David Zink Yi
Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (n.b.k.), Berlin
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Curated by Kathrin Becker, this exhibition featured the Berlin premier of David Zink Yi’s 2009 video installation *Horror Vacui*, together with new photographs from his *Twilight Images* series (2011-12). The press coverage of last year’s Dublin Contemporary was dominated by images of crowds arrested in half-embarrassed awe around Zink Yi’s *Untitled (Architeuthis)* (2010) – an immense, sheer-slicked, ceramic squid. Although his offering to this Mitte venue was of an ostensibly more sober tenor, in each instance the artist draws the mythically monstrous to the surface and, with a remarkable lightness of touch, incites his audience to re-evaluate the threat that his bogeyman subject connotes.

At n.b.k. eight silver gelatin photographs on baryta paper were installed within a loose zigzag of plywood screens. Stopping well short of the ceiling, these screens segment the gallery without inducing claustrophobia. Impeding any cursory apprehension of the whole space, they force us to approach each work individually. Suspended between two panes of glass, the photographs have been mounted in identically-sized rectangular gaps in the plywood so that both surfaces are simultaneously on view. Each black and white piece thus carries a semi-opaque, bleached-out ghost image on its reverse side, which appears and is effaced in response to the interplay of natural and artificial light in the room.

Presented as further instalments in a collectively titled and otherwise unindividuated *Twilight* series, the namelessness of these photographs exists in suggestive tension with their heightened specificity. They nominate themselves as exemplar-imprints—samples chosen from among infinite twilights—even as they each demand and reward focused attention. Although identified as shot in ‘a public park in Havana’, it is walls and hinterlands rather than open expanses that predominate – no swathes of floral or grassy or even tarmacdammed flatness for the practice of public leisure here. Instead, these photos show only the unprepossessing fallow lands surrounding designated amenities and pleasure-grounds. This is not to say, however, that there is anything ominous about these borderlands. Indeed, these tenebrous images of a city long associated with revolt and rebellion do not conjure any paranoiac or anxious atmosphere. The light is at once artificial and caressive and everywhere there are shadows; they stretch across streets and up walls, evoking attenuated forms, but we infer from them no penumbral menace.

Compositions crosshatched by the grids and axes of urban planning are overlaid with the semi-transparent textures of feathery palm trees, their blades massaged to a more luxuriant blur by some digital intervention. Beyond the park perimeters, distant facades of towerblocks sometimes display impossible x-ray visions of interiors. They glow their domestic geometry through walls that should be opaque. Flat roofs sprout groves of T.V. satellites whose tubular intersections suggest that the locals have assembled a communal garden of Calder sculptures. Unpeopled and undisturbed, this Havana is a still and magical city. The messy business of life is presumably going on behind those walls, in the next street or in those far-off flats, but we need not immediately concern ourselves with that.
There is substance enough for us in these anticipatory spaces between places. Presaged only by the faintest permeation of its riotous soundtrack into the main gallery, *Horror Vacui* was on view in the adjoining room. Inside, two immense screens are angled towards each other in a dialogic head-to-head. A spectacle of audiovisual superabundance, this double-channel video installation (136 minutes) prophylactically treats the fear invoked in its title. The video combines rehearsal and performance footage from De Adentro y Afuera, the Cubo Latin band co-founded by Zink Yi, with footage of the performance of rituals from three Afro-Cuban ceremonies: Cajon, Tambor Batá and Wiro. Here, then, are the bodies, the dynamism and the colour that are absent from the *Twilight* photos. Perched at awkward vantage points and unheeded by its subjects, the camera captures highly defined and physically intimate horizontal cross-sections of the milling bodies that pass before it. Any rare glimpses of an entire figure are brief, frequently interrupted and subject to inclement lighting and inopportune camera placement. Here, as in the doubly walled *Twilight* series, we are denied the sense of omniscience imparted by the illusion of panopticality. Suspended at all times in a web of polyrhythmic complexity, we watch disarticulated mouths sing, feet lift, shuffle and dance, torsos keep time with drumming hands and, in one particularly hypnotic sequence, the back of a bald head describe tight, regular circles in the air. Audio tracks are braided around each other, snaring within them loops of percussive motifs. Occasionally, as though one of the eyes through which we too closely observe these parallel performances must momentarily close, one screen will give way to blackness. Each screen from time to time becomes a horrifying void, especially when neighboured by the uninterrupted play of sound and colour on the adjacent screen. The apprehension of that sudden emptiness on a surface which so recently clamoured (in searing High Definition) for our attention has a disorienting effect. With the resumption of stereoscopic output, we then experience a curious moment of sensory relief. The juxtaposition of these video documents might have induced a studied comparison of the agonistic surrender common to musical and religious ecstasy. However, in *Horror Vacui* the artist moves us towards an altogether more productive reading of the interplay between what are often, on the screen, mutually indistinguishable practices. In Zink Yi’s attentiveness to the distinctly individual and yet efficiently collaborating components of these performers’ bodies, something much more suggestive and powerful is at play. Through his parallel presentations of group ritual, of people moving and making sounds together and towards a shared purpose, the threats so commonly associated with collectivity are powerfully challenged. Even as the soundtrack transmits the sonic production of their collective labour, Zink Yi’s camera atomizes and thereby particularizes the beings and bodies which compose them. Hearing polyphony, we watch a single percussionist’s head keep time with a drum we can neither see nor aurally distinguish from the tumult. Through this fracturing of sound and vision, individual performers are re-invested with an autonomy that is rooted in the specifics of their bodily inhabitation and respected, even celebrated, by the direction of this video. While it might have been more palatable to a contemporary audience to privilege the rhapsodic, hypnotic, qualities common to both religious and musical praxis, to do so would have been to repeat a lesson already familiar in a society grown suspicious of fervour and fearful of all impassioned submission. Zink Yi instead makes a claim for a model of individual contribution to collective endeavour which redeems the experience of forming part of a larger whole. *Horror Vacui* presents a provocative vision of a unified mass that is neither voracious nor autophagic; a collective body composed of variegate but specific, bounded and yet joyously interactive performing parts.

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