

Laurent Grasso: Galerie Chez Valentin

ArtForum, March, 2006 by Jean-Max Colard

What does it mean to be contemporary? It depends with whom or with what. We are always contemporary in relation to something, to someone. To the Internet, to Viktor Yushchenko, to the war in Iraq, to plasma screens? On this question, there is no "we" that holds up: Born in 1968, I am not the same "contemporary" as my fifth-floor neighbor, born in 1974. And each instant renegotiates this bond of contemporaneity, this relationship to the world--because being contemporary with someone or something entails a distinctive manner of bonding with one's time.

Sometimes, contemporaneousness is almost synonymous with coincidence. And that's how I first perceived Laurent Grasso's solo exhibition at Galerie Chez Valentin in Paris--through what some might dismiss as mere coincidence. It was mid-November when I saw it, and while certain suburbs were ablaze as a result of a long-pent-up social rage, while rioting blew like wind on the outskirts of the capital and spread to other suburbs around the country, Grasso's video *Untitled, 2003-2005*, sent an enormous cloud rolling through the cloistered streets of Paris like a dust storm. A fiction, in other words, something that did not take place in reality but to which the current climate gave a certain plausibility: The outbreak of suburban violence moving into the capital itself.

No doubt those who subsequently see this work at the Witte de With in Rotterdam, where the whole ensemble has been incorporated into "Satellite of Love," an exhibition on television in contemporary culture, will have different associations. And viewers from New York would certainly have thought of another catastrophe. Indeed, were it not for its Parisian setting, Grasso's video would revive the (tele)visual memory of the dusty, whitish collapse of the Twin Towers. Others, more detached from history, know this quickly advancing cloud moving toward the viewer, swallowing buildings and cars in its way in a muted rumbling, as a standard cinematic fiction, a typical sequence in Hollywood blockbusters like *Godzilla*. By only showing traces of the catastrophe, Grasso urges viewers to enter a process of narration and invent the screenplay on their own. Swept into a sort of floating temporality as depicted by the virtual cloud embedded in the screen, we move between recent history and pure science fiction, between lucidity and hallucination.

Moreover, the entire exhibition encouraged a sense of distance vis-a-vis this astonishing

untitled video occupying an entire back wall—for instance, a little blue neon piece, entitled *Projection*, 2005, a sort of warning sign or advertisement that immediately lets us know that everything here is a mental fiction. Elsewhere in the gallery, the cloud also appeared in other forms: in a series of black-and-white photographs ("*Untitled*," 2005) and even on an old television set from the '70s (*Untitled*, 2003-2005), as if it were some old disaster movie—a matter of removing the form from a too-immediate contextual reading, of making it abstract, making it weightless, and adding it to the other phantoms with which Grasso haunts the spaces of art.

Translated from French by Jeanne Herman.

COPYRIGHT 2006 Artforum International Magazine, Inc.

COPYRIGHT 2008 Gale, Cengage Learning