

# Corner College

Kochstrasse 1 • 8004 Zürich

## Spooky Action at a Distance (Artes Mechanicae and Witch's Cradle)

A group exhibition at Corner College with **Amélie Brisson-Darveau, Andreas Marti, Conor McFeely, Mareike Spalteholz.**

Opening on **23 April**, finissage on **22 May 2015.**

Both at the opening and at the finissage, there will be a sound intervention, *Lointain* (2015) by **Brandon Farnsworth, Benjamin Ryser and Hannah Walter.**

Curated by **Gabriel Gee** (TETI) and **Dimitrina Sevova** (Corner College).

The exhibition is organized by Corner College in collaboration with the TETI group (Textures and Experience of Transindustriality).

## Curatorial Text by Gabriel Gee

### Darkroom notes underneath the *artes mechanicae*

**T**he codification of the *artes mechanicae* at the turn of the 12th century served as a starting point to consider the binary between material and virtual realities in the beginning of the 21st century. The medieval invention of the *artes mechanicae* underlined the contributions of practical arts such as agriculture, metallurgy, but also medicine and architecture to the shaping of the world. They provided categories to complement those of the liberal arts, noble practices such as arithmetic, logic and rhetoric. This historical process could be used as a guiding thought when transposed into the present world, where the multiplication of images, virtual fluxes and platforms increasingly dislocate the embodied experience of the world. Social-robots and post-human hybrids are certainly fascinating creatures and futures. Yet an attention to the actors who command our 21st century nascent imaginaries appears appropriate, and given the remoteness of the design agencies fuelling our screens and mind, a practical exploration of the mechanics of creation offers a possible pathway to bring some light into often inscrutable processes. It is in other words the recognition of

embodied practices as valuable and definable, that can analogically be used to unravel the nature of our digital present.

In the present exhibition, a common thread explored by all four artists revolves around a *mise-en-abîme* of creative conduits, a mode of framing artistic invention and underlining its components for the benefit of the visitor. One particular mode of appreciating this focal attention onto the mechanics of creation is channeled both in a concrete and metaphorical sense by the Camera Obscura. The camera obscura, or darkened room, is a phenomenon and device known since Antiquity: in a dark room, through a small aperture, a reversed image of the outside world can be projected. Subsequently, in the late 16th century, the principle was adapted to a pinhole box equipped with lenses and mirrors, enabling the projection to become mobile. From there on, the optical camera was developed, used in mapping as well as an aid to painting, it became a model for the understanding of the eye, culminating in the 19th century seminal discovery of how to stabilize the imprint of the reversed image on silver iodide coated paper.

The camera obscura functional concentration of matters pertaining to optics, coupled with its long and uncertain journey to provide material visual evidence, are echoed in the works presented hereby; furthermore, the pieces presented also explore through their anatomy the two terms themselves and for themselves: the room, and obscurity.

Conor McFeely's series of photographs and two videos are part of a new work entitled *The prisoners' cinema*. This peculiar cinematographic vision investigates a phenomenon known as the Ganzfeld effect, which describes the hallucinatory visions experiences by people kept in long term darkness, typically and significantly for the piece: imprisoned individuals. The prisoners – and perhaps the artist's guinea pigs ! – are to be seen on the photographs on the wall. The iron bars of their jails block the bottoms of three developing tanks disposed in two-dimensional photographic format on the table lab. Hence the images emerging from the *camera obscura*, that is from a process of photographic production which is historically tied to the development of the moving image in the later 19th century, bear from the outset the marks of their captive nature. One of the video projections echoes this primitive cinematographic era, in mixing spectral archival footage with the artist's measurement grids, another reminder of a confined vision. Yet *The prisoners' cinema* suggests a form of resistance to these alienating cages. In the darkness of isolation and confinement, there can emerge a personal and profoundly internal vision, an interstice of freedom taking the form of a singular personal cinematographic-like projection. This personal projection is at odds with the experience of the cinema room, where in the dark, individuals are submitted to the projector's flow of images. One might keep one's own reading and experience of these images, yet the source remains external. Not so in McFeely's prisoners' cinema, where the projection comes from within, thereby escaping industrially fabricated imaginaries. The bat, whose mummified figure rotates before us, is the icon of *The prisoners' cinema*. Living in the dark, it perceives space through

echolocation and its own emitted high-pitched sound. In that respect, McFeely's cinema evokes an internalized camera obscura, where in the face of contemporary industrial visual and mental invasions, we might all become batmen/batwomen.

We find a similar interest in projection and shadow in Amélie Brisson-Darveau's *Shadow theatre – three essays on film noir*. The camera obscura metaphor can be observed in two different yet complementary forms: the enclosed box, in which the peeper can observe projected film sequences and animations; and a partly opened box offering several stages to the viewer's attention. In those two scenographic structures, however, the focal point is light's mirror and uncanny twin, the shadow. On the one hand, crouching to one's knees, the viewer can privately gaze at the projection within the black box, thereby gaining access to a private theatre and a private cinema. On the other hand, a scenic arrangement enables us to see within the heart of the black box, where a revolving feather rotates as its shadow expands and diminishes accordingly; above, on an upper stage lit from afar, the *mise-en-scène* presents a rooftop scene complete with a ladder suggesting movement in and out of the structure. Another parallel comes to mind in this universe of shadows and darkness, that of the shadower and the ropper, two archetypal figures of the roman noir and the film noir, which are explicitly referenced by the artist, in particular in the cinematographic archive material projected in the enclosed box. The shadower, us, the singularized viewers, follow incognito the unfolding world; the ropper, on the other hand, comes forward to query this very world, and to find the truth hidden beneath. Perhaps the ladder suggests an escape route from the cave's distorted wall ornaments, unless it provides a way into the mysteries of the dark box.

Dark boxes and materials have also been a recurring theme in the investigations of Mareike Spalteholz. In *Im Getriebe*, we see glimpses of fantastic universes, newly discovered planets and continents where uneven relief unfold in rich geological textures of colored and contrasted hues. These brave new worlds whose frontier cannot be reached from the satellite photographs brought back to us, are the product of bacterial multiplication, occurring from a dark coffee ground and into the dark. Obscure emergence of the manifold. With *Simultan*, similarly, one finds multiple visions condensed in one 'Rubix cube' box, whose manipulation generates series of alternate architectonics.

In *We Were Here III*, Andreas Marti bridges the two columns at the centre of the room with a metallic and kinetic structure. The piece pursues Marti's ongoing exploration of archaic technologies, whose spatial extensions provide the very slowing down and even freezing point of those contemporary technological fluxes that so fleetingly surround us. Movement instills the horizontal and vertical ramifications of the structure before our eyes; we see the mechanics at work, and are in effect led in principle into the veiled machineries that instill life into the world of objects in our environments, not to mention their human-robotic protheses. Furthermore this primitive machinery plays a concrete function

for the artist, who watches carefully over his crop: it makes drawings. On the paper positioned on the floor and on a plinth, colored pigmentation fuelled into the grinding mechanics progressively imprints the former immaculate surfaces. The archaic return also operates in our metaphorical reading. For Marti's machines can be seen as reflexive *Camera Lucida*, the optical device designed in the early 19th century to help artists drawing. The camera lucida provided an optical superposition of the scene or object viewed, and the drawing surface through a half-silvered mirror. Furthermore, it played a negative role in the inception of photography itself, when Henry Fox Talbot became disenchanted with it while experimenting in the Como region, prompting the research that would bring *the Pencil of Nature*, to refer to Talbot's successful stabilization of the photographic image and his 1846 publication. Consequently, *We were here III* might also be seen as an archaic root of photographic inception. The piece disembodies the very process through which images appear into the void. A primitive framing of the image to emerge and be preserved in the darkroom, it complements a charting of the genesis, of the conditions for the creation of worlds, of the functioning, threats and potentials of the camera obscura.