

Melik Ohanian - Reviews: Paris - Critical Essay

ArtForum, Nov, 2002 by Jean-Max Colard

What is cosmopolitiques? Not merely the title of a new French journal, conceived by philosopher Isabelle Stengers and sociologist of science Bruno Latour, but the name given to political systems that also embrace the nonhuman, according a place to trees, whales, genes, seas, mountains--en to the Gulf Stream, currently threatened by global warming. "With what other beings do we want to continue to exist? With what sort of world?"--such are the basic questions raised by this new ecology, which rejects an essentially rationalistic and totalizing concept of nature. Without reducing his work to a message or the mere illustration of a political idea, the French artist Melik Ohanian partakes of this kind of thinking. Here, the world no longer appears simply as the backdrop for human activity, still less as Nature, organized and hierarchized in advance, but as an eventful, changing cosmos. Thus, to cite some earlier works, the striking dockworkers of Liverpool, the subject of his 1997 film (transferred to video), *White Wall Travelling*, take their place among quite different realities--for instance the isle of Surtsey, situated to the south of the Icelandic coast, which suddenly appeared one day in 1963 following an underwater volcanic eruption: the birth of a new land. The artist has been contemplating, documenting, filming, and photographing this place since 1998, and he has retraced its geological evolution in a journal. The island was also the subject of a half documentary, half poetic installation created for the opening of the Palais de Tokyo in January 2002 and shown again at the Basel art fair in June: With a projected landscape as background, *Island of an Island, 2002*, used spotlights to depict a strange flower that has sprung up on this mysterious bit of land, which is not much older than the artist himself.

It was therefore as an interface with the world that Ohanian conceived his one-person exhibition "Nightsnow." In *Freezing Film, 2002*, the visitor saw, projected onto a concrete structure something like a cross between a skateboarding ramp and a Ping-Pong table, 250 images of Mars (collected from the Internet) rush by. Pressing a button interrupted the flow, allowing one to linger over an image. In *Switch Off, 2002*, a large light box showed a black-and-white photo of Earth. When the light went off, the planet dissolved into starlight. A cosmic reverie, but also a game about dysfunction--a strategy the artist often favors: "I've already sometimes done a kind of performance-installation that consists of turning off the streetlights in a neighborhood, at the exit of a movie theater, for example," he told me. "Other times, using flares, I add a minute of supplementary daylight. In Miami next December I might switch off an entire neighborhood: I like turning things off, the game of it, the slight perturbation of the world." For the video *Nightsnow, 2001*, barely twelve minutes long,

Ohanian simply filmed the beginnings of a storm during another trip to Iceland. At an intersection, under two orange streetlights, swirls of snow rise in circular flurries, an antispectacular spectacle of the world. Using diverse means such as video, photography, installation, and interactivity, without order or hierarchy, Ohanian's exhibition revealed a veritable cosmography of the image.

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