"Days of Endless Time" at the Hirshhorn Delivers an Antidote to Information Overload
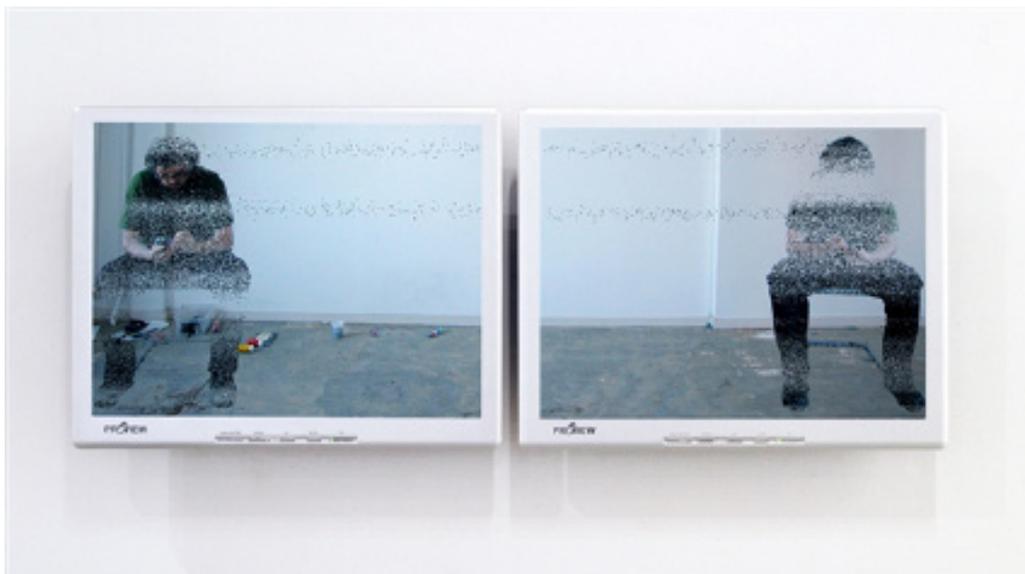

Siebren Versteeg, Neither There nor There, 2005. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. Photo by Lee

The average person checks his phone 150 times a day. As a population, we supposedly spend more time online than we do sleeping. Human technology and tools have historically been implemented to make our lives generally better, more efficient and more comfortable. But now it seems technology's main purpose is to endlessly seek new ways to distract us. When's the last time you got side-tracked by "click-bait"? For me it was literally just minutes ago.

The premise of "Days of Endless Time," which opened at the Hirshhorn in October, is to highlight "works that emphasize slower, more meditative forms of perception," to combat a "world conditioned by the frantic, 24/7 flow of information." It might come as a surprise, then, that nearly all of the works in the show are the products of the digital tools that otherwise contribute to this information overload. This is not an exhibition that shies away from technology; on the contrary, a few of the works were entirely constructed digitally with little to no referents from "real life" objects or settings.

The show is made up of 14 works of art from 13 internationally renowned video and new media artists, using moving images to evoke themes of timelessness, solitude, and the sublime. You will not find Ryan Trecartin here. Nor will you find the tired video art formula of banal images in slow motion. The works are thankfully not all slow and somber, rather "Days of Endless Time" groups a diverse set of moving image artworks that employ technology to critically question the nature of perception and our relationship to the world around us.

These are particularly vital questions to be asking in an epoch of information overload. One of the smallest works on display, Siebren Versteeg's Neither There nor There (2005) seems to identify the crux of our culture of constant distraction. In this real time computer program shown across two monitors, a photograph of the artist hunched over his cell phone slowly disintegrates, as streams of pixels migrate one by one over to the adjacent monitor to form a second, identical figure. This image of the artist, gazing at his mobile device, is neither present in real life, nor completely present in the virtual reality--neither there, nor there.

Su-Mei Tse, L'Echo, 2003. Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York. © Su-Mei Tse

The interrelation between humans and the landscape is a preponderant concern in many of the works included in the show, as artists confront the magnitude of the natural world in distinctly different ways, "updating traditions of the sublime, the picturesque, and landscape," as curator Mika Yoshitake put it. In Su-Mei Tse's L'Echo (2003), which won the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Biennale and which opens the exhibition here at the Hirshhorn, the artist, a classically trained musician, plays cello perched on a grassy overlook before an impressively monolithic mountain range. The strains emanating from the stringed instrument echo from the stoic mountain in this sublime composition, made strange by the oversaturated colors of the verdant green grass contrasting starkly with the sheer verticality of the mountain.


Eija-Liisa Ahtila, Horizontal, 2011. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Purchase Fund, 2013 (13.1). © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / KU-VASTO, Helsinki

Eija-Liisa Ahtila, when faced with the limitations of the camera in trying to represent a tall spruce tree without distortion, mounted cameras on a series of six platforms to capture the tree from its base to the tops of its branches. In the installation Horizontal (2011), the six screens show the tree horizontally, allowing the viewer to confront the tree, upturned yet still monumental, from an impossible perspective.

Flatform, Still from Cannot Be Anything Against the Wind, 2010. Courtesy and © Flatform

Likewise presenting us with an impossible landscape, the Italian duo Flatform's Cannot Be Anything Against the Wind (2010) divides views of the Tuscan landscape into movable elements of foreground, middle-ground and background. Orchestrated to correspond to a soundtrack of ocean waves, these collaged elements actively move and shift about in opposing directions, their motions sometimes smooth and oftentimes absurd, calling to mind the illusion of stage scenery and even the animations of Terry Gilliam in his Monty Python days.
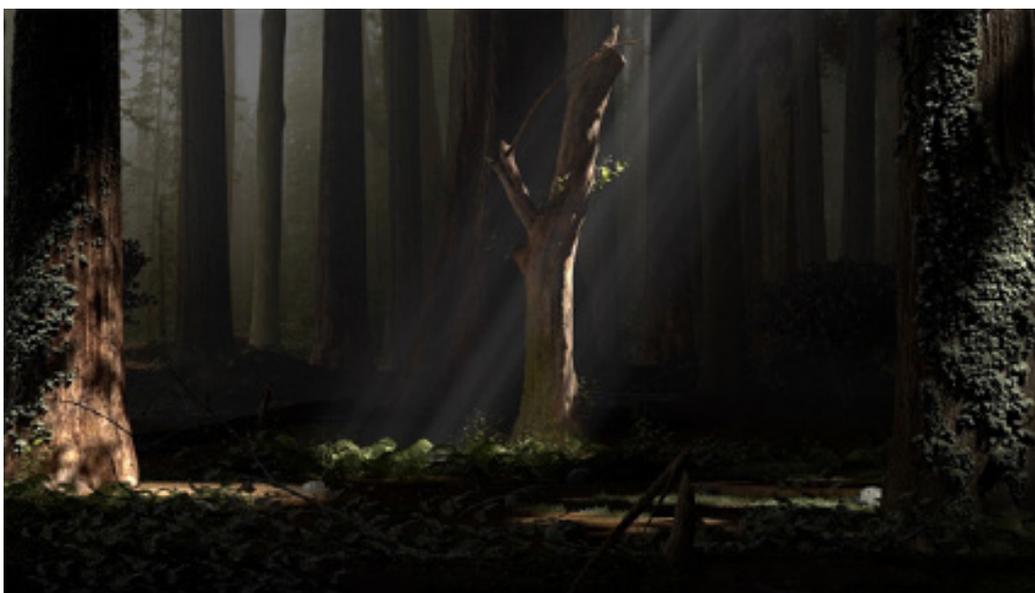
David Claerbout, Still from Travel, 1996-2013. Courtesy of the artist; Sean Kelly Gallery, New York; Galerie Yvon Lambert, Paris; and Galerie Micheline Szwajcer, Brussels. © David Claerbout

Sigalit Landau, DeadSee, 2005. Collection of Lizbeth and George Krupp. Image courtesy and © Sigalit Landau

A notable thread throughout the exhibition is the motif of centrifugal motion, echoing the circular architecture of the Hirshhorn itself, or perhaps pointing to the recurrence of the loop as a device to induce a meditative state--think of the rotation of mala beads in Buddhist and Hindu meditation practice, or the use of a Christian rosary in prayer. In Sigalit Landau's intensely poetic DeadSee (2005), one watches a spiral of floating green watermelons--some with their dark red flesh exposed--slowly unravel as the artist effortlessly floats among them, until finally gliding off camera as the string of fruit uncoils in the aquamarine waters.

Guido van der Werve, Still from Nummer Negen (#9) The Day I Didn't Turn with the World, 2007. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. © Guido van der Werve

Rotation, or rather the resistance to rotation, is the primary conceit in Guido van der Werve's Nummer Negen (#9) The Day I Didn't Turn with the World (2007). The work is comprised of an eight-minute, time-lapse documentation of the artist standing at the North Pole for an entire 24-hour period, shifting every few seconds to counter the turning of the earth. One watches as the artist, his shadow always before him, restlessly shifts his weight, checks his watch, and warms his hands. It's apparent that the act was excruciating rather than meditative.

While van der Werve explores the extreme isolation of the figure within the landscape, in Douglas Gordon's Play Dead; Real Time (2003) nature is brought into the isolation of the white cube of the gallery. As a camera circles her, an enormous elephant is directed to lie on the gallery floor--to "play dead." She, too, is restless, and subsequently rises to her feet, while the camera, set low on the floor, continues to circle the giant creature. As such, the viewer is allowed to scrutinize the elephant out of context, watching her anatomy and movements from an unusual angle. It's as though Gordon is asking the viewer to simply perceive--to pause, focus, and reflect on the enormity of the video's subject. To escape from information overload, and see something so familiar, yet so alien, with fresh eyes.