

This essay accompanies the Gallery TPW exhibition by Lindsay Page
Thursday, January 11 to Saturday February 17, 2007

Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Lindsay Page: *Force Field*

by Chris Gehman

Lindsay Page's installation *Force Field* provides a visual framework for thinking about our changing relationship to the moving image. In recent years, as video (and occasionally, film) projections have become increasingly common in gallery settings, it has also become crucial to understand the differences between what happens when we watch moving images—of any genre—in a theatrical screening, and what happens when we encounter them in a gallery. Installations using moving images more often than not offer little more than a minor variation on the cinematic experience, transplanted with variable success to an alternative environment. (Hence the provision of a bench or a few chairs, grudging substitutes for comfortable theatre seats.) For the artist whose work truly engages the spatial and temporal articulation of moving pictures, however, the viewer's mobility and active negotiation of installation spaces are crucial. Lindsay Page's work falls into the latter category: the moving images in a work like *Force Field* must be experienced as articulated in the gallery space

in order to be fully understood. This assertion may seem too fundamental to even mention, but I think it needs to be stated explicitly because it is so very often not the case with video installations.

From this perspective, *Force Field* could be seen as a refined demonstration of the differences between looking at moving pictures in a theatre and in a gallery. Film theory has long wrestled with issues involving the subject position of the cinema spectator: immobile in her theatre seat, she is freed in her imagination through identification with the point of view that produces onscreen space (i.e. "the camera"). "The camera" has more or less infinite potential mobility, and editing allows the cinema-subject to leap instantaneously, though imperceptibly, across time and space. The spectator's real immobility is the price paid for her imaginary mobility (and this must surely be why films with very long shots, static camera positions, little action, etc., tend to frustrate the desires of the general cinema audience). In the gallery,



Lindsay Page, animation still from *Force Field*, 2005

the situation is reversed: the relative poverty of cinematic means employed by the artist may be compensated for by the mobility and activity of the viewer.

This dialectic, between mobility and immobility, is the underlying issue in *Force Field*. The looping animations projected on screens placed throughout the space show birds in flight, an image which suggests freedom and rapid movement through space. But these birds fly nowhere; they merely repeat the motions of flight, remaining perpetually contained within the area of their respective Plexiglas screen. As we move around the installation, we eventually discover an immobile human figure at the back of the space, looking out towards (and perhaps hiding behind) the flock of birds in static flight. Our mobility, necessary to looking at the installation properly, has its negative correlative in his immobility, which is so like that of the traditional cinema spectator. At the same time, we find ourselves implicated, recognizing our kinship with the man lurking behind the birds as we find our way through this field of motion loops that are projected on the screens around us and reflected, ghost-like, behind. From this position, we may be encouraged to reflect on the general proliferation of animated images within the contemporary visual environment. Page's *Force Field* is a concentrated, allegorized instance of this particular aspect of the machine world in which we live.

Not since the nineteenth century, the era of such early animation devices as the thaumatrope, the phenakistiscope, the zoetrope and the flip book, have moving image loops of short duration been so common. (Even Thomas Edison's coin-operated, peep show style kinoscope, though it allowed for longer sequences, was a looping device, and the enthusiastic viewer must have often watched the same little movie more than once in succession.) Computer desktops, cellphones, video billboards and the like now surround us with animated graphics that often move without going anywhere, and repeat incessantly. A computer desktop may, like *Force Field*, present us with a number of simultaneous looping animations communicating work being carried out by the machine, attempting to draw our attention to marketing messages or reminding us of the corporate provenance of its applications (e.g. the Netscape logo that loops in the corner of its application window). Short, looping,

animated sequences can be readily downloaded for use as screen savers. News bulletins, weather forecasts and stock reports run over and over again across public video screens.

Force Field's loops of birds in flight make direct reference to early motion picture experiments, and specifically to the motion studies of Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904) and Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904), both of whom made images of animals in motion, including birds. Their photographic studies of animals and humans in motion are among a handful of indispensable early experiments that contributed to the development of the cinema proper, and were among the first photographic sequences to be “re-animated” using early animation systems. Page's stuttering flight loops look very much like Marey and Muybridge's brief photographic sequences brought into repetition, as they often have been by their creators and many others. In order to view their own motion studies as moving images, Marey and Muybridge had to print each individual image as a photograph and then transfer the sequence to an animation device. Marey initially attached his prints to a revolving zoetrope drum, while Muybridge used his photos as a reference for images hand painted onto a glass phenakistiscope-type disk that could be projected by a specially adapted magic lantern. Their brief visual sequences were thus transformed into continuous loops. Lindsay Page adopts a similar approach, taking her own short video sequences of birds in flight and editing these sequences digitally, one frame at a time, to create each individual loop; it is in this sense that we can consider her material a form of animation, or, perhaps more accurately, reanimation.

Inevitably, as was the case with Marey and Muybridge's loops, the beginnings and ends of Page's loops do not quite match up seamlessly. Each bird's loop has its own peculiar rhythm and stutter, which is not synchronized with the others. Viewed in isolation, each loop tells us something about the characteristic of that bird's flight, but the aggregate effect of the mass of short, looped movies is like watching some complex, irrational machine at work. This basic image, of a mass of similar figures, is a key motif in Page's photographic work as well as in her installations. In the triple-screen installation *I'm building you an army* (2005–present), a pair of hands makes a series of soldier puppets. Each, as it is completed,

joins its comrades, and as their numbers increase their collective motion becomes increasingly awkward and senseless. In photographic series such as *Collections* (2002–2003) and *Basement Performances* (2005–present), Page reflects on the human tendency to collect like objects together and to engage in habitual, repetitive activities. The implication is inescapable: that the individual tends to seek shelter in groupings and repetitive actions, positions that simultaneously offer a feeling of safety and a restriction of freedom, leading to habitual, purposeless activity.

This interpretation suggests that by raising the issue of subject-positioning in media artworks, Page is merely using a particular case relevant to the media in which she works to explore a much

more fundamental question of social psychology, namely the relationship between the individual and the collective. If the lurking figure in *Force Field* is hiding (from what?), protected by his flock, he is also effectively imprisoned, unable to move freely for fear of losing this protection. *Force Field* brings this situation into a state of infinitely extended tension: while we anticipate the possibility that the birds might fly away, that the man might make a move, we inhabit a machine construction that illuminates one of the fundamental problems of human life.

About the Artist

Lindsay Page is an interdisciplinary artist based in Toronto, working primarily in photography and video installation. Her photography and installation work has been exhibited internationally and has appeared in numerous publications including *Carte Blanche*, and forthcoming this spring, *Camera Austria*. She received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2006.

About the Writer

Chris Gehman is an independent filmmaker and media arts curator. He is the co-editor, with Steve Reinke, of *The Sharpest Point: Animation at the End of Cinema* (YYZ Books, 2005). His writings on film and video have appeared in anthologies on the work of John Porter and Philip Hoffman, periodicals such as *Millenium Film Journal*, *Cinema Scope*, and *Take One*, and he has written a catalogue on contemporary Japanese experimental film and video. Chris was the Artistic Director of the Images Festival from 2000 to 2004, and has also worked as a programmer for Cinematheque Ontario and the Toronto International Film Festival. His films have been screened at festivals and cinemathèques across North America and at several overseas venues.

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