



A WINDOW THAT ISN'T THERE...

DANIELA GULLOTTA (ITALY/UK)

NORIAN PAICU

AMÉLIE SCALERCIO

LUHSUN TAN

MICHAEL VALE

PHILIPPE VRANJES

CURATED BY MICHAEL VALE

STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

## A window that isn't there...

Looking out a window that isn't there

Looking at the carpet and the chairs

Bill Callahan, *The Sing* (2013)

The idea of direct, objective observation is a myth. No visual experience is visual alone, it must always trigger a negotiation, otherwise it may as well never have happened. Whether that negotiation is primarily concerned with orientation, or used as a catalysing field that can beckon almost involuntary reverie, depends on a range of circumstances. When matters of physical survival are not imminent, the mind is predisposed to wandering. When this wandering occurs vision becomes a backdrop, an immersive setting for our innermost thoughts. Familiar objects and images can shift before our eyes, both outer and inner. There are times, of course, when wandering can lead to getting lost... or even getting found. There are other times when our degree of negotiation is so inwardly directed that we almost do not see at all, or if we do we see something quite different to what is there.

This exhibition will present the view that visual experience is a tug of war between what we see with our eyes and what we see with our internal memories and visions. Put simply, a rich inner world co-exists within all of us, jostling for attention with external stimuli and familiarities. 'Hysteria', a condition identified and explored by the pioneering French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, was seen by André Breton as a supreme means of expression. Charcot's treatment and, extraordinary as it might seem, his photography of patients in various states of hypnotic suggestion, was to provide fertile inspiration for the Surrealist reappraisal of the human brain. While Breton could be accused of selectively interpreting Charcot's findings, he nonetheless championed the hallucinatory potential of everyday life. The six artists in this exhibition each offer direct vision as an upper layer, like the icing on a cake.

**Daniela Gullotta** seeks out the imprint of departed human presence in empty and abandoned structures across Europe; hospitals, asylums, prisons, grand and decaying mansions, crumbling ruins that still hold traces of former lives. Her work, *Stairs to Nowhere*, depicts an abandoned sanatorium just outside Berlin, a place where, in a metaphorical sense, the stairs may well have led nowhere. Gullotta uses a camera to record the abject shell of each forlorn building then works over the resultant photographs with a variety of textures and media, imbuing them with the sad and ghostly patina of time. A crusty layer of unnameable stories is thus attached to these inanimate witnesses of human drama, like coral deposits on a shipwreck. Gullotta's work reminds us that the spaces we inhabit will, most likely, outlive us and retain a smear of our time amongst them.

**Luhsun Tan** also works with time. His looped film, *Track*, gives us an endless present, denying the photographic medium of its traditional entombment in a readable past. In Tan's reworking of an amateur film from the 1930's, the ongoing moment becomes the subject of the work. The figure we see climbing down towards a water-hole renews himself in an unending loop, thus becoming demonstrably a ghost of technology. Photography's ability to freeze moments of being, like an insect captured in amber, offers, in most cases, only an aspect of seeing. Tan presents memory as a living thing – a living, breathing, haunting presence that will look over the shoulder of any historian attempting to consign photography to the role of documentation. For Tan, the ghost, the photograph and the film are as much a part of the future as they are of the past.

**Philippe Vranjes** engages with an archeological, perhaps even supernatural reading of technology. His work, no matter which medium he chooses, depicts the evidence of human activity – evidence by implication. Evidence, of course, is fundamentally different to proof. The footprint of a *Yeti* is evidence, but to most people it doesn't offer proof. In René Magritte's painting *Perspicacity* the painter looks at an egg and paints a bird. Vranjes reverses this process. It is left to us, the viewers, to detect, speculate, interpolate, guess what may have given birth to these strange artifacts. Chances are it was a spectacular event, most likely involving electricity, or events too volatile to imagine; but we cannot be sure. Perhaps it never happened at all and what we see is fiction? This work is born from a theatre of possibility and might well be acquired in the future by a museum from a parallel universe. In the meantime we can look and wonder, look and deduce, or look and invent multiple meanings.

**Amélie Scalercio** records her myth-like relationships with the world (and the moon) by bringing to life the spirits all around us that lurk in shadowy disguises, perhaps waiting to be recognized. As part of this process, Scalercio calls on the indexical science of musical memories. She believes in the poetic reach of popular culture and the profundity of humour. Song titles, like geological specimens, are more than just names; they are gateways to an onrush of private associations. Quoting a song, or a line from a song, is like opening an overcrowded wardrobe. The chances of shoeboxes of memory avalanching onto one's head are too likely to ignore. Why should we take this risk? Scalercio's exquisite drawing skills are almost trance-inducing; seductive and ludicrous at the same time. Her use of simple tools and methods is shaman-like, enticing us to follow her into the volcano. It would be amiss to talk about vision acting as a trigger without referring to symbols. The shortcoming of prescribed symbolism though, is that its understanding is usually retrospective. Immediate recognition of metaphoric agility is rare – even more so when it is political.

**Norian Paicu's** *Claustrophobia* installation is like a stage set that Kafka or Ionesco might have dreamt of. To be confronted, in real and immediate space, by an office whose function is to weigh and classify turds, and whose dazzling complexity defies any form of common sense, is perhaps closer to what we are led to believe is reality than its sense of parody might suggest. Having grown up in Ceaucescu's Romania, Paicu is acutely aware of the sinister potential such bureaucratic overkill can bring. In this work, functionary objects swarm like drunken bees around a throne-like desk. The smell of delay, misinformation and wasted time hangs in the air above. This is an aesthetics of frustration borne of real experience, poetically filtered. Paicu's taste for the absurd offers us what is probably our most effective survival strategy.

In my own work, *For Augustine, Charcot and St. George*, my aim has been to address the original inspiration for this exhibition, the attempt by the French neurologist J.M.Charcot to find a cure for the condition he had identified as 'hysteria'. It seems to me that this milestone in the early diagnosis and treatment of psychological illness operated like a weird reenactment of the legend of St George and the Dragon; but here the dragon and the rescuer are more interchangeable, more open to revision. Who is the dragon and what is the dragon? Who is the victim and who is the saviour? What Augustine, the subject of this powerplay, actually sees is a matter for speculation and probably skepticism. The real Augustine, apparently cured of whatever her condition might have been, is known to have disappeared into the dark evening of history while Charcot (and the dragon of hysteria) were to continue their epic struggle into the Surrealist manifesto.

A window offers light and sometimes hope, but more importantly it offers an alternate space that is not entirely out of reach. A window can make a room seem bigger or, when viewed from outside on a cold winter's night, a glimpse of safety and warmth. Whether the window is there or not, it can always be imagined.

Michael Vale, curator, 2014

Cover: Luhsun Tan, *Track*, 2013

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