

# The Vanishing Point of History

Since 2003 Arlo Mountford has been producing digitally animated films that feature a dizzying array of famous artists, artworks and events from the history of art inflected with an almost equally dizzying array of pop cultural references. These films typically adopt a loose narrative structure within which two silhouetted figures (of the type used to indicate gender on public toilet doors) misadventure through various iconic art galleries and artworks to murderous effect. In *Wedge for S/Elective Viewing* (2005), the characters construct a special art viewing platform (a replica of which houses the screen in the actual gallery) that doubles as a guillotine for beheading unsuspecting visitors. In *Murder in the Museum* (2005), the characters visit MoMA, the Guggenheim and the Tate, only to be set upon by an axe-wielding maniac. In *The Pioneer Meets the Wanderer* (2006) the two figures lounge on the beach as Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* washes ashore, dance to punk band The Saints in the National Gallery of Victoria, re-enact the climactic scene from *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and, finally, head over to the Heide Museum of Modern Art to decapitate some of Australia's best known artists. And, in the most recent work in this exhibition, *The Triumph* (2010), Brueghel's eponymous painting, *The Triumph of Death* (c.1562), is reanimated and repopulated with a cast including Duchamp, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Yves Klein and Patti Smith, all of whom are variously, and inevitably, slaughtered. In Mountford's history of art, everyone loses their head.

The critical reception of Mountford's self-referential 'art of art history' has to date tended (both explicitly and implicitly) to align it with the postmodernist strategies of appropriation and pastiche. Ashley Crawford, for example, has characterised Mountford's films as "postmodern comedy", while Julie Ewington has referred to his art historical borrowings as a "deliberately postmodernist gesture".<sup>1</sup> If Mountford's films do, at first glance, bear some affinity with certain practices associated with postmodernism (for example

Sherrie Levine's *After...* series, comprised of photographs of reproductions of famous modern artworks), there is, nonetheless, an important distinction to be made. As Craig Owens famously argued, appropriation, as practiced by artists such as Levine, was allegorical insofar as it worked to empty images "of their resonance, their significance, their authoritative claim to meaning".<sup>2</sup> Yet while Mountford's incessant shuffling and reshuffling of images from art and cultural history also engages the authoritative production of meaning, the result is more like a remix or mashup than either appropriation or pastiche, insofar as the effect is to *reactivate and reimagine* their resonance and significance.

In this respect the films in the current exhibition are thus much closer to what Nicholas Borriaud coined "postproduction", wherein the artist works, much like a DJ or internet surfer, to diminish the "dividing line between reception and practice".<sup>3</sup> This is artistic practice reconceived, Borriaud argued, as an "incessant navigation within the meanderings of cultural history" via which "new cartographies of knowledge" proliferate.<sup>4</sup> Borriaud is hardly alone in observing this recent artistic impulse to renavigate art and other histories, and critics including Hal Foster, Mark Godfrey and James Meyer have respectively made very different but broadly related arguments for the archival, historiographical and mnemonic imperatives of so much contemporary practice.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this preoccupation with remixing, renavigating and sometimes even fabricating histories has emerged as one of the more salient features of international art *after* postmodernism. And it is the trajectory of Mountford's own renavigations that this essay seeks to begin charting.

The first work of this type, *Ramp For S/Elective Viewing* (2003, of which *Wedge...*, included in this exhibition, is a variation) clearly situated Mountford in this vein of practice when, having first built a wooden divide in his studio, the artist hit upon the idea of producing

an animation to explain its presence.<sup>6</sup> In other words, this loose series of films was inaugurated as fictitious history. Since then the histories through which Mountford has navigated are delimited neatly enough. References to modern and contemporary western art by the likes of Duchamp, Picasso, Klein, Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg are intertwined and/or overlaid with reference to more popular cultures, particularly music (e.g. Jimi Hendrix and punk) and cinema (e.g. Alfred Hitchcock and '80s slasher flicks). The three vignettes that comprise *Murder in the Museum*, for example, are transposed from *Friday the 13th Part II* and set to the film's original soundtrack.<sup>7</sup> However while the pop cultural references tend to vary from film to film, the art historical references are derived from a stock archive developed by the artist and recur (particularly Duchamp, Klein and Rauschenberg who are referenced in almost every work). Furthermore, the artists and artworks redeployed by Mountford are strictly from the established and seemingly impregnable canon of western art as rehearsed in countless undergraduate survey subjects and textbooks, and fortified by the broader academic publishing industry and magazine trade. The focus on this narrow and endogenous historical formation is a point on which the artist is unapologetic yet self-reflexive. This position is made clear on the soundtrack to *Proposition (meets the unfathomable - bergwerk 5)* (2004), an homage to German artist Martin Kippenberger, when Mountford's deliberately mawkish song about his idol ("Oh Martin Kippenberger, how I'm missing yer-er") is interrupted by a female voice admonishing "The artist [Mountford] is a total wanker. Is he just going to recycle all his favourite artists one after the other? And it's just a Eurocentric boys club that he's referencing." Viewed in their totality, these films thus present the history of art as a closed system. This is history presented not, as the ubiquitous presence of Duchamp might imply, as a readymade, but as always *alreadymade*. Yet it is also a system that Mountford throws into a state of perpetual, indeed almost pathological, auto-destructive flux.

This is both underscored and complicated by the sense of temporal ambivalence and untimeliness that manifests in the relationship between the style and medium of these films. Although composed entirely via digital technologies, each of the constituent images is hand drawn into the software and the finished animation is rendered deliberately awkward with unconvincing physics and low frame rates.

As a result figures tend to hover above or float across, rather than walk on, the ground, while their physical activity is both rudimentary and repetitive. Combined with the complex but static backgrounds across which the 'camera' pans slowly section by section, this evokes the side-scrolling genre of video games prevalent until the release of the Sony Playstation, capable of generating genuinely three dimensional environments, in the mid-1990s. Yet the specific medium is Adobe Flash, software that is inextricably associated (particularly as the engine of YouTube) with a much later technological generation: the emergence of Web 2.0 in the mid-2000s. This ambivalence and anachronism is particularly clear in *The Triumph*, where the stunningly realised setting casts the gesturally limited protagonists into sharp relief, and particularly literal in *Universal Language - alternate reality* (2006), where a Piet Mondrian painting provides the setting for a Super Mario Bros-style platform-based quest.<sup>8</sup>

One way of coming to terms with the historical and temporal somersaulting that permeates the very core of Mountford's practice is by turning to what numerous critics have already identified as its leitmotif: the decapitated or otherwise disembodied head delineated as a simple black circle, ball or void. This motif features in all of Mountford's films, most typically in the form of so many heads that have rolled, yet also in the circular holes through which visitors view *Wedge...*, in the steel balls that drop to the floor in the installation *Requiem to the Negativist Spectacle* (2005) and furthermore as a character in its own right. In *Portrait of the Artist as a Dead Man* (2004) it lolled lifelessly on the window of Gertrude Contemporary, while in *STAND UP* (2007) it mouths artworld platitudes and pieties to canned laughter. In *Return to Point* (2006) the head appears again, this time as a narrator of sorts but also as the central compositional device. Here, the errant protagonists are absent and the film comprises a history of modern art condensed into a 14 minute montage sequence anchored by this circular form. The film opens with an image of the black circle, which declares "I am the point", before segueing into the rising sun of a Hiroshige landscape, Jackson Pollock's baldspot seen from above while painting, the basketball from Jeff Koons' equilibrium tanks, the propeller of Joseph Beuys' crashing plane, the rubber tyre around the goat in Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* and so on and so on culminating with Gordon Matta-Clark's *Conical Intersect*, a

series of large perspectival holes cut through an apartment block in Paris (site of the then soon to be built *Centre Pompidou*) and here punningly transposed to the gallery where Mountford's own film was first shown – Conical in Melbourne. At this point the film itself assumes a circular temporal form as the final scene shows the first scene playing in the gallery: the eponymous 'return to point'.

The iconography of this motif has been the subject of some discussion. For Ewington it is an appropriation of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Circle* (1915) that positions Mountford's artistic project at a kind of modernist ground-zero, while Edward Colless, more playfully and more sinisterly, compares the circular, negative form to that of a glory hole and ultimately castration.<sup>9</sup> While it may indeed reference any or all of these things, in terms of appearance, its art historical context, its compositional function, and, as the circle itself inasmuch declares, this motif reads most of all as a vanishing point.<sup>10</sup>

Since the Renaissance the vanishing point has provided the structure of visual knowledge, a role only reinforced with the mechanisation of linear perspective by photography in the 19th century. It is the point (either on or off the canvas) at which a painting's recessionary planes converge, synthesising the scene by determining proportion as well as what falls both within and outside the frame. Given that the recession of space doubles as the visual articulation of the recession of time, the vanishing point is thus also the limit point of history. It is for this reason that the historian Helmut Walser Smith (demonstrating that if artists are increasingly acting like historians, then the inter-disciplinary traffic is not entirely one way) has recently advocated an understanding of history as painting (or photography) in order to argue that the vanishing points of history – those points around which the collective historical gaze focuses and which thus structure the received historical image – are the proper, and urgent, subject of contemporary historiography.<sup>11</sup>

In this respect Mountford's inversion and multiplication of the vanishing point works with the narrative provisionality and temporal ambivalence inherent to the style and medium of these films to de-synthesise art history while productively opening it to a proliferation of new combinations and a simultaneity of perspectives. This foregrounding of the vanishing point thus remobilises it not as the full stop but the blind spot of history, thereby reminding us of our own violently foreshortened

purview. In so doing Mountford shoots the very notion of a closed and endogenous teleology of art full of holes, while directing our gaze to the negative spaces that remain to be filled.

<sup>1</sup> Ashley Crawford, 'Art Animated and Dissected', *RealTime*, 79, 2007, 46; & Julie Ewington, "Arlo Mountford" in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism*, ex. cat., Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery, 2008, 155. For further, if quite different, alignments of Mountford's art with postmodernism see, *inter-alia*, Jeff Khan, *The Flux of the Matter*, ex. cat., Melbourne: Gertrude Contemporary Art Spaces, 2007; & Andrew J. West, 'The Hacienda Must Be Built', *The Bangkok Post*, 30/04/2009, <http://www.bangkokpost.com/entertainment/art/15924/the-hacienda-must-be-built> (accessed 18/1/11).

<sup>2</sup> Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism', *October*, Vol. 12, Spring, 1980, 69.

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas Borriaud, *Postproduction, Culture As Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*, New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2005, 13–18. The DJ analogy has emerged briefly in previous writings on Mountford, see: West, 2009; & Arlo Mountford, David Simpkin, Adrien Allen and Jason Maling, "Return to Point", *CrONICAL*, 5, 21 July, 2006, np, [http://www.conical.org.au/cronical/return\\_point\\_cronical.html](http://www.conical.org.au/cronical/return_point_cronical.html) (accessed 24/11/2010). Bree Richards has also productively described *The Triumph* as "willfully mashed up" in *Crawl2: Three Moves*, ex. cat., 2010, np, [www.crawl.net.au/crawl2/](http://www.crawl.net.au/crawl2/) (accessed 11/01/2011).

<sup>4</sup> Borriaud, 2005, 18.

<sup>5</sup> Hal Foster, "The Archival Impulse", *October*, 2004, 110, 3–22; Mark Godfrey, "The Artist as Historian", *October*, 2007, 120, 140–172; and James Meyer, "Nostalgia and Memory: Legacies of the 1960s in Recent Work", in *Painting, Object, Film, Concept: Works from the Herbig Collection*, ex. cat., London: Christies, 1998, 26–35.

<sup>6</sup> Arlo Mountford, conversation with the author, 30/11/2010.

<sup>7</sup> The precise nature of Mountford's recalibration of art history to the narratives of popular culture would be a productive line of further enquiry, but one beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>8</sup> This medial relationship with YouTube is both acknowledged and further complicated in works like *We Wanted Something More* (2007), wherein viral YouTube clips are reanimated in the same style as the films in this exhibition. It is also an aspect of Mountford's practice further, if inadvertently, complicated by the potential anachronism of Flash itself following Apple's refusal to support the software in iOS, the mobile operating system of both the iPhone and iPad.

<sup>9</sup> Ewington, 2008, 156; & Edward Colless, "Arlo Mountford", in Linda Michael (ed.), *21st Century Modern: 2006 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, ex. cat., Adelaide: Art Gallery of South Australia, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> The head reiterates this towards the end of the film when it reappears to insist "I am the white space, I am the black space, I am the projected light, I am this spinning DVD, I am positive space, I am negative space".

<sup>11</sup> Helmut Walser Smith, "The Vanishing Point of German History: An Essay on Perspective", *History & Memory*, 17:1/2, Spring/Summer, 2005, 269–295. The context of Smith's controversial argument is how the 'vanishing point' of 1933 in particular has worked to counter-productively disinter modern German history from the *longue durée*. There is, of course, a long history of historiographers, including Walter Benjamin, Alfred Toynbee and Hayden White, who have suggested that historians would do well to behave more like artists. Smith's argument is in direct response to the latter's influential model of history as poetry.