



Biennale of Moving Images

Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva

P BY PABLO LARIOS IN REVIEWS | 28 JAN 17



A 'moving image' is a manifold thing these days: the flicker of a virtual-reality headset; the bodycam recordings made on a police officer's uniform; an animated icon sent as a text message. To consider the moving image as an artistic category differs from a consideration of sculpture or painting, since it means taking into account a plurality of everyday contexts and forms. But it means accounting, too, for video as a political tool: a handy, accessible, democratic (or anti-democratic) medium of forensics and surveillance, reportage and testament – and, increasingly, an inexpensive form now making filmmakers of amateur-experts across the world.

It is in this broad and global sense that the Biennale of Moving Images excelled. For its second inception after its reinstatement – founded in 1985, the event paused in 2007 and was re-initiated in 2010 – and hosted by the Centre d'Art Contemporain de Genève (CAC), the biennale presented commissioned works by 26 artists working across documentary, video installation, 3D video and experimental film, as well as between art and the film circuit. Divided between auditorium screenings and installations, the 27 films took us to places such as La Rinconada y Cerro Lunar in the Peruvian Andes, a Nigerian palm-oil plantation, the rural American south and a desert in Qatar. While some of the artists – such as Trisha Baga, Cally Spooner and Wu Tsang – are better known than others, the best works focused on the experience of people in places I'd never been able to visualize. If this sounds suspect or exoticizing, consider the degree to which our experience of 'art' is mediated and weighted by a shockingly small number of global capitals. If video has a democratic potential, it's perhaps in the way it can correct the repetitive, centrifugal aggregation of art towards the expected places, themes and even imagery.



Emily Wardill, *I gave my love a cherry that had no stone*, 2016, production still. Courtesy: the artist

By far the most unusual, and compelling, inclusion was Serbian journalist and filmmaker Boris Mitic's *Once Upon a Nothing* (work-in-progress), a film crowd-sourced from more than 100 contributors, ranging from amateurs to better known filmmakers, such as Jørgen Leth. Each was asked to provide short clips that represented 'nothing', which Boris weaved into what will ultimately become 90-minute film. 'Nothing', the cheeky faux-philosophical 'protagonist' of the film, is really a decoy: a platform to commission content without 'content'. In the film, we are fed the kind of boiler-plate imagery that is almost everywhere today – in ads, icons, screen-savers and phones – some of it beautiful but most perfectly meaningless: the sad, sublime banality of the digital. Remarkably, the film, narrated by Iggy Pop, is anything but boring: Pop recites Mitic's philosophical platitudes in jingoistic rhymes recalling advertising slogans, Silicon Valley self-help philosophy or puerile rants on Reddit: 'If pictures create memories, What does a surplus of pictures create? / The future of shopping will not be to buy, but to eliminate.'



Boris Mitic, *Once Upon a Nothing*, 2017, film still. Courtesy: Dribbling Pictures

A few years ago, a number of artists such as Oliver Laric and Helen Marten – updating, in a way, the appropriation tactics of the Pictures Generation – began using commercial stock photography in works where the conspicuous fakery of the image jarred against its intention for general use. Whereas stock photography sought a degree of universality that would allow its commercial application across a great number of contexts, Mitic's film footage is grittier, stranger, more conspicuously 'placed'. It shows the non-sites depicted in memes or Instagram humour: the kind of imagery that many of us encounter online, while in bed or in transit, and never really talk or think much about. It's a dark, morose take on what it means to 'participate' today, when participation looks closer to extraction (of time, energy) – or, if you will, to a kind of mining. Dislodged of reference to any real-life 'experience', the video clips are a remarkable compilation of the low-brow aesthetic that we find in memes, in comment streams, or even – sadly – in politics. It's a perfect mix of surface and depth that reflects something about the way we live, reading real news amid fake news, 'liking' photos and sharing updates: a bland addiction to half-disengagement from which we can't fully divorce ourselves. In one segment of the film, the voice-over asserts: 'There has never been a less exciting time to be behind a camera.' But, having just seen a number of works of undeniable relevancy and commitment, by a number of young filmmakers stemming from places far and wide, I can – with Mitic – only emphatically disagree.

P

PABLO LARIOS

Pablo Larios is an editor and writer. He lives in Berlin, Germany.