

JESSIE CARYL
MUSICAL CHAIRS IN THE REALMS OF THE REAL

KEVIN SCHMIDT

9 SEPTEMBER – 7 OCTOBER 2006

One of the components of Kevin Schmidt's digital video installation, *Sad Wolf*, is a D.I.Y. projector built by the artist which is housed in a wooden box. This projector-crate is wedged into an aperture in the back wall of the projection room so that part of it juts out into the main space of the gallery. The instant I spotted this aspect of the work, it punched a distinct mnemonic picture into my mind, abridged from the vivid tale of a friend who once worked at an independent cinema in Toronto. In the middle of some paperwork, her gaze had travelled up the dingy, badly wired wall — only to discover the desiccated hindquarters of a possibly decades-old mouse stuffed into a cavity it had clearly presumed to be a hole.

Schmidt's intramural projection box further brought to mind those illusionistic nails painted on and seemingly through the surface of Northern Baroque canvases, as well as the trompe l'œil spiders and houseflies that, correspondingly, puncture any flat separation of viewer, viewed, and vexation.

But the high-definition digital video that further comprises *Sad Wolf* in fact involves very little visual artifice. In terms of genre it resembles the television nature documentary, although the majestic panoramas and montaged close-ups typical of that format have been exchanged for a deliberately selected mise en scène. In the foreground, the wire grid of the wolves' enclosure keeps slipping into focus, emphasizing the not entirely natural aspect of Schmidt's document. Furthermore, the documentarian audibly breathes and shuffles and moves around, which interrupts the seamless narrative identification or communion of the viewer with the omega wolf. The ambient noise of a nearby traffic artery leaches into the recording; the projection itself borders on the walls and ceiling of its viewing room in the gallery to obtrusively tenant its own built framework.

As the slow choreography of the camera tracks the movements of the omega wolf in the piece, the animal's body language sharpens as it approaches the general melee of the pack, only to then cringe back. In pack hierarchy the omega wolf ranks lower than any other wolf and usually sleeps away from the other members. It functions as the scapegoat of the pack, preferring to absorb hounding and injury rather than to leave the group.¹ The omega is neither cut out from the system nor assimilated to it. It is not a parasite but is a passive intercessor that abets social stability. As Schmidt's piece observes, the conditions of captivity only serve to heighten the wolves' exaction of the line of dominance. The viewing room sets up a narrative expectation much like a theatre, cueing the omega wolf as a protagonist to elicit the sympathetic identification of its viewers — but the “documentarian” who set the stage is pointedly chewing up the scenery.

Occupying a separate exhibition space in the gallery, three large photographs by Kevin Schmidt are titled, *Face Lake*, *Johnson Lake*, and *Little Blue Lake* (all 2006). To produce each work, Schmidt hiked into different forest locations, scouting prospective lake views interposed by lone trees. Once selected, each of the three trunks became marked as remote lookout posts through their transformation into trompe l'œil pictorial props. Schmidt applied a plaster-like substance onto the bark of the tree to produce a smooth surface onto which was painted an image of the scene behind. This action suggests a willful recursiveness — producing a montage based on the confusion of the mark with its place (meaning both the mark as it indicates itself; the mark as it indicates its place). Combined with the works' square format, the presence of the doubled image subverts their simple reception as landscape images and pilots them steeply towards portraiture. From this new angle, the artist's gesture in equipping the tree trunks to convey (to the viewer) an image of the

scene that they interrupt (for the artist) seems a recuperative venture in the midst of a landscape both produced and cleared by human beings, perhaps evoked visually by the bandage-like appearance of the paintings' supports. The dual frame of representation in the pictures, however, both enacts and documents the distance between the artist's standpoint and the doubled landscape that meets the viewer in the gallery. Vertically bisected by the solid, wooden presence of each tree trunk, they project the landscape ahead as an endgame in check.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, painting turned away from Mannerism's witty, intellectual character and moved towards a more emotional, visceral appeal aimed at the senses. The aesthetic technique of *bel composto* (beauty in synthesis) united different media in order to produce an integrated sensory environment intended to draw the viewer into participatory inclusion in the work. In evoking and enacting the transcendence of the physical in the passage from the limits of one medium

to the next, *bel composto* offered a means of accessing an immersive, illusionistic, scripted space, in which the passions and spiritual ecstasy of the viewer might emerge concomitantly with the experience of the artwork.²

Both Schmidt's *Sad Wolf* and his series of lake photographs plot the viewer, aesthetically and corporeally, in relation to their subjects. There is a choreographed displacing at play; it is almost as if the artist assumes a position in the work only to renounce it to the viewers and cue a partial and relative transference in angle to those who will consolidate the work in experience. The inescapably human conceit of "the wild" (whether inflecting alpha/beta-version landscapes or omega wolf) flickers at the edge of each successive pictorial framework that cages the mutable works. What inevitably eludes symbolic articulation is the subjective self in its traverse of acceptance and defeat, depicted plenty and captive lack. The perception of something immanent, caught in the grooves of orthogonal perspective; tracking fresh prints at the omega's heels.

FROM WHO COMES AFTER THE SUBJECT?

JEAN-LUC NANCY: How could sadness be non-human? Or rather, how would sadness fail to testify to a relation to a world?

JACQUES DERRIDA: To come back to your remark, perhaps the animal is sad, perhaps it appears sad, because it indeed has a world, in the sense in which Heidegger speaks of a world as a world of spirit, and because there is an openness of this world for it, but an openness without openness, a having (world) without having it. Whence the impression of sadness — for man or in relation to man, in the society of man. And of a sadness determined in its phenomenology, as if the animal remained a man enshrouded, suffering, deprived on account of having access neither to the world of man that he nonetheless senses, nor to truth, speech, death, or the Being of the being as such.³

NOTES

1. "Frequently Asked Questions About Wolves." *Wolf Park*. <http://www.wolfpark.org/wolffaq.html>. Accessed August 22, 2006.

2. Angela Ndalianis, *Neo-Baroque Aesthetics and Contemporary Entertainment*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), pp. 223.

3. Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Who Comes After the Subject?* ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, and Jean-Luc Nancy, trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronell (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 111-12.