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David Haines and Joyce Hinterding: Artspace

Philip Auslander

Standing before a dazzling projected image of a placid alpine scene disrupted by an avalanche, I am aware of two mysterious presences above me to the left and the right, spotlit to cast elaborate linear shadows on the floor. Looking up, I see two very large television antennae that seem perfectly capable of pulling in live signals from a camera trained on a distant mountain to cover this newsworthy event.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

This isn't what was really going on, of course. The "photorealist" image in David Haines and Joyce Hinterding's installation *Purple Rain*, 2004, first shown at that year's Bienal de Sao Paulo, is a computer-generated fiction based on video of a real mountain in New Zealand. The antennae pull in analog television broadcasting signals from the local environment and a complicated computer system uses those signals to trigger events in the video. Although what happens on the screen is always the same, the precise way in which it happens varies with the fluctuations of the captured television signals.

Like much of the work Haines and Hinterding have made together since 1999 (they also work individually), *Purple Rain* asserts the presence of a ubiquitous but invisible parallel landscape consisting of electromagnetic vibrations and signals, some man-made and some natural. Their collaborative work often charts the ebbs and flows of those signals and presents scenarios in which they become audible and visible.

Purple Rain differs from the duo's earlier work in its specific focus on the concept and technology of broadcasting. It is an elementary tenet of communication theory that transmitted messages are encoded by a sender and decoded by a receiver. In successful communication, the decoding yields the message intended by the sender. Haines and Hinterding undermine this process by hijacking broadcast signals and using them to generate their own message. In this piece, decoding enjoys an absolute dominance over encoding: The computer can use any captured signal, however encoded, to influence the image of the exploding mountain. *Purple Rain* is thus a contemporary elaboration of one of the foundational impulses of video art, exemplified early on by Nam June Paik's *Magnet TV*, 1965 (in which the signals received by a television set are distorted into abstraction by the presence of a magnet): to use the hardware of broadcasting in ways that defy its ostensible communicative purposes. The seeming ease with which this can be done is both scary and liberating, showing mediated communication as a risky and fragile process in which messages can readily go wrong, but also showing that we do not have to passively accept messages as they've been encoded.

While critical ruminations on communications technology are inevitable when considering a piece such as *Purple Rain*, this is not what comes immediately to mind when actually seeing and hearing the installation. The brilliant, grand-scale image of a powerful and recurrent natural phenomenon, presented dramatically in a darkened room, is sublime in the Romantic sense. The looming antennae over-head seem more to witness silently the event depicted on the screen than to produce it. They, too, are impressive--massive, sculptural versions of a familiar technology. The hardware is highlighted to draw attention not only to the manipulation of signals but also to its own aesthetic qualities. Haines and Hinterding thus juxtapose and hybridize two versions of the sublime--the longstanding pictorial tradition of the awe-inspiring landscape and the more recent notion of the technological sublime. The landscape image is technologized by being presented as reactive video, while the antennae are aestheticized by being presented as sculpture.

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