

UNFOLDING PERCEPTION: MATERIALITY AND TIME IN THE WORK OF TARA MERENDA NELSON AND ANDY WARHOL

The first time I visited New York City in 2012, I was anxious to see the Empire State Building. I walked along Fifth Avenue from Central Park and passed by without noticing it. When I realized that I was at Thirty-first Street, I turned around, and there it was. After paying my ticket and queuing, I went to the observatory on the top floor. Images of the building began to unfold and overlay my direct experience, and my perceptual relationship with it began to change. Before, the Empire State was an idea constructed from pop culture. It was *King Kong* (1933, directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack), *Empire* (1964, by Andy Warhol), and many others. But, now the Empire State has a spatial reference for me. It has become part of my perceptual archive of images; my mind reconstructs it through the recollection of direct experience.

The process of perceiving and giving meaning to images is a puzzling psychological exercise that enlarges with perceptual experience. Linking meaning with perception is a process of accumulation that expands and regenerates every time we encounter an image. We see images and we try to make sense of them. We seek recognition and attempt to fit them into our categories of long-term memory while dealing with our short-term memory experience of them. The mechanics of human perception combine the empirical process of experiencing the world and the mental process of assimilating what is seen.

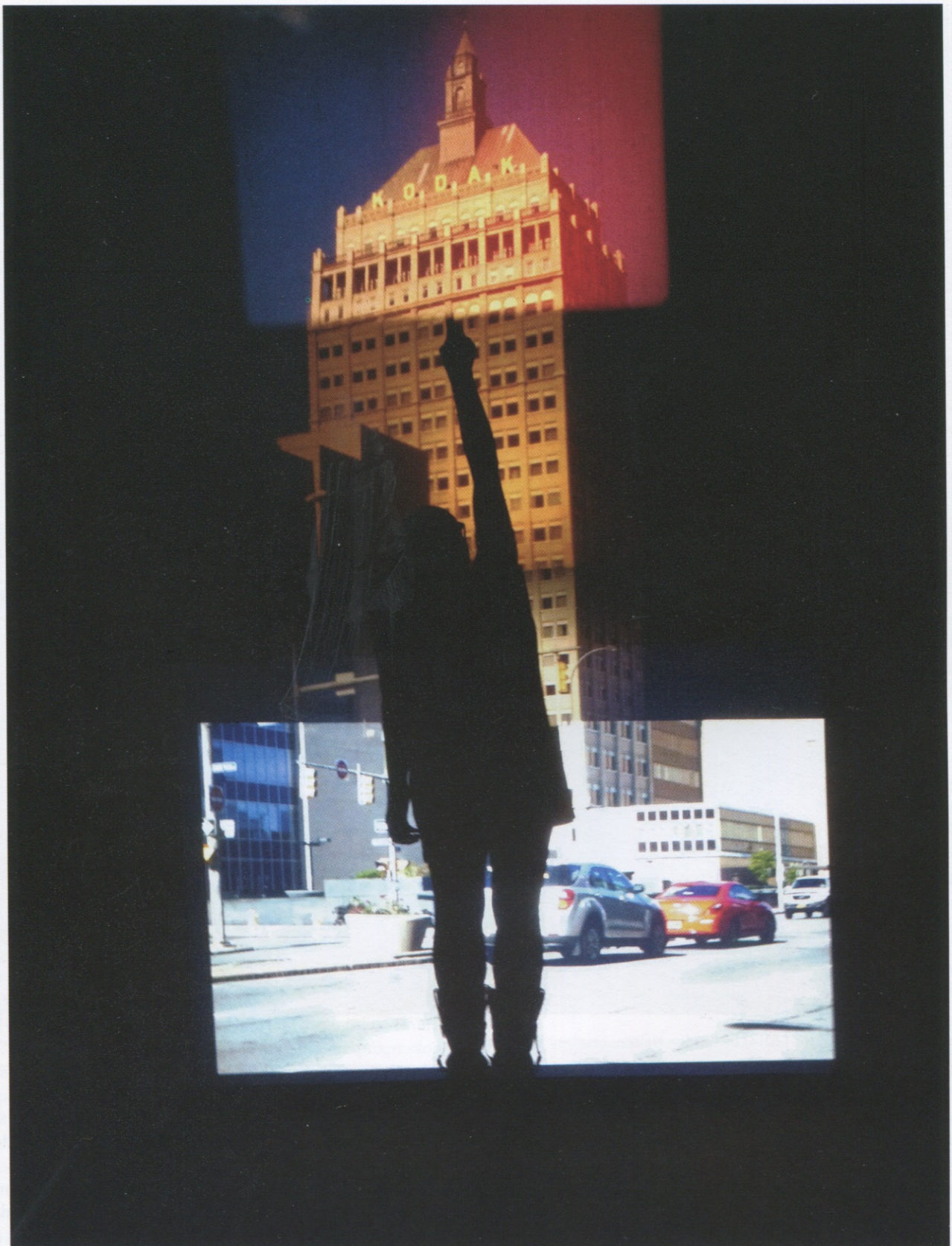
Tara Merenda Nelson's multimedia installation *End of Empire* (2014) enlivened my curiosity about not only the image per se, but the processes of perception as well. When I first saw the piece created in collaboration with Gordon Nelson at Visual Studies Workshop, I was struck by its particular combination of elements. The installation, the first piece of the artist's ongoing *FourMats* series (2014–present) is a multiformat vertical puzzle of the Kodak tower in downtown Rochester. Nelson divided the building into four parts that were each filmed simultaneously in four different formats. The first three parts of the tower are analog—shot on discontinued Ektachrome color-reversal stocks of 16mm, Super 8, and slide film—while the base of the tower is a high-definition digital video. Each portion of the tower operates as a separate entity, with different aspect ratio and physical qualities native to its format. The illusion of the tower as a single image is formed with the magnified scale and the line created between the top and bottom right corners, which connects the four distinct formats. It is undeniably the Kodak

tower that the viewer confronts. The building is a core element of Rochester's skyline, a landmark of its bright economic past and prosperous industry. Outside Rochester, even when the building is unknown to the viewer, its crowing Kodak sign makes its identity clear. Kodak means film, and its tower still represents the epicenter of film production.

End of Empire challenged me with moving images of the Kodak tower for the first time. My knowledge of the object resided in memory, while the installation was an immediate viewing experience. When I asked Nelson about her experiences showing the piece in other locations, she said that it was like bringing Kodak and the history of film to different spaces. Although audiences did not always know the building itself, they were always able to engage with the materiality of the piece and its symbolic references.

Tara Merenda Nelson during production of *End of Empire* (2014); photograph by Gordon Nelson





Installation view of *End of Empire* (2014) by Gordon Nelson and Tara Merenda Nelson; courtesy the artists



Kodak Tower in Rochester, NY (2014) by Gordon Nelson; courtesy the artist

End of Empire stands as a reflexive requiem to film and its industry as well as an homage to Warhol's *Empire*, filmed fifty years previously. Although a single piece, its structure is a result of contrast and opposition. By juxtaposing four different formats, Nelson unfolds their perceptual and material differences. The top of the building is constructed with the three obsolete film stocks, which exhibit the fading and scratches of celluloid's inevitable degradation with each successive screening. It is the chronicle of a death foretold. Digital,

by contrast, maintains its predictable steadiness in a fashion similar to the monotonous rhythm of the traffic that circulates under the shadow of the tower.

The discussion around the materiality of film and its role in perception is the last chapter of the journey that Warhol started more than half a century ago with *Empire*. The object of *Empire* is also a building filmed with a fixed camera, motionless and static. It, too, is an emblematic building—for New York City and, by extension,

for Western popular culture. Warhol filmed it at twenty-four frames per second for just over six and a half hours with a rented Auricon camera. He then projected it silently at sixteen frames per second, resulting in a total duration of more than eight hours.

Warhol incorporated the materiality of the film itself, embracing what were understood as technical mistakes.¹ Flares, fade-outs at the beginning and the end of the reels, grain, and other evidence of the film as object become intrinsic parts of the film.

The physical condition of film is equally visible in the 16mm and Super 8 parts of *End of Empire*, where it is possible to see light flares at the beginning of the film loops. They unfold the process of representation, making the viewer aware of the distance between the object and themselves. They reveal the celluloid and the essential role played by light within the filming process. Nelson treats the flares as a quasi-sculptural element of the analog media, foregrounding the nature and functionality of celluloid, in contrast with the opacity of the digital image. 16mm sits above the Super 8, which is superimposed over half of the slide film, which in turn sits above the digital. Perceptual attention swings between the understanding of the object as a whole and the perception of the materiality of each section.

Nelson and Warhol are both invested in the capacity of the film medium to determine the experience of the image as an entity in itself, performed in the audience's space. They generate meaning with the *surface* of the screen,² embracing what is seen by narrative cinema as technical mistakes. The apparatus becomes the central element undermining the actual meaning of the represented object.

The Empire State and the Kodak buildings existed at their physical locations before they were filmed and remain there even after the films end. They are motionless subjects present in the non-diegetic space of the viewer, persistent images extending outside the screen. The lack of a cause-effect narrative and the interminable quality of both films break with the idea of beginning and end. The permanent position *in milieu* allows multiple points of entry, raising questions about the relationship between external and internal references, short- and long-term memory, and the role of the perception of the object per se.

The lack of narrative in both cases makes time independent from action. In *Empire*, time is determined first by Warhol's budget (for ten reels) and secondly by the length of each reel (between thirty-three and thirty-five minutes). The silent projection at sixteen frames per second adds a third time constraint, stretching the film to more than eight hours. The apparatus and its limitations—the camera and the projector—determine the duration of the film. The use of silent speed creates a specific tempo, what Douglas Crimp called "Warhol's time."³ There is an encounter between the diegetic progression of time and the fast pace of the non-diegetic time, reinforcing the idea of separation between object and the viewer.

Nelson also manipulates time using film and digital video loops and the static image of the slide film. The moving image formats are loops of varying length while the fixed image of each slide maintains a frozen anchor position in the middle of the projection. Loops embody repetition, and repetition is similarly a durational experience, allowing for the observation of that which at the beginning went unnoticed.

Nelson's treatment of time is equally based on extension by means of repetition. Although all the pieces of the puzzle were filmed at the same time, each loop is an independent time fragment—with the exception of the slide film that is a single frozen moment. The multiple temporalities contrast with the overarching experience of the tower as a single object in the exhibition space parallel to the actually extant building out of frame.

In both instances, time becomes an independent element of the moving image that has been crafted as celluloid, to create awareness of the medium and reclaim its expressivity. Warhol liberated time from narrative constraints, returning to its physical and expressive qualities. Nelson proposes loops as a constructed reiteration of time, in contrast with the still image of the slide and the free flow of the digital image at the base of the tower. Certainly, the perception of time in the digital section is closer to the non-diegetic time of the exhibition space. Yet it is the contrast between the parts that makes visible the specific structures within film aesthetics. Digital simply mirrors, leaving little space for imagination. The process of perception is immediate and perfect. The screen is no longer a surface but a window that positions the subject's perspective at the center, as in a Renaissance painting where perspectival rules create the illusion of another world that the viewer observes and gets to know from the other side of the frame. Warhol and Nelson are both invested in making the viewer aware of the medium, proposing a radical empiricism in which perception and knowledge are not necessarily the same thing.

For Warhol, the film medium is the empire of the senses, from which it is possible to develop a new perceptual process. Nelson picks up the discussion at the end of the reign of film. By contrasting different formats and creating the illusion of a single piece, she reveals film's expressive capacity in contrast with the digital. *End of Empire* is a reactivation of the experience of looking, as a separate phenomenon different from the subject of the film. It is not about representing the world as it is but about offering an experiential epistemological encounter with it. It is a requiem for film and its perceptual values in the age of digital production.

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NOTES 1. Douglas Crimp, "Our Kind of Movie": *The Films of Andy Warhol* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 141. 2. Daniel Barnett, *Movement as Meaning in Experimental Film* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1983), 38. 3. Crimp, 144.



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