

# Erzähl mir das Ende

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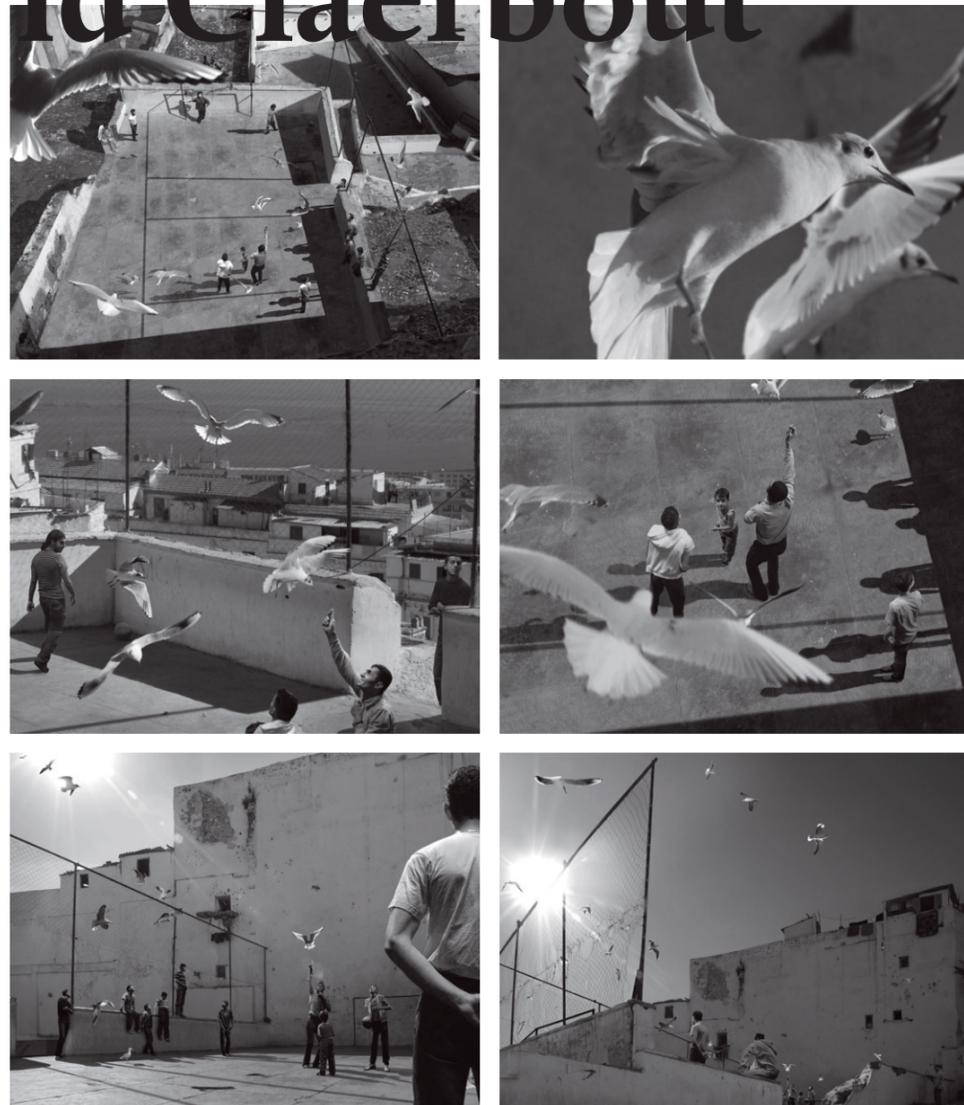
*The Algiers' Sections  
of a Happy Moment, 2008*  
Projection Detail  
Single channel video projection,  
black & white, stereo audio  
Courtesy of the artist and  
Fondation Louis Vuitton



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# An Interview with David Claerbout

by Catherine Somzé



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Basketball players have their eyes fixed on the ball: will it fall into the net or not? The camera pans through the field, zooming in and out, allowing viewers to appreciate the scene from a wealth of different perspectives. As the picture is shown over and over again, each time from a slightly different angle, attention slides from the scene to its constitutive elements. All details come under scrutiny. The ball, however, remains frozen in mid-air. This match will have no winners or losers. It has no end.

The slides look like documentary photography, but each of them is a highly composite image, digitally crafted from dozens of separate shots taken in a blue screen studio and pieced together. Every character and prop that

appears in them has been captured separately from all possible angles and distances in order to give viewers the extraordinary ability to explore the image from inside out.

With this work, *Arena*, as well as *Sections of a Happy Moment*, both from 2007, Belgian conceptual artist David Claerbout emerged as one of the most talented video artists of his generation. In a literal sense, before his work, a picture had never been shown in quite the same manner.

Originally trained as a painter, Claerbout makes us experience photography and film as if they were paintings, sculptures, or even buildings. *Angel* (2007) depicts a stone angel who starts to breathe, and *Olympia* (2016) features the

infamous Nazi stadium turning into ruin. How does this transformation of time into space take shape?

On the occasion of his exhibition at Espace Vuitton in Munich, Claerbout speaks to ZOO about some of the main concepts behind his oeuvre. Two pieces in particular are on show: *The Algiers' Sections of a Happy Moment* (2008) and *Travel*, which was conceptualized in 1996 but fully realized in 2013, when the technology was finally available to create it. While *The Algiers'* is similar to *Arena*, *Travel* is based on a piece of relaxation music from the 1980s, and features a journey into a forest intended to relax viewers and possibly send them to sleep.



David Claerbout  
*Portrait at Espace Louis Vuitton München*, 2018  
Photo: © Louis Vuitton/Christian Kain

**Catherine Somzé: Your exhibition at Espace Vuitton is called *Erzähl mir das Ende*, which roughly translates to “tell me the end”. How is this title emblematic of your work?**

David Claerbout: Titles for exhibitions are like signs. The two pieces on show seem to propose something very straightforward at first sight — one could even say it's too easily straightforward. What they have in common at a more essential level is that it is absolutely impossible to conclude something at the end of each film. They are exercises in preventing conclusion. They suggest storytelling related to the mystery of a dark forest with the kitschy music in *Travel*, for instance, but they never provide viewers with catharsis or dénouement. So, the title of the show, *Erzähl mir das Ende*, refers to the end part of a film, which is missing in both pieces. They are both poems that end the way they started.

**CS: The notion of ending is paradigmatic of classical film conventions. You have said elsewhere that storytelling is the ‘god of filmmakers.’ What is your ‘god’ as an artist working with the moving image?**

DC: If storytelling is the god of filmmaking, it also means that literature has more to do with the moving image than painting or image-making, for instance. Movies constitute a distribution of information in a game of hide and seek with the viewer — a game that ultimately ends in disclosure and catharsis in mainstream cinema — hence the happy ending in Hollywood movies. My ambition, instead, is to look inside the materiality of a moving image and its relation to memory.

**CS: I had a strange experience watching *The Algiers*. It was as if I was reminded of what it feels like to move, without actually moving myself.**

DC: Exactly. You feel the paradox of moving while the scene isn't. Physical laws of movement in space are contradicted by my use of digital tools.

**CS: So you are consciously aiming to give the audience an experience of cognitive dissonance?**

DC: Memory sensation is the material I work with. These are the things that would still exist in your memory even if you were to lose your senses and couldn't experience them firsthand again. Imagine if you were to go blind and, from tomorrow onwards, you could only see the things that you have in your memory. This is the material that I work with. These are simple sensations — the feel of the wind on your skin, or a hormonal sensation — that have no particular reason or cause, but can be summoned up by a memory.

**CS: Can we then say that your images are like Proust's famous madeleines — involuntarily provoking memories?**

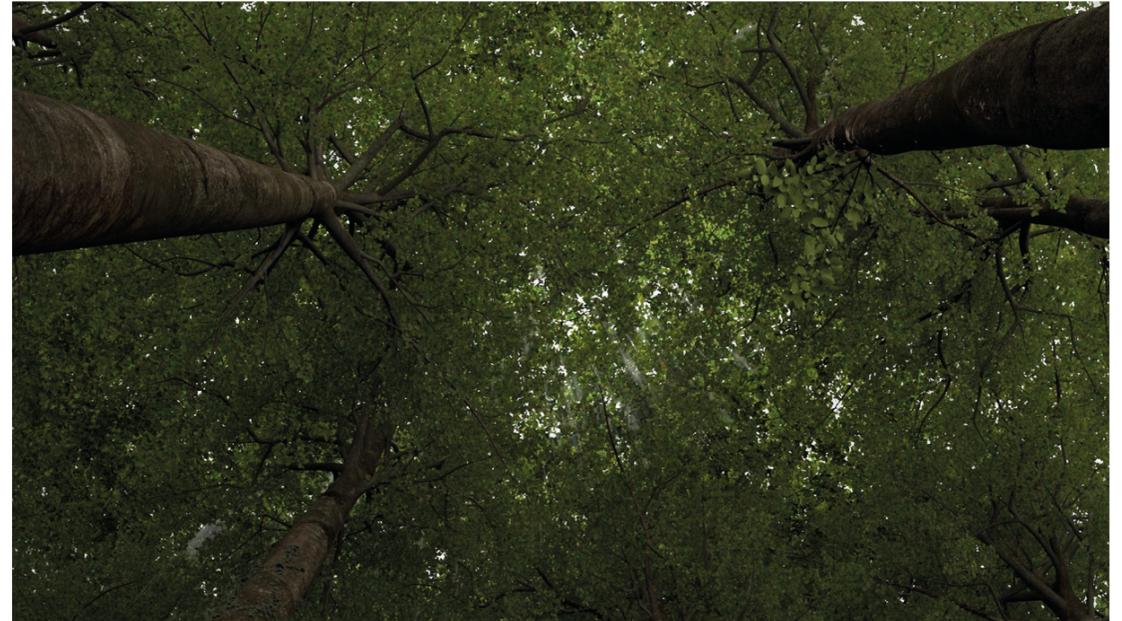
DC: Maybe! [Laughs.] What is always so fascinating to me about images is that you can be close to them, in the same way you feel close to a person, but at the same time you can't feel further away from them. This is somehow a painful realization, and what I'm looking for is to foster a sense of being in the world.

**CS: To what extent do you need to work with actors if there is no storyline in your films?**

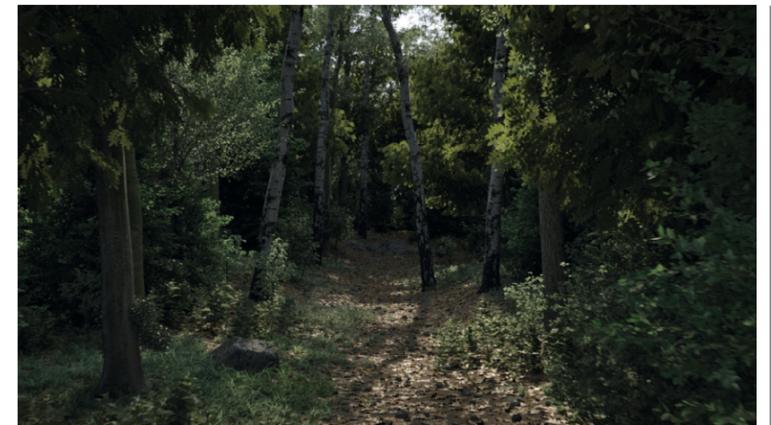
DC: I have this bad joke that I tell every so often:



*Travel*, 1996-2013  
Exhibition view at Espace Louis Vuitton München  
Single channel video projection, HD animation, color, stereo sound  
Courtesy of the artist and Fondation Louis Vuitton  
Photo: © Louis Vuitton/Christian Kain



*Travel*, 1996-2013  
Projection Detail  
Single channel video projection,  
HD animation, color, stereo sound  
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*Travel*, 1996-2013  
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David Claerbout  
*Erzähl mir das Ende*  
Selected Works from the Collection  
On view until August 25th 2018

Espace Louis Vuitton München  
Maximilianstraße 2a  
80539 Munich

'I have no problems with cinema as long as there are no actors.' [Laughs.] I do use actors in my work, but they should instead be referred to as "witnesses." They do not have the same function as they would in mainstream films. Rather, they form the background of a scene in much the same way as plants, the sun or shadows do. When I create a scene, I primarily look for a sense of memory in everything that constitutes it — actors included. Therefore, when I sometimes talk in vengeful terms of cinema, I don't mean it in such a bad way. Instead, I simply mean that mainstream cinema with its obsession with psycho-realism is almost never about things I care about. I am interested in real existence, but not in the way that mainstream cinema represents it through narratives in which the psychic life of the individual has a central role.

**CS: But you do address the subject of identity. For instance, when you portray specific people in *The Algiers*'?**

DC: I do, but for me this is something I drop into a work rather than something that is interesting in itself. That is also why I choose types of narrative elements devoid of drama or spectacle. I use them to refer to other things such as the narrative conventions of mainstream cinema that demand a beginning and an end. You see, managing stories is a little bit like managing lightning. The story is an energy that can change lives — some films have the power to turn you upside down with their stories. The tricky part for me is that cinema often sparks strong emotions, but that those emotions don't last — their memory fades. I'm always trying to look for a way to shift the emotion from the story to questions of materiality. In *The Algiers*', you initially think you are looking at photography, but in the end you are not sure anymore.

**CS: In both *The Algiers*' and *Travel*, viewers are omniscient. They become all-seeing — almost as if they were given God's eye.**

DC: Of course, that's a very important issue.

Where is the big controller? Where does he reside? Ultimately, he resides in our own heads but, through the existence of the lens and photography, we have subcontracted God to a camera. This is what could explain this persistent idea that there is something automatic and natural about images made with a camera. What I am trying to do in my work is reach a flow of time where this God-like eye is unlike a controlling eye and is unlike a totalitarian eye, but something quite the contrary. I am trying to make this eye look panoramic as if — and we come back again to the topic of "the end" — it would allow you not to have conclusions and a sense of time which wouldn't necessarily lead to either the future or the past.

**CS: Is this where the notion of duration comes in? Many critics have mentioned the slowness of your pieces and the patience required to access them.**

DC: Slowness is essential. It's one of these dirty

concepts that has been thrown into the trash bin by neoliberal culture. I have a love for them. Most of my projects provoke a kind of hormonal physical response only upon repeated viewing. Such responses reveal themselves in time, when the pace of the work starts hurting and getting into conflict with the real time of the viewing experience.

**CS: In the trash bin? But slowly, animated paintings and photographs in the vein of your work like *Long Goodbye* have become very popular over the past few years. They are even part of contemporary meme culture.**

DC: Sadly, this is indeed often cited as my heritage. I don't like to think of my work as a painting with digital means, but there is something interesting about the notion of the "gimmick." When does it stop working? I always had a kind of perverse interest in working with new technologies, and I love it when people say it's just a trick. But there is nothing spectacular

about my work. The very purpose of my work is to avoid drama and the spectacular — to unfetter the image from its commercial shape found in mainstream visual culture.

**CS: So, who is your ideal spectator?**

DC: Someone who gives up. Someone who says the work either goes too slowly or who notices the technology behind it and gets fed up with it. All viewers should pass this stage of bewilderment, and I sometimes try to purposefully embed clues for that in my work. Only then will they start thinking about the image itself and what it constitutes.

**CS: Have you already set your eyes on a new technology?**

DC: *Olympia* and *The Pure Necessity* almost wrecked my studio because they required very expensive production means. I had to work extremely hard, which almost broke me as a person as well. These projects have been

both professional and technological summits. I learned an incredible amount of things from them but they, quite literally, almost killed me. I am now going to use all these skills and experiences to develop fewer, smaller ideas. I've been dedicating more time to writing and thinking over the past few months, and have discovered the few concepts that have been guiding me all along.

**CS: Which we have been discussing. Like the notion of "materiality in a blind world" and your preference for "background" aspects?**

DC: Yes. Can you imagine? At almost 50? I guess this is the power of taking it more slowly.

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