

Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

WOLFGANG STAEHLE

5/11/09
POSTMASTERS
APR 16 – MAY 16, 2009
by *brian boucher*

NEW YORK The video work of German-born New Yorker Wolfgang Staehle is marked by philosophical sweep, existential sharpness, startling slowness, and elegiac beauty. "A Matter of Time," his latest show at Postmasters Gallery, continues his investigation into landscape, architecture, networked imagery and the place of the sublime in a wired world.

Indicating the show's epic ambitions, a wall-mounted monitor in the entryway displays a passage from Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* (1882) that addresses the concept of eternal return: "What if a demon were to creep after you . . . in your loneliest loneliness, and say, 'This life which you live and have lived must be lived again by you, and innumerable times more.'" Would it be a blessing or a curse, Nietzsche asks?

In a cycle of four projected videos in the gallery's front room, Staehle offers the rise and fall of global powers as an analogue for eternal recurrence. All the videos are 24-hour-long archived versions of streaming webcam footage shot by Staehle in America and Europe over the last eight years and are shown synchronized with New York time. The pictures change every several seconds, resulting in an uneasy hybrid of still and moving imagery. Each work is attractive and weighty in itself, but as an ensemble, according to press materials, they refer to American painter Thomas Cole's iconic five-painting series "The Course of Empire" (1834-36), which illustrated the sobering proposition that any empire's rise would inevitably be followed by decline.

Two projections show empire in ascent. *Umbria* (August 30, 2006) shows a peaceful, sun-kissed, agrarian Mediterranean landscape -- the pastoral setting Cole depicted as ideal. *Manhattan* (September 10, 2001) is a panoramic view of the lower part of the island that stands for empire at its height, the day before 9/11/2001, Trade Center towers intact. (The same view was included in Staehle's 2001 show, also at Postmasters, and, incidentally, this is the one day that was archived before the terrorist attack.) In striking contrast to the clarity of the following day, clouds and fog dominate as boats make their jumpy way along the Hudson.



The gradual decay begins with *Berlin, Palast der Republik* (November 29, 2006), which shows a rainy day on the grand boulevard Unter den Linden. In the distance, giant yellow cranes loom over the demolition of the Palace of the Republic, which once housed the East German parliament. A symbol of Socialist ideology falls, even as a fair's Ferris wheel spins in the middle ground. Finally, echoing countless romantic paintings of ruins, *Forum Romanum* (September 15, 2007) shows the seat of power of the Roman Empire, where tourists stroll among broken columns and architectural fragments.

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