

OPENINGS

DARREN ALMOND

DANIEL BIRNBAUM

Now falls from a gray sky, while a group of people waits for a bus that never comes. The black-and-white film is so grainy that it's impossible to make out faces or details. On the other side of the street, another bus stop stands empty; traffic passes by intermittently. The anonymous crowd lingers; nothing happens. It's March in the small town of Oswiecim, Poland, also known as Auschwitz. British artist Darren Almond's installation *Oswiecim, March 1997* consists of nothing more than two 8 mm films projected side by side, showing the two bus stops—one filled with visitors from the concentration-camp museum, the other for those few who wish to travel further into the country. (The bus stops themselves were recently moved to Berlin, where Almond exhibited them as an installation piece, *Bus Stop*, 1999.) The films have been slowed down considerably, making the hopeless wait more agonizing. Like many of Almond's works, this is a piece about duration, delay, and it affords an intensified experience of time. Where nothing happens, temporality makes itself felt, viscerally. Time hurts.

In *Traction*, 1999, an installation that recently premiered at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, tem-

porality is manifest as a bodily phenomenon. Built around an on-camera interview that Almond conducted in an attempt to unearth his father's history as a construction worker, the piece uses the elder's scarred body to establish the chronology. "When was the first time you saw your blood?" is Almond's opening question. Moving from toes and ankles to head and crown, the inquiry reveals an incredible number of injuries, bearing witness to the harsh realities of a working life. "How big was the crack in your head?" Almond queries matter-of-factly. "You were choking on your own blood?" The tripartite installation shows the father giving his report, but the interrogator remains a disembodied voice; the viewer is made privy instead to the reactions of Almond's mother (projected on a third screen), who, sequestered alone in a room, sobs as she listens to the interview. The images of the artist's parents are separated by an additional projection, of an earth-mover's mechanical arm overturning brick and rubble.

Almond's most explicitly autobiographical work so far, *Traction* approaches temporality in a brutal way.

As a boy, Almond "train spotted" as a way of escaping the small English town of Wigan, where he was born, which introduced him to the world of timetables and clocks. In many of his works, several layers of temporality make themselves felt: the time measured by mechanical devices; the temporality of the human body; even cosmic time, marked each day by the rising and setting of the sun. In *A Real Time Piece*, 1995, a wall-size projection of the artist's London studio was transmitted via satellite to an abandoned shop (which viewers could enter) in another part of town. It's not a dramatic image in any way: You see a table, a chair, a fan, and a digital clock on the wall. No

one enters the room; nothing happens—except, every sixty seconds the numbers flip over, causing a surprisingly loud crash. This goes on for twenty-four hours, and in the time it takes the room to get dark and then light again the crash occurs 1,440 times. What we are taking part in, have become part of, is nothing but a huge clock, broadcast live a couple of miles across the great city.

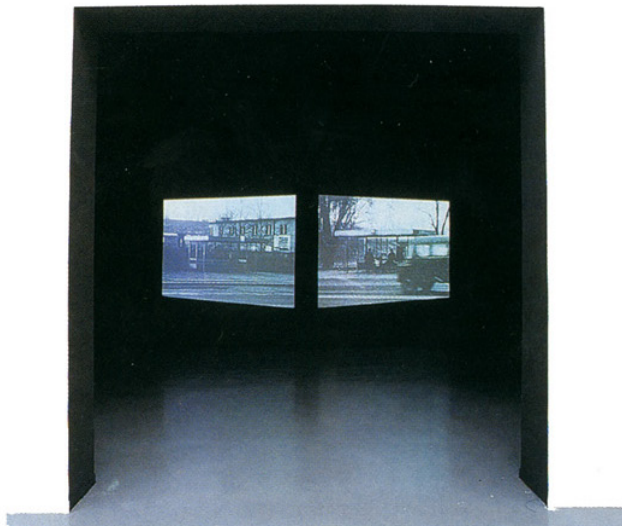
Although the work is technologically complicated (the artist required assistance from the BBC), it's not

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the technology so much as a theoretical conundrum that seems to interest Almond. After all, *A Real Time Piece* doesn't present us with anything we don't get in our living rooms every day via live TV. In fact, it offers us much less; but here the focus on the medium itself, on the live image, makes the basic theoretical predicament conspicuous: spatial distance, temporal presence. We are "here," bodily present in this room, but also "there," in another room, not directly perceivable but nonetheless given. Understood by Almond as a performance (with time and space as the protagonists), this piece seems to have developed in two directions: one rather traditional, producing a beautiful series of images; the other adding a psychological twist. The first direction led to *Tuesday (1440 Minutes)*, 1997, consisting of photographs that document the changing natural light in the studio each minute for twenty-four hours, resulting in twenty-four tableaux of sixty photographs each. The relation between the rigid grid and the seamless blending of light and darkness results in an elegant piece about cosmic time and the human desire to impose structure on experience.

The second direction led to a work relayed live via satellite to the corridors of high culture. *H.M.P. Pentonville*, 1997, is a truly innovative piece. Having a close friend in jail, Almond decided to stage a live transmission from a cell at Her Majesty's Prison in

*In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists at the beginning of their careers.*



Darren Almond, *Oswiecim, March 1997*, two black-and-white films in 8 mm, both 6 minute loops. Installation view.



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Birnbaum, Daniel: Openings - Darren Almond

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Clockwise from upper left: **Darren Almond, *H.M.P. Pentonville*, 1997**, live satellite link between Her Majesty's Prison and ICA London (May 7, 1997). Installation view. **Darren Almond, *Bus Stop (detail)*, 1999**, two bus stops: aluminum, glass, paint, and plastic, 19' 9" x 119 1/4" x 106 1/4" each. Installation view. **Darren Almond, *Traction*, 1999**, three-part video installation, 28 minutes. Installation view.

North London. Relayed via satellite from the prison, the image of an empty cell appeared live for two hours at the ICA in London. The old and worn space, claustrophobic and depressing, offers no surprise, but the deafening sound from the guards outside—the constant clanging of metal gates and the shrill noise of keys locking and unlocking—is a real shock. The sound builds to a crescendo, and one anticipates, even hopes for, some final eruption of violence. It never comes.

What is it that's so puzzling about real-time projections presented in an art context? To begin with, they're

unique; they happen once. Filtered through technologies of mass distribution, they are nonetheless singular, in that they have an open future: We don't know what's going to happen. This is all quite evident, but still worth emphasizing, since it seems to relieve the artwork of the ailments diagnosed in Walter Benjamin's endlessly reproduced essay on mechanical reproduction. There is a videotape version of *H.M.P. Pentonville*, but the original work of art happened only once.

While watching videos of these projects in Almond's studio, I came across another work related to distancing

and remote control, and it has stuck vividly in my mind: *KN 120*, 1995, an aluminum fan attached to the underbelly of the huge concrete highway that runs past Almond's building. One can't see the fan from the window, but it can be turned on by flipping a switch inside the studio. When activated, the blades rotate mysteriously. This artwork has no audience and no clear mission. I got a glimpse of it on one of the videotapes, and it's majestic, like a huge mechanical albatross soaring through the night. Is it really out there? □

Daniel Birnbaum is a contributing editor of *Artforum*.