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# Frieze

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Reviews /

## How Physical



BY MICHAEL FAMIGHETTI

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Johann Lurf *The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Lazy Dog*, 2009, 35mm film still

Catastrophe, whether manmade or natural, is usually followed by discussions of how images captured and communicated the scope of the devastation, and later, how those pictures function in the event's memorialization. Images usually fail on most fronts. Last year's earthquake and tsunami in northeastern Japan highlighted photography and film's inadequacy to truly convey the devastation. But for the curators of 'How Physical', the events of 11 March 2011 were also a reminder of the fragility of the physical world upon which images depend. Staged at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, this intelligent, tightly curated exhibition, part of the Yebisu International Festival for Art & Alternative Visions, which also included a series of films and symposia, sought to investigate the physical foundations of images, their means of production and display, and how those means impact their meanings.

For an institution that puts conventional photography at the centre of its programming, this seemed to be a particularly ambitious show. And while 'How Physical' dovetailed with current concerns about the materiality of photography and the death of analogue film, the exhibition chose to focus instead on moving images. Viewers were confronted with a barrage of projections and video installations packed into two crowded and cacophonous floors. The ambient noise bleeding from gallery to gallery underscored the show's preoccupation with grounding seeing in the mechanics of display. As curator Keiko Okamura noted in her catalogue introduction, the word 'physicality' denotes both 'materiality' and 'corporeality' – the former referring to materials and technique; the latter to how the image affects the viewer's body. Julius von Bismarck's *The Space Beyond Me* (2010), installed in complete darkness (viewers were guided inside by flashlight-equipped docents), featured a UV-light projector made from a modified, sputtering 16mm projector, a mesmerizing whiz-bang object that panned from left to right, leaving image traces on the walls painted with phosphorescent paint – a little piece of mad science that effectively mimicked the manner in which memories linger like chimeras in our mind's eye.

At the opposite end of production, Marijke van Warmerdam's films *In the Distance* and *Couple* (both 2010) were projected on opposite sides of a large screen, offering two perspectives of an elderly couple seated on a bench in a bucolic field beside a lake. Both videos were arresting for their fluid, at points vertiginous, technique, allowing the viewer to access the disembodied perspective of a ghost moving through a window to intrude on a quiet moment. Yeondoo Jung's *Six Points* (2010) also heightened the viewer's sense of place. His animated still photographs of New York immigrant neighbourhoods, including the Russian enclave of Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, and predominately South Asian and Indian Jackson Heights in Queens, place everything in focus and exaggerate the colour and three-dimensionality of street scenes that unfurl horizontally, like Ed Ruscha's *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1965). Vernacular signage and mom-and-pop shops, livery cabs and chrome-rimmed SUVs pass by as the audio relays the individual narratives of immigrant residents. Unfortunately, the English soundtrack wasn't subtitled in Japanese and was difficult to hear over the noise intruding from other parts of the gallery.

While Jung over-sharpened and opened the image, Sutthirat Supaparinya's *Dotscape* (2010) obscured vision to call our attention to what and how we see. In this clever video shot on a train in Thailand, where the windows are covered with dot-printed advertising, looking is mediated by the visual noise of marketing, which creates its own pointillist landscape. Elsewhere were works by Johann Lurf, whose montage of thousands of movie frames had the kinetic power of Stan Brakhage's films, and a piece by William Kentridge, a natural fit in this context. While most of these artists illustrated, often cleverly, the relationship between the means of making and display and a viewer's understanding and experience of images, Bram Snijders and Carolien Teunisse's installation *Re:* (2010) made technology itself the object – in this case a digital-video projector, the usually hidden engine of so many exhibitions – by projecting, via three mirrors, a gridded image that formed, liquefied and then dissolved onto the surface of the projector itself. With all its clicking, flickering and stimuli, 'How Physical' played, as intended, on the body, demanding, and at times overwhelming the senses, like a

visit to a science museum. For this reason, the inclusion of a series of formally brilliant Japanese science films from the 1960s didn't feel like an outlier.

Now that the one-year anniversary of 11 March 2011 has passed and the images of an unimaginable wave of water erasing a landscape and its inhabitants are replayed, the question of how these images function as evidence, as reminders, or as inadequate representations of something too big to represent, has begun to come to the fore. Whatever form such conversations take, and however the inevitably thorny questions of memorialization are weighed, 'How Physical' reminds us of the physical forms that captured and displayed those devastating physical forces.

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