

Frances Loeffler, "Rachel Rose," *Cura*, October, 2015

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RACHEL ROSE by Frances Loeffler

In times past, strange weather was thought to signal trouble ahead. The death of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar is famously foretold by a "tempest dropping fire" that caused "all the sway of earth to shake like a thing in-firm." This summer, Europe experienced a heatwave that has broken all records. Even while revelling in the heat, it was hard to shake a barely apprehended feeling of unease about nature behaving so 'unnaturally.' While we may no longer be superstitious, our experience of strange weather today is surely intensified by the very real threat of climate change. Nonetheless, our perception of this peril is filled with uncertainty: are we experiencing a mere 'change in the weather' or the first signs of impending doom?

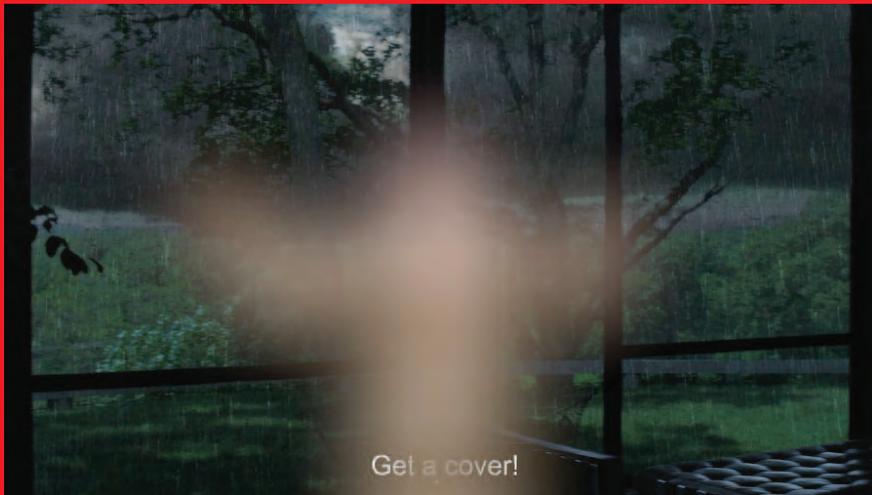
This strange mixture of delight and discomfort is beautifully evoked in American artist Rachel Rose's 2014 video *A Minute Ago*. The work takes its cues from two main reference points: amateur video footage of a hail storm that happened suddenly on a sunny day in 2014 in Novosibirsk, Siberia, and documentary footage of the architect Philip Johnson conducting a tour of his famous Glass House in New Canaan. While these two sources may seem unrelated, they both form part of the stream of image material available on the Internet. *A Minute Ago* reflects something of the Internet's expansive and disparate reach, spiralling out from Novosibirsk and New Canaan to a frenetic and dense concatenation of see-

ingly unrelated images and sounds.

Using compositing techniques, Rose layers these tesserae so that scenes move alongside and on top of one another. The result is often dreamlike and uncanny. At one point a bather runs in panic, bent double, across Johnson's serene Connecticut estate. The Dada-like composite voice of Bruce Conner comes to mind, as well as paintings by Nicolas Poussin that feature figures fleeing from some horror hidden in an orderly landscape. Poussin is a key figure here, and his *Death of Phocion* (1648) – kept at the centre of the Glass House – is something of a leitmotif in the work. Painting, building, and grounds seem inseparable, their contours and perspectival lines running in continuity, making the interior and exterior readily interchangeable. Thematically, they are also linked by the motif of ash, the material residue left after combustion or fire (the concept of the Glass House was derived from Johnson's memory of a village that had been burnt to the ground, and the painting features the moment just before the cremation of Phocion's poisoned body).

Rose's audio material is equally important, another layer of content that adds meaning to the work. It includes the minimalism of Steve Reich, the rapper Big Sean performing *Memories* in Detroit, and the eerie romanticism of Pink Floyd's 1972 recording of *Echoes*, played live among the ruins at Pompeii. Ashes, ruins, storms, eulogies, hail, the Glass Pavilion at the To-

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A Minute Ago (stills), 2014, HD video, 8'43" All images Courtesy: the artist and Pilar Corrias Gallery

ledo Museum of Art, police violence, skateboarders, a football match; what binds these disparate fragments is the interplay between order and chaos. This is perfectly encapsulated in the Glass House itself, Johnson's most translucent, modernist design, and yet also a 'metaphorical ruin.'¹

The popular-cultural term 'Anthropocene' has been described as a 'great acceleration' of humankind's activity and impact on the planet. *A Minute Ago* embodies this *tempo accelerando*, building in speed. But Rose's editing structure also suggests an inversion of sorts, a deceleration. Towards the end of the film, elements begin to move in reverse, leading ultimately to entropy when the imagery breaks down and distorts. In theatre, this would be the 'catastrophe', the downward turn towards disaster that has come about through failure to read the signs (in ancient Greek *katastraphēin* literally means 'downward turn' and the Italian 'disastro' derives from 'ill starred').² It also suggests the fragility of the modernist worldview, its failure to bring order to the world, or perhaps 'the big crunch,' one possible future that some scientists have predicted, in which the universe reverses into collapse.

Rose's earlier video essay *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* (2013), a profound meditation on our place in the world at this particular evolutionary juncture, also plays out some of these ideas. Comprised of footage shot in a cryogenics lab, a robotics perception lab, and in zoos, the work turns on the notion of 'deathfullness,' which the artist describes as "being alive, feeling dead." While these three contexts form the subject matter of the work, it is as much about the digital technology used to make the films. Rose brings the digital to the fore by constantly interrupting imagery with screen-captures showing the software editing tools she uses. The click-like sounds of the computer also serve as reminders of the digital realm. At one point

video footage of a pink mug and a computer-rendered version alternate, as though in an effort to conflate these two seemingly irreconcilable realities.

This instability between digital and physical realms takes on a new urgency when the work touches on the natural world, which is often. Horrifying footage of the death of an animal can be replayed on YouTube "and the animal becomes alive and re-dead as many times as you watch it." Animals tend to live longer in zoos: "the average age of a sea turtle in the zoo is 150 years," the narrator's voice informs. The shiver of a peacock's tail suggests a brief moment of vitality, yet here the rituals of mating seem oddly misspent. In the digital sphere, images multiply forever but remain perfectly flat, or 'deathful.' The immortality that is offered comes at a cost: in the narrator's words "being alive, feeling dead."

This tension between order and chaos, life and death, is ultimately what propels both works. Equally forceful is Rose's skilful and highly sensitive editing. Collage, the shock medium of the modern, seems especially suited to the loose associations and image streams of the Internet. Its fragmentary dissonance aptly evokes the uncertainty of a world facing great change in both technological and natural spheres. To date, Rose has only exhibited three films (the equally masterful *Palisades in Palisades* (2013) is the third). There is more in these three than many artists could offer with a much larger body of work. With solo exhibitions forthcoming at the Whitney Museum of Art, The Serpentine, and Castello di Rivoli, I look forward to what is to come.

1. Keith Eggner, *American Architectural History: A Contemporary Reader* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 333.

2. Kenneth J. Saltman, *Schooling and the Politics of Disaster* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 26.