

**Dawn Roe's *Goldfields***  
***Leigh-Ann Pahapill and Lisa Zaher in Conversation***

Leigh-Ann Pahapill (MFA, University of Chicago) is a sculpture and installation artist based in Toronto. Her works look at how language and thought influence our experiences of objects and space. Exploring these affect-rich and highly metaphorical mediations, Pahapill creates interventions, recordings, assemblies, and disassemblies that are simultaneously alienating and seductive.

Lisa Zaher is a Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Chicago. Working between the History of Art and Cinema and Media Studies, her research and teaching focuses on inter-medial and media-archaeological approaches to the history of art and visual culture. She is completing a dissertation entitled, "By Mind and Hand: Hollis Frampton's Photographic Modernism."

**LMZ:** When I first watched *Goldfields*, I was mesmerized by its Dziga Vertov-like cataloguing of forms of stillness and motion—both those found in nature and those made cinematically. The stillness of the trees, the fleetingness of the clouds, and the stilled stream that ripples to motion find homonyms in Dawn's act of recording, from static shots to pans and turns. Presented in triple projection, I found myself at times uncertain of the stasis or movement in each shot, trying to fix, in my mind, an awareness of the repetitions and subtle differences across each image. Several viewings later, this task of locating repetitions and differences still compels me, but now I find myself haunted by its protagonists—agents of action and subjects of attention that repeat and are repeated. Of these, of course, the trees are most prominent, as well as the birds and crickets that we hear but do not see.

I wonder if you found yourself similarly as a witness to these protagonists, to their polyphonic soliloquy that speaks of both time and place? How do you see the photographic performance of stillness and motion worked out with or through the performances of each subject?

**LP:** Indeed, I also recognized 'protagonists' immediately – from the ridiculously feeble 'runt of the litter' tree (sapling?) in drag, to the s-curved exaggerated contrapposto posed tree in the forest through to the absentee fire tender. They are axioms, or signs, cliché images, familiar forms – art historical, canonical and so on, things that I cannot 'see' without attaching a scheme of meaning to. For me, they appear – or are made to appear vis-à-vis the collocation of the moving and still image, as if, by arresting the image, it immediately becomes something so easily nameable – a known. The French philosopher Alain Badiou has written about this phenomenon in *Being and Event* as *being as one-multiple*, which is an operational result, an effect of the operation of the *count as one*. Each time the sequence shifts from moving to still image I find this phenomenon occurring; I count as one the tree now *con-sisting* – or standing together with other presentations, for example, {tree, figure, contrapposto}. I can no longer see the tree in experience, as a presented multiple or as a figure of presentation. Each time the image is stilled the figure of presentation becomes a representation and I see it in syntax, that is, as regimes. The moving image sequences present themselves as presentations in a consistent multiplicity that, in the act of presenting, become embedded in knowledge. I find this to be quite compelling.

Let me take this a little bit further. In response to your characterization of ‘agents of action’, I’d like to point out that a curious thing happens for me in this work: I find myself as a viewer aligned with the camera operator. Saying this, I mean that I am acting on the scene – or, operating, as it were, and not just passively taking in the scenery. In a fashion, I become an agent of action, and in this activity, *I become (briefly)* more than my finitude. In this regard, the action that I find particularly interesting is the framing activity that is referenced and its relationship to being or presence as multiple. For Badiou, ontology is a situation, and, through representing activity, being emerges but then regresses: “the one, which is not, cannot present itself; it can only operate...it is retroactively apprehended as non-one as soon as being-one is a result.”<sup>1</sup> The sequencing of the video (as a series of successive representations) also echoes this ontological structure as it continuously cycles between moving and still images. As soon as I count as one, that one regresses and I find myself participating in a stream of presentations only to have the next count as one emerges as the sequence stills. I’d like to link this idea to your (really interesting) conflation of the multiple and the singular, the ‘polyphonic soliloquy’ that you identify and ask if the performing subjects you are thinking of also include the viewer?

**LMZ:** Yes, I think that in the work as a whole the viewer is called to action. However, I am not sure I find myself, as you do, aligned with the camera. Even when the shots in each of the three screens are the same, I find my attention split from one screen to the next. Do I bear witness to, or act upon the event as the camera does, or do I bear witness to the events as presented by and through the projected images? Am I implicated in the act of looking that occurred in the act of recording the event, or am asked to identify, to locate, to fix that which seemingly slips from one screen to the next?

For me, it seems the viewer is asked to act *not* with the camera, panning as it pans, waiting as it waits, looking and listening with its mechanical eye and ear; rather, the viewer performs a synthetic function, taking up the space between shots, performing physically, and not merely perceptually, the conditions of cinematic experience. The juxtapositions of still and moving images similarly produce a space within which the viewer may act, by noting the starts and stops of movement, by remembering from one screen to the next what was just seen, determining what had been, what remains and what is no longer. Each screen gives its own “now-point” (to borrow the philosopher Edmund Husserl’s term).<sup>2</sup> We perceive the now-point before us, while through memory we confirm a shared duration across each image. The ripple effect in the water stands out for me as a moment when the individuality of each now-point conflicts with the shared generality of the durational image. Given the context of this work, produced in the woodlands that once served as the site of Australia’s gold mines, the work seems to place some pressure on the viewer to reconcile the past with the present. The acts of identifying, locating, and fixing that I mention above rely heavily upon coming to an

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2005), 25.

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Husserl, “A Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time,” in *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*, ed. Donn Welton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 186-221.

awareness of the significance of memory, whether we think of this in terms of primary retention—the memory that, according to Husserl, “holds on to” that which has just passed and forms a unity with the now-point of perception, or in terms of an invoked cultural memory that may be particular to those viewers who have experienced this region, or whose knowledge of its history has been passed down through generations.<sup>3</sup>

I wonder if the very nature of what qualifies as an ontological grounding is not placed in question here by Dawn’s work. Even the act of synthesis, of unifying past and present, seems a little tenuous and contingent. There are, after all, in addition to the blurring of stillness and motion, breaks throughout the sequence from night to day. Time flows and is both interrupted and stalled. While Nature may have reclaimed the space marred by Culture, the landscape remains broken, masked by darkness in the opening scene, and wrapped or marked by synthetic gold material throughout. Shots that seemingly offer a view through thickets of shrubbery sometimes return back a surface. What might the failure to determine stilled images from moving ones, to reconcile past and present, to identify surface from depth, do to any ontological claims made on behalf of the viewer, the landscape, or the medium?

**LP:** The irreconcilability that you describe is key for Badiou’s ontology since the situation that emerges on the scene (screen) cannot, in fact, be accounted *for*. For Badiou, the *count as one* is not *one* and, in his formulation, the *one is not* being (non-being), as “being is neither one nor multiple...[and], finally, ontology, if it exists, is a situation.”<sup>4</sup> So indeed, I couldn’t agree with you more, as the act of synthesis *is* tenuous and inconsistent with this work. Interestingly, I can identify a parallel structure between the larger axioms that structure the sequence—for example, the Categorical (as the structure that enables the presentation of a presentation from an *inconsistent multiplicity*, or what you are referring to as the irreconcilable) and pattern of emergent presentation within the structure itself (to become a *consistent multiplicity* or that which *con-sists*, or can be understood as standing together, i.e., the symbols of cultural memory). For Badiou, the realm of the irreconcilable that I take you to be referencing also falls outside the structure that frames the ontological situation. In fact, it is the axiomatic structure that creates the consistent multiplicity from an inconsistent one:

Ontology, axiom system of the particular inconsistency of multiplicities, seizes the in-itself of the multiple by forming into consistency all inconsistency and by forming into inconsistency all consistency. It thereby deconstructs any one-effect; it is faithful to the non-being of the one, so as to unfold, without explicit nomination, the regulated game of the multiple such that it is none other than the absolute form of presentation, thus the mode in which being proposes itself to any access.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Husserl, 194.

<sup>4</sup> Badiou, 25.

<sup>5</sup> Badiou, 30.

I align myself with the camera due to Dawn's juxtaposition of the moving sequence and the still frame. As much as I find myself to indeed be "panning as it pans, waiting as it waits, looking and listening with its mechanical eye and ear", I am not able to discern (name) what I am to be waiting and looking for and listening to until it presents itself to me. This is critical to Badiou's account of non-being:

What is required is that the operational structure of ontology discern the multiple without having to make a one out of it, and therefore without possessing a definition of the multiple...an axiomatic presentation consists, on the basis of non-defined terms, in prescribing a rule for their manipulation...an explicit definition of *what* an axiom system counts as one, or counts as its object-ones, is never defined.<sup>6</sup>

This is where the strength of this work lies for me – that it takes me from the undefined, to the defined, to the one, and back again with a formal elegance that is consistently ruptured by a kind of ridiculousness that is so unexpected: The classicism of the draped figure is ruptured by the chintzy gold lamé fabric; the carefully composed landscape shots similarly slip into 1960's hallucinatory kaleidoscopic wallpaper; and the Goldsworthy-esque *Rivers and Tides* construction reveals a cheap sheet of gold leaf. An additional layer of formal elegance emerges through Dawn's editing, which shifts the scene in and out from what appears to be 3-channels to a single channel several times throughout the installation. Unlike you, I am not finding myself studying these moments tracing the movement from one screen to the next – rather I feel a sense of relief as I am pulled away from the framing moment to reposition myself in a much more vast, dare I say sublime, moment that is once again ruptured by an accompanying cliché (the bird call, the campfire, the tide...). I find that these moves that juxtapose the known with the undefined serve to prevent just the sort of ontological synthesis that you refer to above.

I see this work to be very heavily invested in the failure (to determine, to reconcile, and to identify) that enables a critical reappraisal of the role of the viewer, of the idea of the landscape, and of lens-based practices. Of the latter, I want specifically to raise the issue of the relationship of lens-based practices to truth, and in particular to wonder what is at stake when the documentary image shifts in and out (as I feel it does here) of 'authenticity' and whether this failure to fix representation allows Dawn to represent the unrepresentable. Put another way, does her refusal to determine, to reconcile, and to identify *a* politic, *a* point of view allow a glimpse into what structures the axiomatic presentation, to the view of what *in-consists*, the *impure multiplicity*,<sup>7</sup> to the multiple units of thought by which we create meaning?

**LMZ:** I think so. I think we agree in stating that *Goldfields* gestures towards forms of universally accepted truths that either cannot be defined, or conventionally go unstated or unacknowledged. But for me the question remains as to whether the axiomatic structure

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<sup>6</sup> Badiou, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Counted situation.

operating in *Goldfields* is singular and universal, or multiple, yet shared intersubjectively. The passage from Badiou that you cite above suggests to me that, in his formulation, it is *through* the epistemological situation that the ontological situation may emerge; that is, through repeated acts of coming to an awareness of how we know things in the world we open up the conditions of possibility for understanding *Being*. But in *Goldfields*, what is the entity that becomes known, and who or what performs the acts of knowledge? Do we interpret *Goldfields* as addressing selfhood and *Being*, or cultural memory and historical belonging, or medium-specificity? Or, is there something about the nature of *Goldfields*, its subject matter, its media and form of address, that brings together an inquiry into the ontological status of *Being*, history, and photographic media in a manner that is not a trivial overlapping of three divergent questions, but rather a claim to the fundamentally integral character of all three?

I am taking my cue here from the American photographer, filmmaker and theorist, Hollis Frampton, who, in a review article of an exhibition by the photographer Paul Strand, identified two parts to any work of art: its deliberative structure, and its axiomatic substructure. The deliberative structure refers to that which is visually apparent in a work of art; the axiomatic substructure “consists of everything the artist considered too obvious to bother himself about—or, often enough, did not consider at all but had handed him by his culture or tradition.”<sup>8</sup> What interests me in thinking about *Goldfields*, is how we might understand the axiomatic structures that inform the landscape, the artist and her medium, and each spectator coming together. Dawn has described the landscape of *Goldfields* “as a repository of cultural memory constructed from pastoral landscape representations, post-colonial and aboriginal concepts of space and place, folklore and myth.”<sup>9</sup> Multiple axiomatic structures embedded within the landscape, split between the causally defined historic time of post-colonial narratives, and the anti-historical, cyclical time of traditional civilizations, speak through cinematic sequences of duration and repetition. The anthropologist Mircea Eliade has argued that the source of modern man’s creativity rests in his ability to make history, and that in periods of late capitalism this is, for most men, essentially an illusion.<sup>10</sup> Archaic man, on the other hand, “is free to be no longer what he was, free to annul his own history through periodic abolition of time and collective regeneration.”<sup>11</sup> Might we not understand Dawn’s use of duration, of blurring stillness and motion, and of repetition as an attempt to think photography outside of its ties to history, as participating in the periodic cosmogony that characterizes nature? Might not Dawn’s prescription for an ontology of photographic media be grounded in the same phenomena that governs ritual: “the “magic” [that] exists in the periodic

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<sup>8</sup> Hollis Frampton, “Meditations around Paul Strand,” in Bruce Jenkins, ed. *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 61.

<sup>9</sup> Dawn Roe, Artist’s Statement: *Goldfields*, <http://www.dawnroephotography.com/DawnRoe/GoldfieldsAbout.html> (accessed: May 26, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1955), 156.

<sup>11</sup> Eliade, 157.

phenomena of life appearing.”<sup>12</sup> Might not *Goldfields* provide a creative defense against what Eliade describes as the “terror of history” and an alternative conception of *Being*?

**LP:** I feel like you are absolutely right on how the still/moving image formal strategy that Dawn employs enables an apprehension of the landscape as axiomatic while at the same time pointing to elements that work to structure the axiom itself. In Dawn’s representational strategy the landscape somehow manages to engender experience *and* representation *at the same time*: her image of the landscape shifts from *my* experience of the landscape to a generally accepted representation of the same.<sup>13</sup> As you suggest, Dawn seems to be using form (such as duration and repetition) to draw attention to the structure, rather than the content of that experience. Of course, by her emphasis on the structure (vs. the representation) she enables us to regard the content that piggybacks upon the structure critically. In her patterning of moving sequences punctuated by still images, she mimics our activity as viewers as we navigate the terrain of experience and representation. By creating this formal echo, she draws our attention to the ways in which form and content reinforce one another – that selfhood and being are embedded in cultural memory and historical belonging and that we understand or define ourselves in such a relation of performativity within these named (signed) constraints. We are the campers in the Other landscape, we are the beachgoers that witness, but are not responsible for, the crying child. In her juxtaposition of moving and still images, Dawn seems to situate us as tourists all the while breaking each sublime moment with an irony (this never happens). We cannot live outside of language, syntax, and representation – and it strikes me here that Dawn is asking us to reflect on the ways that the past informs the present by bootstrapping form rather than content (what a relief!).

While you and I share the inclination toward an ontological lens for regarding the work, I am reminded just now as I look again at the piece of the many other points of access presented here. For example, Dawn’s repeated use of the triptych structure and the humor in the work are two other, very different, means by which one can begin to think about this work. Interestingly, for myself, with just this mention, viewing the work again initiates the process of rupture once more, where art historical convention provides me with a vehicle for meaning as well as a vehicle for showing how meaning is made.

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<sup>12</sup> Jack Burnham, “Objects and Ritual: Towards a Working Ontology of Art,” in *Great Western Salt Works* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1974), 149. See also Joel Snyder, “What Happens by Itself in Photography?,” in Ted Cohen, Paul Geyer and Hilary Putnam, eds. *Pursuits of Reason* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1993): 361-74.

<sup>13</sup> “axiom, n.”. A proposition that commends itself to general acceptance; a well-established or universally-conceded principle; a maxim, rule, law. OED Online. March 2012. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/view/Entry/14045?redirectedFrom=axiom> (accessed June 03, 2012).

Art is the process of a truth, and this truth is always the truth of the sensible or sensual, the sensible as sensible. This means: the transformation of the sensible into a happening of the Idea.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Alain Badiou, "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art," trans. Peter Hallward (December 4, 2003). <http://www.lacan.com/issue22.php> (accessed June 3, 2012).