



Film

April 6th, 2016

Planetarium of Blended Dreams

BEN COONLEY *Moonley*

by Felix Bernstein

MICROSCOPE GALLERY | FEBRUARY 26 – APRIL 3, 2016

Ben Coonley's new show at Microscope Gallery in Bushwick throws net art, Silicon Valley tech, avant-garde professionalization, micro-cinema, diaristic video, and fatherhood into a panoramic blender. The heart of the show is within a small DIY dome on the far side of the gallery. After reading jovial instructions, you enter the dome, lie on a cushion, and put on special 3D glasses. Inside, you're surrounded by Coonley's video *Trading Futures*—filmed with a 360-degree camera that moves from his child's room to Olafur Eliasson's sculpture *Parliament of Reality* (installed at Bard College), to the roof of the Whole Foods in Gowanus. Toys swirl towards you with an uncanny surreality. CG characters mix with real objects that have been scanned on an iPhone and modified in the 3D software, Blender. And then there's the star of the film, his young daughter Clara, who tempers the mind-boggling optics with a sweet, bemused presence.

Outside the dome are several HD monitors with 3D rendered composition notebooks. The notebooks have been shot with a PixelVision camera, an out-of-production Fisher Price toy famously used by Sadie Benning and Peggy Ahwesh in the '90s. Shown in bleak abstraction, the black/white layers of the notebooks forge a pointillist confusion that bends the quotational framework and sinks you into an awkward sublime and uncanny valley.



Ben Coonley, flattened still from *Trading Futures*, 2016, 360° stereoscopic 3D single-channel HD video, 10 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

Coonley's work to date cunningly uses new technology, as well as the history of cultural toys and experimental cinema—mixing hobbyhorses, litter boxes, cats, babies, and Ken Jacobs's *Nervous Magic Lantern*. But he also juxtaposes his nostalgic playfulness with a paternal and academic

professorial role. In *Trading Futures*, he charmingly attempts to teach dividends to Clara, his cat Otto, and his own warped, CG clone—an echo of earlier videos, which have integrated philosophy quizzes and Walter Benjamin quotations into his YouTube-style zaniness.

Coonley's dividends instruction and up-to-date tech know-how are reminders that he's a real professor, at Bard College in the Film and Electronic Arts department. Which, under the leadership of filmmakers such as Adolfas Mekas, Peggy Ahwesh, and Jacqueline Goss, has been a rare bastion of experimental film culture. Microscope Gallery has taken a parallel route by exhibiting works by Ahwesh, Bradley Eros, Jonas Mekas, Nick Zedd, and Su Friedrich. Coonley stands at the tail end of this tradition, which is coming to a close for reasons as diverse as the gallery absorption of microcinema, slashed funding in the liberal arts, the high-speed proliferation of net art, and downtown New York gentrification.

There are meager options with which to experiment in performance, poetry, and dance in Manhattan without a contract with a gallery, museum, or college. MFA programs that overrate critique at the expense of experiment play into this market. Experimentation becomes not very experimental at all. But transition does not have to signal denigration of past perfection—just as when Brakhage started teaching at Boulder, the “avant-garde” did not collapse.

With galleries, as with academies, there is still the same old potential for disaster and genius. Coonley's *Moonley* risks both, without the cloying carefulness that marks many attempts to work in the precious tradition of conceptual video art. In its stead, Coonley plays towards the cornier side of expanded cinema, replete with goofy 3D glasses and domes. He shows a willingness to be foolish in teaching, selling, producing, and consuming. As a result, he allows for happy accidents, which make his experimentation fulfilling and uncontrived.

CONTRIBUTOR

Felix Bernstein

FELIX BERNSTEIN is the author of *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry* (Insert Blanc Press) and *Burn Book* (Nightboat, forthcoming). His writing has been featured in *Bomb*, *the Believer*, *Poetry Magazine*, and *Hyperallergic*. His performance *Bieber Bathos Elegy* will debut at the Whitney in January 2016. His website is felixbernstein.com.

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



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by Felix Bernstein

MAR 2016 | FILM

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INCONVERSATION



MICHAEL TAUSSIG with Nathlie Provosty and Jarrett Earnest

NOV 2015 | ART

The anthropologist, author, and Columbia University professor Michael Taussig is best known for his book *My Cocaine Museum* (2004) and his many decades living, on and off, in the Putumayo region of Colombia.

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