

A photograph of a crowded gallery. In the foreground, a man with glasses and a grey jacket looks towards the camera. To his left, a woman holds a silver digital camera up to take a picture. In the background, many other people are seen, some holding cameras, in a gallery filled with framed paintings on the walls.

IMAGE & IMAGINATION

Edited by Martha Langford
Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal 2005

Adad Hannah: *Cuba Still* (Remake)

GALERIE B-312



Anon., publicity still, date unknown. Purchased 2003 in Havana's Chinatown (photographer and movie unknown). Gelatin silver print

Adad Hannah is best known for a series of silent video projections collectively titled *Stills*.¹ *Stills* are reminiscent of *tableaux vivants*, a nineteenth-century theatrical entertainment in which performers/models struck a pose, often derived from classical painting, and held it for extended periods of time as living statues. *Tableaux vivants*, when photographed, become mere tableaux. Photography kills the *vivant*. Life requires presence; presence requires duration.

Moving pictures can be derived from still ones – technologically, film necessarily followed and was dependent on photography – but photography cannot be derived from film without the loss of duration. Film contains photography in a way that photography cannot contain film.

Traditionally, time has been viewed as an endless, divisible continuum. The two dominant metaphors are of moments strung together, like pearls on a string, or the flow of a river, passing inexorably from future to present to past in such a way as to make the present continuously ineffable. In this model, time is external to experience, like a river we step into, separate from our existence and flowing always at the same rate. Phenomenologists discard this transcendent concept of time in favour of a model based on time as immanent, lived, experienced. “We do not live ‘in time,’ as if the latter were some independent, abstract flow external to our being. We ‘live time’; the two terms are inseparable.”²

It is no coincidence that questions of existence and time became central to philosophy contemporaneously with the development of motion pictures; the technology itself poses the questions. What is the difference between photography and film, still and motion pictures? Is film *photography + time* or is it something more? A mechanistic view, one that conceives of time in the traditional sense, would say that, indeed, motion pictures are a series of still images presented sequentially. For André Bazin, influenced by the phenomenologically based philosophy of Bergson and his own somewhat mystical Catholicism, film was *photography + time + x*, *x* being an aspect of time that had remained inadequately conceptualized. Hannah’s *Stills*, moving images that refer to photographic images, also pose this question. For Bazin, this something else, this *x* in the equation, was duration. Duration, for Bazin, was spiritual: it could breathe. Filmic images were in the world, and depicted the world, in a manner fundamentally different from photographic ones.³

In “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” Bazin develops his most famous metaphor for film: the mummy complex. Humans have an unconscious need, according to Bazin, to defeat time. This need is based on the inevitability of death, of course, but not limited to it: the decay of things and the entropy of systems are parallel traumas. Bazin posits Egyptian mummy making as an initial technology of representation against time and death and entropy, a starting point for Western art history. Hence film as “change mummified.” This conceptualization, which places film in a teleological progression of representational technologies against death, supposes that film is derived from photography.⁴ But Hannah’s project is a reversal of this: to extract a moving image from the photograph. Not “change mummified” but “stasis zombified.”

In *Cuba Still (Remake)*, Hannah takes a publicity still from an unknown film as his starting point. He bought the 8 x 10 from a stall in Havana’s Barrio Chino. (The film and actors remain unknown.) It is clearly not a photogram (frame enlargement) but an archly posed photograph for publicity purposes. Hannah remakes the photograph as a series of silent videos “in the manner of his *Stills*” – one video for each actor. He exhibits the six *Stills*, along with a larger projection that composites them onto a single screen, as well as photographs that document his production and the original 8 x 10.

Duration brings with it the possibility of narrative, of storytelling. The simplest story requires duration or temporal change: this happened *and then* this happened. We often refer



Adad Hannah, *Cuba Still (Remake)* (2005). Six video stills from photo and video installation

to single images as being “narrative,” but, strictly speaking, that is not possible. Unless an image contains multiple temporal frames (like a long tapestry or scroll, or the frames of a comic book), it cannot tell a story. At most it can illustrate a single incident from a story, or suggest, allegorically, possible stories. In history painting the moment depicted is, ideally, the *peripeteia*, or decisive moment, the point at which possible outcomes hang in the balance. Publicity stills attempt to condense the entire film into one image, a task that is possible only because of the highly codified genre adherence of the feature film.

The narrative engine for storytelling is the question, What will happen next? In previous *Stills*, the set of narrative questions is simple and meta-textual: Will the models be able to hold their poses? How much will they move? Might they crumble under the strain? It may seem that *Cuba Still (Remake)* constitutes an investigation into the meaning of the original 8 x 10. This is not the case. The original image is not subjected to any analysis, nor does it receive any interpretation: it remains as opaque as ever. It is meta-textual meanings that Hannah investigates here – questions of performance, restaging, repetition, duration, and the differing ontologies of the still and moving image – with greater complexity than in his previous work.

Steve Reinke

- 1 An earlier version of this essay accompanied the exhibition *Adad Hannah: “Folk” and “Still”* at Gallery TPW in Toronto in 2004. It is available online at archive.photobasedart.ca.
- 2 George Steiner, *Martin Heidegger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 78.
- 3 André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” in his *What Is Cinema?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
- 4 Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

STEVE REINKE is an artist and writer best known for his videos. He completed an MFA at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in 1993. Co-editor of *By the Skin of Their Tongues: Artist Video Scripts* (1997) and *Lux: A Decade of Film and Video by Artists* (2000), his recent video titles include *Anthology of American Folk Song*, *Ask the Insects*, *What Lutherans Believe*, and *Advanced Pictorial Vaudeville*. Coach House recently published a book of his scripts, *Everybody Loves Nothing: Video 1996–2004*. He is co-editor (with Chris Gehman) of *The Sharpest Point: Artists' Animation at the End of Cinema*, forthcoming from YZY Books (fall 2005).

ADAD HANNAH was born in New York in 1971. He lives in Montreal where he is a PhD candidate at Concordia University. His video series *Stills* was presented at the WRO 05 11th International Media Arts Biennale, Poland, 2005; G39, Cardiff, 2005; Viper Basel, 2004; Loop 04 International Video Art Fair, Barcelona; SeNef Festival/Ilmin Art Museum, Seoul, 2004; Big M, Mediakunst Tour, Groningen, Amsterdam, and Nijmegen, 2004; and Artists Space, New York, 2003. In Canada he has shown at Ace Art, Alternator, B-312, Dazibao, MSVU, Optica, SAW, Séquence, and TPW. He won the 2004 Images Festival Installation/New Media Award in Toronto.

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