



DARK MATTERS

When photography was new, some people thought it could see very far—in fact, into the next life, including emanations and “mediumnic attractions.” *Dark Matters: Artists See the Impossible*, at San Francisco’s Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, tests our faith and calls forth similar feelings of wonder by ringing changes on the kinds of infinities the global and fragmented can generate.

Most of the work in the show has a technical component.

Listening Post (2002–06) is a shimmering curtain of information by an artist, Ben Rubin, and a statistician, Mark Hansen. A gallery-sized aluminum lattice is spangled with 231 miniature LCD computer screens that flash fragments in real time from tens of thousands of Internet chat rooms and other forums. Here human exchange looks like a global swarm, and computer-flattened voices blend into a kind of plainchant polyphony. Elating and melancholy, the installation gives form to the vast isolating collectivity that is the Internet.

Paranoia is another way to synthesize data. Photographer Trevor Paglen’s *Tonopah Test Range, NV* (2005–06) documents classified U.S. Air Force-base operations using a camera whose range is twenty miles. When even the most covert is penetrable, what is secret? His *San Nicholas Island* suite (2007), taken from sixty-five miles away, seems to record distance itself, as subject matter dissolves into a blurry, Rothko-esque beauty.

David Maisel’s 2005–07 series *Library of Dust* shows eroding storage canisters, discovered in a closed psychiatric hospital, which hold the unclaimed ashes of cremated patients. Such strange abandonment renders a sense of displacement, which is supported by the violently gorgeous colors of oxidation that bloom across the cans. Does this beauty mean we *should* look at these strange funerary urns? Are they memorial sculptures, framed by art and given an audience? Or do we intervene by rejecting the idea that they “stand for” anyone’s life?

The multimedia installation *Murmurs* (2006) is a collaboration between Richard Barnes, sound-artist Charles Norman Mason, and video-maker Alex Schweder. It documents the annual return of a flock of starlings to Mussolini’s unfinished ode to Fascism, the Esposizione Universale in Rome. The viewer ascends a platform to stand inside a kind of box-kite of the swarm, hearing calls, rasps, chatter, and drones that shape the gallery space. Barnes’s photographs, a companion piece to the installation, are as mesmerizing as explosions and tornadoes: abstract and foreboding.

Sergio Prego’s video-installation *Black Monday* (2006) delivers an explosion in the round, manipulating time and space so events go faster than they happen in real time. We are compelled to respond to the photo-genie of an explosion—as we are in Walid Raad’s grim 2006 *We Can Make Rain but No One Came to Ask*, a video-analysis of a car bombing in Beirut, considering a real explosion with distanced deliberation.

Bull.Miletic’s ongoing work *Heaven Can Wait* (2001–present) is a fifteen-channel video-installation of panoramic views from revolving restaurants on almost every continent. These are familiar vistas of prosperity and natural grandeur; they convey a banal Golden Age charged with anxious foreboding.

Modernism began with a man (Charles Baudelaire) walking through a city. With *Proximity* (2007) Alison Sant and Richard Johnson created a suit of video cameras and recorded the problems of human contact on such excursions. Kambui Olujimi’s *Scaredy Cat* (2006) overhears and records grievances and dissatisfaction, an unstoppable engine of urban ranting, delivered via telephone.

Much of *Dark Matters* addresses urbanity in some fashion, but this new society occurs on the Internet, in the basement of asylums, or in the distances of covert activities and technical estrangement. ●

—Robert Glück

Dark Matters: Artists See the Impossible was presented at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, July 28–November 11, 2007.

David Maisel, from the series *Library of Dust*, 2005–07.

Courtesy the artist and Haines Gallery