be seen at night (GMT -5 hours).

The work is shot using an ‘orbital camera’ which circles slowly and continuously around the building

taking around twenty minutes per iteration. As Gerrard explains: “Each camera orbit intersects with the orbit of the sun. The light reality will repeat and develop every 24 hours (on account of the Earth's spin) and of course begin again every 365 days as the earth moves around the sun.”



Dioniso González

Born 1965, Gijón, Spain
Lives and works in Madrid, Spain

Paulicéia Desvairada, 2004
Single channel video projection,
20 minutes

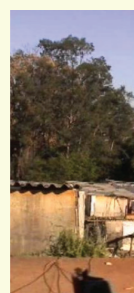
In González's film the camera tracks in an apparently continuous travelling shot through a “favela” or shanty-town. In fact the film depicts a number of different locations spliced together, all of them however in the Brazilian mega city Sao Paulo. The continuity of the shot in which the camera's gaze is returned by the passersby

is significant because as the artist proposes favelas “act as counter-panoptics because of their overcrowding [and lack of] police vigilance system.”

Equally the horizontality of the shot is important to the artist who “found it paradoxical that the few serious interventions made by the municipality of Sao Paulo were aimed at the demolition of these settlements or their verticalization.”

The film's title *Paulicéia Desvairada* (from the Portuguese, literally “Untapped São Paulo”, often

translated as “Hallucinated City”) is borrowed from an influential collection of poems first published in 1922 by the Brazilian modernist poet Mário de Andrade. “Paulicéia” being a nickname for São Paulo.



Isaac Julien

Born 1960, London, UK
Lives and works in London, UK

Enigma, 2014
Time-lapse composite consisting
of 2500 still photographic images,
1 minute 42 seconds, 2 hour loop

Dubai's ambitious architectural projects for business and tourism take centerstage in this timelapse work which follows a 24 hour cycle in the desert city. The title refers to urban geographer David Harvey's

2010 book, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis of Capitalism*, which analyzes the causes of the 2008 stock market crash and ensuing global financial crisis. Harvey argues that capital, in its relentless need to invest its surpluses, produced such forms of habitation as the Paris of Haussmann, the US suburbs of the 1950s and the vertical cities of the Pearl River Delta. His main argument is that capital, with its imperative requirement for a three per cent annual return exports itself and its crises all over the world.

Harvey conjures a vision of capital swirling over ocean, plain and mountain like weather systems seen from space, a view replicated in Julien's view of Dubai in which the city fizzles and flares with pulsing light and energy, the glow of capital seen from above.



Cocoy Lumbao

Born 1977, Manila, Philippines
Lives and works
in Manila, Philippines

Index (Elevated Train), 2008
Single channel video installation,
11 minutes, 13 seconds

“Using an image from a moving train's perspective—the commuter Light Railway system—I tried to reconstruct the city from this elevated vantage point, manipulated out of desperation in trying to amass beauty and perfection from the clutter. While staying faithful in portraying the veracity of the

train-tracks to the train's motion and its surroundings, the result, I would like to believe, is a near-utopian symmetry, livable and breathable but at the same time disconcerting. It becomes a refreshing view of the city which seems to be compounded by mystery. And as a payoff to this plot, speaking in terms of narrative filmic conventions, we then come face to face at each train station with waiting commuters and their doppelgangers on the opposite side of the platform as it provides the resolution to the guised perfection.

Growing up in Manila, I have always been amazed by its rich heritage.

As one of Asia's oldest cities, and as one of the great metropolises of the past, I have always felt that there is a part in each present citizen who may have longed for its grandeur. As in every case of great cities, it succumbs to its own demise.”

–Cocoy Lumbao



Elizabeth Price

Born 1966, Bradford, UK
Lives and works in London, UK

At the House of Mr X, 2007
Single channel HD video,
20 minutes

“This narrative video takes as its subject the home of an anonymous art collector, designed and built in the late 1960s. Only briefly inhabited, the house and its contents remain immaculately preserved. The film opens as a visit to the house. A slow, visual tour begins, proceeding from the

entrance through open-plan areas, into every room. The elegant geometry of the spaces, the varied materials of the architecture, and the luxurious modernist furnishings are attentively documented. In particular, the camera dwells upon gleaming, reflective surfaces: the lustre of coloured glass; bright plastics and the liquid-shine of chrome. The tour is directed by a silent narrator, present as an on-screen script, punctuated with percussive and close-harmony vocal arrangements. This narrator is the guide for the tour, and the only

protagonist in the film. Its script is collaged from documents relating to the house, art collection, and business ventures of the former resident, who generated his wealth through cosmetics brands Outdoor Girl and Mary Quant.”

–Elizabeth Price



Józef Robakowski

Born 1939, Poznan, Poland
Lives and works in Lodz, Poland

From My Window, 1978-1999,
16 mm film transferred to video,
18 minutes

“I have been working on this film since 1978, when I started living in a flat situated in the so-called Manhattan centre of Lodz. From time to time I would “look out” of my kitchen window with a film or video

camera onto a huge square which became the hero of my “notebook”. I kept filming all the changes and various social and political events taking place in this square. Today twenty years have passed since I shot the first frames of that film. The time accumulated in the film became the protagonist of my venture. In 1998 the City Authorities decided to build a foreign hotel in our beautiful square. Its construction is currently under way. Now the

view from my window encompasses only a fragment of the hotel wall. In 1999 I decided to end those film chronicles [...]”

–Józef Robakowski



Julian Rosefeldt

Born 1965, Munich, Germany
Lives and works
in Berlin, Germany

The Stunned Man (Trilogy of Failure II), 2004
2-channel film installation,
32 minutes, 49 second loop

In *The Stunned Man*, we see a stuntman-actor in a banal domestic setting simultaneously building and violently destroying the work of his alter ego. Two adjacent screens set up a bi-polar relationship between mirrored fields of action. When on one side the man calmly walks

through the door, the mirrored man crashes through the ceiling, then nonchalantly dusts himself off as if everything is normal. The pendulum like sway of the slow moving camera – a nod to Hitchcock's *Rope* – follows the man as he paces backwards and forwards through his comfortable abode. Spilling the noodles he is preparing on one screen catalyzes a destructive chain of events – a Kung Fu attack on his kitchen space, followed by a Buster-Keatonesque slapstick smashing his surroundings. The two frames serve initially to create the idea of mirror images, then binary opposites and finally a reversal. A voyeur inside the home

of the man, the viewer follows the movement of the character as well as the space, a trope made possible by the use of a moving set. As the two images separate and then seemingly dissolve into one another, one gets the impression of the space being turned inside out and outside in.



Zbigniew Rybczyński

Born 1949, Lodz, Poland
Lives and works
in Los Angeles, USA

Tango, 1981
35 mm film transferred to video,
8 minutes, 14 seconds

This Oscar-winning animated short film depicts a room with three doors – two closed and one ajar – a window, a bed, a shelf, a cupboard, a table with three stools, and a crib. 36 characters from all walks and stages of life pass in and out of the room, moving in loops but

never acknowledging one another and it soon becomes obvious that such a small space could not possibly contain all these actions simultaneously. Rybczyński makes critical use of off-screen space – the imaginary area beyond the edge of the screen, and in front of or behind the camera – exposing it for the artifice it is. The doors, window and wardrobe all provide ways through to this imaginary off screen space.

Although originally an experimental film-maker Rybczyński went on to become an influential director of pop videos in the 1980s working

with Grandmaster Flash, Lou Reed and Jimmy Cliff among others. The use of the domestic interior as the frame or setting of the short action sequences recurs in many of these videos, most notably in the video for John Lennon's *Imaginé*.



John Smith

Born 1952, Walthamstow, UK
Lives and works in London, UK

The Black Tower, 1987
Single channel 16 mm film
converted to video, 24 minutes

In *The Black Tower* we enter the world of a man haunted by a tower which, he believes, is following him around London. While the character of the central protagonist is indicated only by a narrative voice over which takes us from unease to mental breakdown to mysterious death, the images, meticulously

controlled and articulated, deliver a series of colour-coded puzzles, jokes and puns. The film was inspired by a hospital water tower close to Smith's home in Hackney, East London which he described as looking like “an absence of image on top of a plinth” or “a black square cut out of the sky”.

The film's narrative and development were also influenced by the controversial demolition of high-rise social housing blocks in Hackney which took place during the 1980s and 1990s. According to Smith these sudden and irreversible

changes to the urban landscape produced the sense of unease reflected in the film, which consists of footage of these demolitions together with shots of the hospital tower taken from a range of view points.



Apichatpong Weerasethakul

Born 1970, Chiang Mai, Thailand
Lives and works
in Chiang Mai, Thailand

A Letter to Uncle Boonmee, 2009
Film, 16 minutes

A Letter to Uncle Boonmee is part of the multi-platform *Primitive* project which focuses on a concept of remembrance and extinction in northeast of Thailand, an area that was at the centre of the Thai government's fight to wipe out

communist insurgents in the 1970s. The film comprises of shots of house interiors in the evening. The houses are deserted except for one, where there is a group of young soldiers, played by some teens of Nabua, the village in which the film was shot. Two of them impersonate the artist by narrating the film: “Uncle... I have been here for a while. I would like to see a movie about your life. [] Here in Nabua there are several houses that I think are suitable for this short film for which I got funding from England. I don't know what your house looked

like. I cannot use the one in my script because it is so different from the ones here. Maybe some parts of these houses resemble yours. Soldiers once occupied this place. They killed and tortured the villagers until everyone fled into the jungle.”

