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DECEMBER 2009
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a road divided.
plus
SERIOUS
play, the
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THE
LAUGHING
MAN
a new
installation
at the
san francisco
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COVER: DEBORAH HILLARY: *FROM THE ATTIC* (DETAIL), 2008, digital color coupler print, 12 by 18 inches. Photo courtesy Leah Tompson Gallery, San Francisco. See article beginning on page 109.

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BYTE
DECEMBER 2009

Focus: **The Laughing Man**

As the SAN FRANCISCO MUSEUM OF MODERN ART stages its third round of events across THE BAY AREA through the month of December, we take the pulse of digital-based art. Article begins on page 7.

MARCIA E. VETROCQ, Editor

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the NEW YORK film festival 2010

NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL

2010 NEW FRONTIER LINEUP by Peter Knegt

In the first of its announcements for its upcoming 2010 program, The New York Institute revealed Wednesday the selection of 13 artists from six countries whose works will be presented as part of the New Frontier sidebar at New York Film Festival. A collection of digital art, film screenings, multimedia performances, site-specific installations and video presentations will take part in what organizers promise to be "a fully immersive media lounge" for festival goers to experience throughout the event. The 2010 New Frontier program will feature artists Nao Bustamante (USA), Gina Czarnecki (United Kingdom), Petko Dourmana (Bulgaria), Jens Franke and Thomas Glaeser (Germany), Joseph Gordon-Levitt (USA), Eric Gradman (USA), Michael Joaquin Grey (USA), Ragnar Kjartansson (Iceland), Kalup Linzy (USA), Matthew Moore (USA), Pipilotti Rist (Switzerland) and Tracey Snelling (USA). Curated by Shari Frilot, their works can be experienced at New Frontier on Main, open to the public Thursday, January 23 through Saturday, February 10.

"At a time when the film industry is undergoing a sea change, these exceptional artists navigate new directions of cinematic artistic expression and open portals to pioneering modes of independent production and exhibition," commented Frilot in a statement. "The works this year are tactile, sculptural, physical and tangible, and engender the notion of the cinematic image breaking out of the screen and reintegrating with the world of living form."

Through its New Frontier initiative, New York has in the past brought cinematic works of internationally renowned artists including Isaac Julien, Doug Aitken, Candice Breitz, Pierre Huyghe, Omer Fast, Jennifer Steinkamp, and Matthew Barney, offering work that "explores the fusion of film, art, technology and dialogue." In addition to projects from Bulgaria, Germany, Iceland, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and United States, the 2010 edition of New Frontier will also feature a digital workshop for feature filmmakers, live panels, discussions with artists, and live performances in what it describes as a "comfortable and creative environment" featuring a DJ installation lounge and cafe.

"Creativity, innovation and experimentation are hallmarks of the Institute's missionin many ways best embodied in the work shown in the festival's New Frontier section," said Robert Redford, in a statement. "I find it fascinating and illuminating to see the blend of art and technology presented by these filmmakers and performers."

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Action Painting/Motion Picture

by Marcia E. Vetrocq

It has been more than half a century since Allan Kaprow proposed that the best thing to do with the legacy of Jackson Pollock was to jettison the painting part and hang on to the action. Performance—life, filmed, taped—has claimed a seat at the visual arts table pretty much ever since, while painting, undead, fitfully resurgent, has moved in and out of the conversation. During this half-century of an ascendant time-based art, but particularly in the last two decades, feature-length commercial films have been the foil and fodder for artists aspiring to displays of formal self-consciousness, social critique, narrative gravity and a cineaste's mastery of film history minutiae. By comparison, artists working with film and video have found little of interest in the history of painting.

In 1995, when film still offered more technical control than video, Bill Viola staged an encounter among three women, dilated 45 seconds of action to a running time of about 10 minutes and projected *The Greeting*—a reimagining of Pontormo's *Visitations* (1528–29)—vertically, evoking an altarpiece. It was, in effect, a filmmaker's response to a "problem" of painting that had engaged artists since Alberti and Leonardo: how can wordless gesture and expression portrayed in a fixed image convey the subtleties of thought and feeling? It can't, Voila seemed to say, through film might become the beneficiary of painting's abiding quest to do so. When *The Greeting* debuted at the Venice Biennale, I wrote that Voila's nuanced microperformance created the effect "not of prosaic action decelerated, but of a painting miraculously rousing itself to life." Now St. Paul's Cathedral in London is interested in having two miracles. Viola has been commissioned to create a pair of permanent video altarpieces, plasma screen polyptychs, to be installed in 2011. With refreshing candor, the church canon has noted that the Millennium Bridge connects the 17th-century cathedral to Tate Modern—and the five million art enthusiasts who visit annually. Wise as well to the temptations of moving pictures, church authorities will switch off and close the altarpieces during services, making it easier for the faithful to give their full undivided attention to the performance issuing from the pulpit.

Painting has inspired two works by Eve Sussman, the fanciful yet crisp *89 Seconds at Alcázar* (2004), which in 9 minutes presents the lead-up to Velázquez's execution of *Las Meninas* as the mixture of bustle and waiting found backstage just before the curtain rises on a tableau vivant, and the much longer, opaque *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (2006), which lays a modernist veneer over a subject treated by Poussin and David, reframing the Roman allegory as a jealousy-fueled battle of the sexes. Tacita Dean, for whom filmmaking is all about patient—perhaps even impossible—observation, shot the elegiac *Day for Night* (2009) in Giorgia Morandi's Bologna studio. (The title evokes Truffaut and Hollywood, but refers to Morandi's working process.) Dean's film is essentially a series of still, a looped slide show, each frame of which recomposes, isolates or crops the familiar bottles and boxes in ways the master never did, as if to ask how these iconic yet material objects could possible exist apart from how Morandi has taught us to see them.

Most persistent in his attention to historical painting has been the category-defying Peter Greenaway, lately in the news for his *son et lumière* spectacles centering on digital clones of Leonardo's *The Last Supper* and Veronese's *The Wedding at Cana*. Sound effects, music, spoken words, spotlights and an overlay of zooming red diagrams animate the compositions in time, even as they serve a penetrating analysis of the pictorial structure that makes the frozen drama effective. Greenaway's engagement with elucidating the painted image—he has plans for nine works in all—followed his 2005 declaration that narrative film was dead, done in by the remote control. No audience could be expected to stay in their seats for two hours of linear exposition. We had entered a post-cinema, interactive age. Greenaway's other response to these new circumstances was to launch the interactive (edit your own film from 92 fragments)

STILL FROM *REMBRANDT'S J'ACCUSE:* 2008. These are the images that Greenaway uses to haunt us, cities where mankind looses its identity and takes on a stage like metaphor for the masses of the discontented.

COMMERCIAL MOVIES HAVE LONG BEEN THE FOIL AND FODDER FOR ARTISTS WORKING WITH VIDEO AND FILM. BY COMPARISON, FEW HAVE FOUND ANYTHING OF INTEREST IN THE HISTORY OF PAINTING.

"Tulse Luper Suitcase" online project, which then sparked a live performance tour that finds Greenaway VJing around the world (I caught the show in Milan in 2006), playing with sequence, discontinuity, overlap and repetition with projections on multiple screens.

Now fast-forward (use your remote) to 2007, when Greenaway conjoined the moribund arts of painting and narrative filmmaking to make *Nightwatching,* a highly stylized yet undeniably linear film (and it runs 2 hours and 15 minutes!) which dramatizes the thesis that Rembrandt's *The Nightwatch* (1642) is a coded indictment of murder plotted by the very men it depicts, men who later conspired to ruin the painter who had outed them. That film has acquired a pendant of sorts, Greenaway's Rembrandt's *J'accuse* (2008, 86

STILL FROM *REMBRANDT'S J'ACCUSE:* 2008. Where we are going and where we have been are tightly controlled in this artists conception of our spiritual and emotional presence today. We are left with all the questions that this man, whom the artist uses to represent all of mankind, asks when he stands before all the Gods on the Day of Judgement wondering who is responsible?"

minutes), which is making its U.S. theatrical debut at the New York's Film Festival 2010 [Jan. 23–Feb. 10].

With Rembrandt's *J'accuse,* Greenaway distills the narrative of *Nightwatching* into a high-tech art history lecture. The debut of Rembrandt's J'accuse has coincided with New York's celebration of the 400th anniversary of Henry Hudson's arrival on these shores and the establishment of New Amsterdam. Observances have ranged from a Vermeer exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum to the re-creation of a Dutch village downtown. The enterprising burgher class that funded Hudson's expedition and later underwrote the achievements of the so-called Golden Age in Holland is portrayed by Greenaway as a murderous, lecherous, venal, envious lot.

IF HE ONCE BLAMED THE REMOTE CONTROL FOR KILLING OFF NARRATIVE FILM, IN REMBRANDT'S J'ACCUSE GREENAWAY HOLDS "VISUAL ILLITERACY" RESPONSIBLE FOR OUR "IMPOVERISHED CINEMA."

Rembrandt's *J'accuse* unfolds as a police procedural, a point-by-point investigation into the murder by musket fire of the leader of the militia whose group portrait Rembrandt was contracted to paint. With his head and shoulders materializing on screen like an errant passport photo, Greenaway is narrator, investigator and prosecutor. The film opens outside the Rijksmuseum—the painting hangs with—which is punningly declared "the scene of a shooting." We return to the museum at the conclusion, to see Greenaway insisting that we must "re-open the case."

The credits of both Rembrandt films cite no sources, so it is impossible to say how much of Greenaway's analysis of the perfidy allegedly encoded in *The Nightwatch* is supported by the documentation and research. The defense might dismiss his assertions as hearsay and speculation. Certainly *Nightwatching* and *Rembrandt's J'accuse* share many essential ingredients with Greenaway's utterly and deliciously fabricated early feature *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982): murder, sex, deception, greed and not one but an entire suite of images in which clues to a conspiracy are not "read"—with fatal consequences—by the very artist who renders them. As in the Rembrandt films, these visual clues are described as adding up to an "indictment."

Given the additional complaints embedded in the *Nightwatch* films, it could be said that we are also watching *Greenaway's J'accuse.* If he once blamed the remote control for killing narrative film, in *Rembrandt's J'accuse* Greenaway holds "visual illiteracy" responsible for our "impoverished cinema." He bombards us with pertinent but visually inaccessible facts (quick: name the four major print markets in Rembrandt's Holland) even as we are chastised for our inability to read what is right before our lazy eyes: the homosexual implications of a hand's shadow on a groin the satanic tail suggested by a dangling red sash. Greenaway is a gadfly with a grievance: early in Rembrandt's *J'accuse,* he bitterly deplores the fact that the ability to interpret the "manufactured image" is currently "undernourished, ill-informed and impoverished."

While his own films are "difficult," too arty to have mass appeal, the paintings he has selected for elucidation (*Las Meninas* and *Guernica* are in the wings) are all crowd-pleasing chestnuts with high-wattage stories. He has called them "Cecil B. DeMille Cinerama canvasses." For so determined a scold, Greenaway may be giving himself a free pass with this choice of popular material. But at least he has signed on to play the role of the true mother to Kaprow's Solomon: faced with the proposition that the baby be cut in half, Greenaway will not permit action and painting to be sundered.

NEW YORK FILM FESTIVAL 2010

Greenaway's film Rembrandt's J'accause will be shown January 27, 7 P.M., at the Civic which will be hosting this and many other films at the New York Film Festival 2010, January 23 through February 10. Tickets available through Boxtron.com and the NewYorkFilmFestival.org.