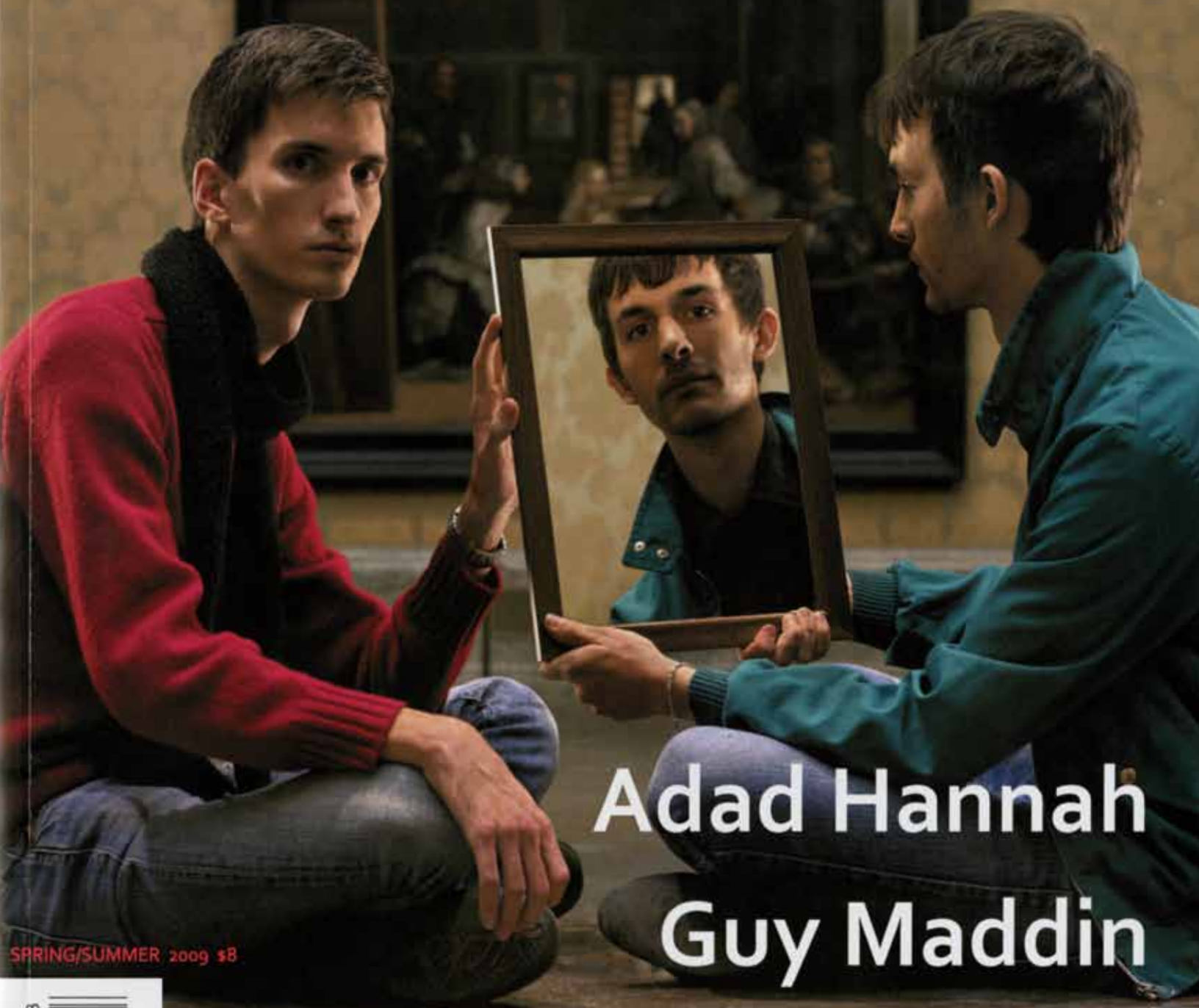


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BlackFlash

PHOTOGRAPHY AND NEW MEDIA IN ART



Adad Hannah
Guy Maddin

artist projects by Joi Arcand + John Mathews

SPRING/SUMMER 2009 \$8



PM 400 20077



Adad Hannah, *Abuji (father)*, 2004, digital video, 2min 14s,
courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain, Montreal

Adad Hannah: Stills

THE VIDEO CAMERA IS A TIME MACHINE

BY Chen Tamir

Photography is caught between an invocation and a denial of death.¹ On the one hand, it petrifies a scene, a moment. When sitters “hold still, smile, and say ‘cheese,’” they are fully aware of how they look at that moment, or at least how the camera sees them, will be carried into the future and seen by others. It is like a little moment of death, or of loss — what Roland Barthes calls “mortification.”² The moment the photographer releases the shutter is the moment to be remembered (or imagined) by whoever sees the photograph in the future. Even if it is seen the day after the photograph was taken, there is a melancholy to it as an object of the past, of time enduring.

On the other hand, photography is often understood as a way of stopping time and thereby “cheating” death, gaining immortality, and sustaining memory. It is the agent of fame, a way to “live forever” as the movie song preaches. Rather than being a reminder of (our own) death, as Barthes would have it through “mortification,” the photograph is a way of embalming or preserving a memory of a life. It is what Andre Bazin called “mummification.”³ Is this the opposite of the death drive?⁴ Of course, death for Bazin does not

have to be literal; it can also mean old age, decay, change and its associated distress.

“Mortification,” what Barthes sees as a pathological process of inserting a part of the self into the image, i.e. posing, invokes unease because it can never truly encompass one’s self. It is a mask, a physical mold. On the other hand, for Bazin the photograph *is*, in effect, the object. Following the “mummy complex,” the photograph is equal to the object. Through the photograph, one could preserve an experience, or even an object, resist change and therefore evade death. It is the ultimate form of preservation. It is a sustained pause, a yearning for stasis, for maintaining a status quo.

If death, or its denial, is what we face when looking at a photograph, I would like to argue that film and video present to us the living dead.⁵ If “cameras are clocks for seeing,”⁶ then the video camera is a time machine. The photograph represents the past, but the moving image brings the past to the present. Through motion, film brings back to life what was lost.⁷ The photograph evokes the past, the time belonging to the photographer and the sitter. With the moving image, the time is always now. It belongs to the viewer.



OPPOSITE TOP: Adad Hannah, *Dinner in Florida*, 2002, digital video, 2min 34s
OPPOSITE BOTTOM: Adad Hannah, *Murray and Beverly*, 2002, digital video, 2min 46s
Both courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain, Montreal

What happens, then, when movement is denied to the moving image? When nothing changes except the shifting of weight from one leg to the other, blinking, or breathing, as in Adad Hannah's *Stills*? In traditional photography the decisive moment when the photographer releases the shutter is the precise moment when she does not see her subject. The shutter blocks her field of view, and she will only see it as a representation (after being developed on film and then on paper). But Hannah refuses to go blind, even momentarily, keeping his penetrating eyes open wide, unflinching from the subject. He is not undecided as to when to release the shutter; he simply refuses to do so. Hannah creates video snapshots — though without the actual snap, as his works are videos disguised as snapshots. Working in some form of cinema instead of photography allows Hannah an element of surprise and anticipation that is impossible with still photographs.

Stills is an ongoing series of videos, ranging in length from three to twelve minutes long, featuring people “frozen” in mid-action. In his *Stills*, Hannah strips video of movement and sound, video's basic elements, to see what survives. Displayed on flat-screen televisions that hang flush against the wall, the stills appear at first glance to be photographs. The complex images hold the viewer's attention long enough for her to notice tiny movements and realize these are time-based works. Although nothing seems to “happen” in these works, they are charged with action as we watch for tiny movements, as if these people are trapped in a picture and are trying to come to life. Despite their static composition, the stills are mesmerizing to viewers waiting for little imperfections, like blinking or twitching, the inevitable failure to become statues.

In this way, Hannah's “photographs” retain not only the viewer's attention, but the possibility of surprise.

For *Stills*, Hannah constructs scenarios inspired by the complexity of daily life and action, most of which fall under the general subsets of Museums, Architecture, Hotel Rooms, and Family. Grouped together, the series of *Family Stills* form a strange family album comprised of what, at first glance, seem like a collection of typical snapshots. Some of them look like vacation photos, while others document domestic moments such as car washing or eating dinner. A second take, however, reveals scenarios begging for explanation.

For example, my favourite *Family Still* is *Dinner in Florida*. It shows five or six seniors around a dinner table enjoying coffee and cake, “frozen” in mid conversation. It is the best one because it is the most failed in a way: the subjects constantly fidget and move, they breath very deeply, and they generally lack the physical discipline it takes to truly hold still (which explains its short 2 minute and 34 second running time). Hannah has composed the work overlooking a woman's shoulder, with the side of her face making up the left margin of the frame. Her proximity to the camera accentuates her breathing and movements even more. This vantage point complicates the work, pitting the viewer in the spot presumably of a fellow table mate who had gotten up, presumably to take the photo, leaving her teacup and chair askew and opening up a semi-circle of company. A woman across the table looks directly at where the viewer, the absent guest, is standing, reinforcing the conflation of viewer with subject in the work.⁸

Two of the *Family Stills*, *Abuji (Father)* and *Otter on the Car*, are framed around cars.



The former depicts a shirtless older man (the artist's father-in-law) on a driveway hunched over the back of a station-wagon, scrubbing it with a sponge. His awkward, forward-bent position makes holding still particularly difficult, and his stomach droops at an irregular rate as he fails to hold his breath. It is a sweet portrait of suburban life, tender care for the family vehicle.

Otter on the Car (also using Hannah's in-laws) suggests a family vacation to a manicured park, with an otter having climbed onto the hood of the car. A woman in a visor feeds the animal Cheezies, while a man sneaks up behind it, about to wrap the furry creature in a towel. The Cheezies, the towel, and the car suggest a complete disconnect from anything natural at all, the towel indicating the man's fear of actually touching it, while the lone Cheezies strewn about the hood suggest they may not be a snack favoured by small wildlife. Of course, the otter is stuffed and couldn't eat them anyway, as his stoic stillness would have been impossible, even for a trained animal. In a very similar *Still, Cheezies*, the same otter is being unsuccessfully fed by the same woman, this time as a pet sitting in a grassy backyard.

Less exotic but equally compelling are a few *Family Stills* featuring older couples. *Murray and Beverly* was presumably shot in an upscale suite similar to the one in which *Dinner in Florida* takes place. An older couple sit on a chair and loveseat, in contemplative, quiet poses. Again, they are framed with a foreground foil, this time over the back of a photograph next to a vase of flowers on a side table. Other photos sit on a similar table by a faux Tiffany lamp. These discreet touches are important, as they hint at being the objects of this couple's contemplation. *Murray and Beverly* is, in essence, a portrait of memory, a vista onto nostalgia. The inclusion of



the photographs is a sophisticated move on Hannah's part, playing off the work itself, which is an attempt to breath life into photography.

The counterpart to *Murray and Beverly* is *Emoh and Emohbu*, in which an older couple sits cross-legged on the floor, next to a low mahogany table. The woman holds an old, green telephone to her ear, the kind to match her 70's-style printed muumuu dress. Like *Murray and Beverly*, their thoughts are elsewhere, possibly on a conversation with a distant relative. In this work, the anachronistic green phone serves the same function as the photographs and kitschy décor used in *Murray and Beverly*.

These works are coated with the patina of memory that is so touching and important in family photos. The *Family Stills* are not completely photographic, yet they are imbued

OPPOSITE: Adad Hannah, *All Is Vanity*, 2009, c-print, 101 x 76 cm, courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain, Montreal, commissioned by BMO Financial Group in 2008

with the sense of death and loss mentioned earlier that is inherent to photography. Many of the *Family Stills* depict older relatives who have since passed away, and their age, like a clock, brings the element of time's passing to the foreground. Perhaps it is their pose, the conscious attempt to arrest the body, so visible in these works that quotes photography and, by extension, death.

Not only do Hannah's *Stills* play so eloquently with the qualities of photography and video, they riff beautifully on the viewer's position as well.

The tension of anticipated movement captivates the viewer as she mirrors the work while watching it. Both viewer and subject stand still, waiting for the other to succumb.

As the viewer experiences the crux of spectatorship, she is forced to consider her own performance within the gallery, and thus her relationship to art, and to time.

In Hannah's works, the placement of figures is obviously constructed, as if they were posing for Jeff Wall photographs. Hannah chooses banal scenes of daily life in a "developed" country. He is interested in the construction of culture through images and brings those forth quite literally by "pausing" them. This technique sustains our attention long enough to actively watch a video rather than scan a photograph.

Hannah has often quoted other artists, especially older works such as Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* in *Two Mirrors* and August

Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais* in *Recast and Reshoot* (discussed below). Hannah's newest work, *All is Vanity (Mirrorless Version)*⁹, is made after Charles Allen Gilbert's optical illusion from 1892, a drawing depicting what appears to be a large grinning skull, but upon closer examination, is revealed to be a young woman gazing at her reflection in the mirror. In Hannah's version, the drawings become a video, akin to the *Stills* series. It mimics a Victorian-era photograph of a woman in a somber dress seated facing her vanity, a

lit candle sits on the edge near a vase of lilies Hannah's version, like Gilbert's, is an optical illusion. There is no mirror; what appears to be the woman's reflection is actually her twin sister, dressed exactly the same.

“Hannah constructs scenarios inspired by the complexity of daily life and action...”

This becomes apparent when one notices the sister looking directly at the viewer, rather than back at the figure with her back to us. Another hint to the physical, rather than optical, connection between the two figures is the apron on the figure's dress, which turns into the tablecloth on the parlour table. If she were to get up from her seat, she would knock over the bottles arranged in a row in front of her, essentially tearing down the barrier between the two figures. Such a move would shake the foundations of our belief in the "fourth wall" and bridge the division between spectator and subject.

Hannah is remarkably consistent in his interests. The motif of breaking down the wall between spectator and subject is obvi-



Adad Hannah, *Burghers of Seoul*, 2006, digital video, 9min 14s, courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain, Montreal



Adad Hannah, *Burghers of Seoul*, 2006, digital video, 9min 14s, courtesy of Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain, Montreal



ous throughout his practice, along with his interest in the still and moving image. For example, *Still* (not to be confused with the *Stills* series), is an interactive video installation set in a darkened room. Viewers walk in and, within a few moments of their standing still, a video image of themselves begins to appear in real time on one of the dark walls. If they move, they are plunged back into darkness. In a way, Hannah traps us in a cage of our own narcissism. If one keeps moving, one avoids being "caught" or "shot." This is the fugitive approach.¹⁰ When more than one viewer is in the room, *Still* creates an unspoken pact between them, a form of peer pressure, what Steve Reinke calls a "social compact towards group narcissism."¹¹

For *Recast and Reshoot* (2006), Hannah has set out to restage August Rodin's famous sculpture, *The Burghers of Calais* (1895), in every city that houses one of its bronze edi-

tions.¹² The first (and as yet only) rendition of Hannah's series takes place in Seoul, Korea, where he has chosen six employees of a courier company to assume the burghers' poses. He records them in the round with a dolly-mounted video camera on a circular track. The same is done for Rodin's sculpture, as each city displays the various figures in different ways. The two videos are projected onto either side of a single suspended screen.

What Hannah has done in *Recast and Reshoot* is what he does in *Stills*: he strips a medium of what is assumed to comprise it in order to see what remains. In *Recast and Reshoot*, Hannah alludes to space with a 360-degree video pan, but we experience the piece as a flat representation. Not only is it flat, but it is time-based. Hannah turns the encountering and manipulation of a sculpture into a temporal experience. In the *Stills* series, Hannah does something similar to video: he strips

it of movement and sound, what are normally considered video's basic elements, in order to see what survives:

When I embarked on what would become the *Stills* series I was considering the importance of sound in video, as well as techniques of trick-photography from the early days of cinema. The first *Stills* I made were the products of a distillation exercise, I wanted to remove everything that makes a video and see what was left. I put the camera on a tripod, asked people to stay motionless, and stripped away the sound. The choice to show people caught in action rather than passively sitting, standing, or sleeping (as Gillian Wearing, Thomas Struth, and Andy Warhol among others have done) was inspired by early photography when exposure times were measured in minutes and seconds.¹³

Hannah is engaging the photographic via video, infusing it with time and duration — with presence. And presence is life. This leads me back to asserting that video is "live." When life is invoked, so is its opposite: death. Hannah comes to the same conclusion: "[I]t is ironic that these works which foreground the breathing, blinking, and swaying — or vital signs so to speak — of the human subjects should also invoke death so consistently."¹⁴ Hannah's work never goes to either extreme of denoting life through complete presence (video) or death through complete absence (photography), and so he forever straddles the line between the two. ■

NOTES:

1. Like the French phrase, "Arrêt de mort," which Derida tells us means both death sentence and to stop death. See his *Parage* under "Survivre" (Paris: Galilée, 1986).
2. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).
3. Andre Bazin. *What is Cinema?* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967).
4. If such a drive exists, it is fundamentally linked to time. Recall Peter Pan's allegory of the alligator who swallowed a clock: Every time the deadly beast came near, the ticking terrified Captain Hook.
5. For more on this see Cécile Chich's *The Obscenity (or Miracle) of Film* (London: Lux, 2004).
6. Barthes, 15.
7. Christian Metz discusses filmic presence as the result of motion in *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974). See especially his discussion of Barthes on page 9 where he states "In the cinema the impression of reality is also the reality of impression, the real presence of motion." It is also useful to remember the etymology of "animate" as meaning both to bring to life and to movement.
8. This is a strategy Hannah has pursued in other works, such as *Two Mirrors*, shot at the Museo del Prado in Madrid, for which he inserts two men and a mirror into Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. Although they share only one mirror, Hannah's title refers to the painted one above, believed to reflect the king and queen posing for their portrait. Velázquez implicated the viewer to a privileged position, just as Hannah does.
9. Commissioned by BMO Financial Group in 2008
10. There is an interesting link between fugitives and photography, especially through "mug" shots and surveillance cameras. To arrest their image is the first step in arresting their bodies. Several children's games teach this, including Red Light/Green Light
11. Steve Reinke, *Adad Hannah: Folk & Still* (Toronto: TPW Online Essays, 2004) <<http://archive.gallerytpw.ca/index.php?c=essay&h=archive&id=96>> (6 January 2008)
12. Rodin's monument is to the six burghers who were ready to sacrifice their lives in order to save the rest of Calais' residents held under siege by the British in 1374.
13. Otino Corsano, *Interview of Adad Hannah* (Dec. 2004 - Jan 2005) <www.samplesize.ca/corsano/hannah> (14 April 2006)
14. Ibid.