Art

MONTHLY

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down – the works at Gimpel Fils explore an aleatory, associative mode: the unexpected assonance between unrelated instances and dissonance between the known.
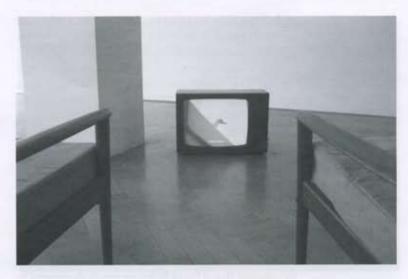
The six short sequences of *Cold Open*, part of a larger series, veer from the oblique to the voyeuristic. At points elegiac, romantic even, at others, inscrutable, sinister, the scenes which this portmanteau project presents – and they are *scenes* – impose a narrative, or at least begin to locate one, while simultaneously refuting any sensible account of events; cancelling the very idea, or value, of a narrative.

Harahan maintains a sense of rupture both within each fragment of *Cold Open* and in terms of its position in the whole, creating a strange sense of anomie in which sequences strive to pertain to one another but also challenge themselves; and a similarly dichotomous apprehension of lucidity and confusion is reflected in the interior of each section. The artist is wily, ungraspable, complicating and bewildering then pacifying with easy answers, solutions which are dead ends or which resolve locally but then create exceptions elsewhere.

Though it feels in passing as though it shares something of the timbre of narrativisation employed in, for instance, Corin Sworn's *After School Special*, 2009, or the associative edit of Morgan Fisher's *( )*, 2003, the machinery of the appropriation of meaning in *Cold Open* is entirely dissimilar to that of Sworn's film, which proposes an alternative dialogue for an extant work located instead in a first-person process, whereas Harahan's is original material. He cloaks the work adroitly by assuming a position of continual movement, shifting sides, implying and refuting in turn; obfuscating at every move in order to evade the viewer and to remain in the work, not above it. His is a position of agency, yet it is a privilege he divests himself of whenever possible. And, oddly, given the high camera angle and furtive form of much of the piece, it is not an altogether dominant, nor indeed unsympathetic position that he assumes.

In *Auftakt*, this process is perhaps more manifest due to the presence of a spoken narrative, but this conventional device becomes unstable, untrustworthy, swinging in and out of phase with the image until it is clear that while one could describe the other, the reverse is also possible – or, indeed, neither. All meaning exists in suspension, at once threatening to implode while offering a momentary yet brilliant clarity.

As with *Cold Open*, Harahan seems to retreat behind the work to suggest that meaning is only and always inferred, not implied. 'It's not the tune that matters so much here,' Arvo Pärt intones in the unseen workshop he is undertaking on his work *Für Alina*, the basis for the narration, 'it's the combination with this triad.' And, indeed, this could function well as a description of Harahan's synthetic, syncretistic work, not least in that the Estonian composer too favours a loose, semi-improvised, interpretative style of notation. The viewer of Harahan's work must take a sidelong glance, a route around, receiving reflected

Seamus Harahan
Auftakt 2011
installation view

meaning as one might view the sun during an eclipse. They must accept or reject associations within sequences or between them, yet perhaps tend towards the former, guided of course by the artist and by a tendency to perceive that like attracts like – a Goethean elective affinity: a desire to construct meaning, narrative, pattern.

While it would simplify *Cold Open* and *Auftakt* to assert that through them Harahan traffics in chance, it is nevertheless central to both works. Rather than employing aleatory mechanics as a means to an end, though, it is these mechanics themselves that the artist pursues. The works enjoy a fluid, shifting status, able at once to dissect the parameters and principles of chance as artistic methodology and to revel in its effects, which are by turns poetic and absurd, profound and banal, yet foregrounded, always, by the artist, the hand of God: omniscient, but never disinterested. ∎

ADAM PUGH is a writer and curator based in Norwich.

Dave Griffiths: Babel Fiche
Castlefield Gallery Manchester
10 August to 30 September

Do you know about the Wales-based Real Institute's 'Analogue Web Portal'? You can request (by letter only) to view any world wide web page, which is then drawn for you in pencil on a piece of paper, and posted back to you in an envelope. 'Some day all internet access will be made this way', their website tells us, and they have a point. Unconnected to the Real Institute, Dave Griffiths is currently preoccupied with the redundant microfiche format, invented in the mid 19th century in Manchester, where his practice is based. Compared with the fragility and instability of the digital archive, microfiche lasts 500 years and needs only light and a lens to be read. Griffiths's project *Babel Fiche* (a pun

on the name of the free online translator) is a film, a website, an installation and an image archive. It is the eponymous film that comprises the central focus of Griffiths's exhibition.

From an office high up, a man in a suit surveys the nocturnal cityscape below through a telescope. It might be Manchester, a northern British Alphaville. The man examines microfiches on a lightbox. Nearby there is a slide carousel and a microscope for reading microdots. A woman is viewing film clips that are evidently aged and worn. We are possibly in the post-digital future and this may be the only technology that will work. The characters do not speak, but a voice-over suggests that we are hearing their thoughts. The male voice ruminates about history and the role of the archivist. The female voice describes or responds to the film clips, in the form of prose poems. Their allusive words were specially written for the film by the futurologist Stefan Skrimshire and poet Gaia Holmes. The prevailing measured tone and pace of the film (similar to that of the influential films of Patrick Keiller) are periodically disrupted by welters of clips of amateur video footage, accumulated via an open call on a dedicated website and from trawling a public film archive: pigs feeding on a farm, buildings being demolished, tea tasting, a person running away into trees, a woman in exotic costume, a fragment of grotesque claymation. The clips have been rendered grainy and scarred (or 'dim jerky far away', as William Burroughs repeatedly put it). Next to the projection screen stand three vintage microfiche readers, still in working order. Frames from the clips seen in the film have been miniaturised on celluloid microfiche sheets to be viewed by gallery visitors. The act of manually positioning the little metal pointer to the appropriate place on the alphanumerically indexed grid to view a particular image on the screen is strangely satisfying. It is worth remembering that crowd-sourced image archives existed before the internet – such as the Canadian artist Michael Morris's international, postcard-based *Image Bank*, started in 1969.

The texts of the philosopher Vilem Flusser about the history of photography and the nature of 'technical images' are rapidly moving from the margins to the centre of media theory (accompanying the exhibition is an essay by Flusser scholar and translator Nancy Roth), and his ideas float in and around this project. Griffiths's film appears to broach an examination of Flusser's thesis that a photograph is 'a dam placed in the way of the stream of history'. There is something Flusserian about viewing a photographic microdot of a star through a real astronomical telescope across the narrow span of a gallery. An

unrealised idea it remains, however, for the telescope standing in the corner of the Castlefield Gallery is only notionally trained on a star map delineated on the wall opposite. This maps the sector of the night sky that, in principle, could be viewed from the gallery at 6pm on the night of the opening. Each star is represented by a round black microdot, like a typographic full stop in search of a sentence. Part of the work *Deep Field [The Photographic Universe]*, the remainder comprises three large tables whose tops are punctured with small holes in each of which is inlaid a miniature photograph of a galaxy, back lit so that it can be viewed through a hand-held magnifying lens.

Despite its professional production standards, Griffiths's film, at 18 minutes, feels like a study for a longer filmic investigation. It is also too well behaved to encompass the delirium engendered by encountering the excessive volume of unregulated, decontextualised imagery that is out there. The accompanying astronomical installation is a work in progress. The exhibition doesn't yet quite live up to its compelling premise. ∎

DAVID BRIERS is an independent writer and curator, based in West Yorkshire.

Dave Griffiths
Babel Fiche 2012

How to Eclipse the Light
Wilkinson London 7 September to 5 October

The term 'post-internet' has, over the past year or so, begun to make its way from specialised pockets of discussion into the clutches of several institutions and galleries. The term – developed by artists and writers such as Gene McHugh and Artie Vierkant – encircles issues relating to the fact that, in most centres of advanced capitalism, the internet is no longer a specialist environment or set of tools for occasional use, or a separate 'realm', but is rather a ubiquitous, banal aspect of everyday life that has inherited the systems of power and economics that preceded it. In art this has meant a shift in the status of images and distribution, now that the flow of an artwork online – via images, texts, videos, links etc – can potentially become more important than distribution offline.

In 'How to Eclipse the Light', our post-internet landscape is metaphorically conceived by curator Karen Archey as one lit by an endless, harsh daylight, blinding in its brightness. The reason that this is such an effective premise is that it hands art a crucial political position for providing shade: creating reflective spaces in which to criticise and consider culture, and also places to make counter-propositions for ways in which we might choose to live. It is artists who provide us with moments in which we can see this enormous system for what it is and what it might be, in which we can see its codes and recognise the structures that it has pulled us into: it is a web, of course.

The curatorial lodestar for Archey's group exhibition at Wilkinson is gallery artist Dara Birnbaum, who, with seer-like foresight, positioned herself this way in relation to media culture long ago, swiping footage and images from television, magazines, film and music, and rejigging, remixing and repurposing them so that we might see them with renewed clarity. In Birnbaum's video *Fire! Hendrix*, 1982, included here, she constructed an alternative video narrative for Jimi Hendrix's *Fire*, in which a woman drinks and offers beer, while people buy fried chicken