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REAL-TIME SUBLIME

Scanning the skies during one month in Autumn, **Wolfgang Staehle's** project 2001 revisited potent art-historical questions

Net art pioneer Wolfgang Staehle recently returned to the gallery with an exhibition

entitled 2001 – his first New York solo show in ten years – which was on view at Postmasters

Gallery from 6 September to 6 October. Staehle is best known as creator of *The Thing*, an early bulletin board system (BBS) that served as a virtual space for artists to critique more staid artworld institutions. With 2001 it seems that Staehle has followed much of the rest of net art from the artworld's periphery back to the traditional arenas of the gallery, the museum and the biennale. Yet 2001 is not merely an abandonment of the critical vantage that Staehle cultivated with *The Thing*. It is an engagement with the iconic painterly image using new technology. The results are not without interest. 2001 consisted of three real-time video feeds transmitted via the web and projected onto the walls of the gallery. *Comburg* was an image of the Comburg monastery, outside of Schwaebisch Hall, Germany, where Staehle grew up. *Fernsehturm* presented the Fernsehturm television tower in East Berlin. The third and largest, *Untitled*, offered a panoramic diptych of lower Manhattan which prominently featured the World Trade Centre – at least until around 10am, 11 September.

2001 was positioned in the gallery press release as a 'Warholian update of the landscape genre', and indeed, Staehle's closest predecessor here seems to be Andy Warhol's film *Empire* – an eight-hour-long static shot of the Empire State Building. This approach marks a significant departure from traditional landscape painting, à la Friedrich, Turner, and Constable, in which landscape figured as an index of that which cannot be adequately grasped by imagery or perception: the appearance of the sublime. In articulating its own limits, traditional landscape painting was in some sense able to transcend them – suggesting a *beyond*

beyond the merely visible. But when the furthest reaches of the globe, and even of history (with Staehle's three images standing in for three disparate eras) can be presented in real-time, in a single room in Chelsea, what can be said to elude the visible?

2001 does not articulate the limits of the image as does earlier landscape painting. If anything, it demonstrates that we are now in the age of the image's ascendancy. Where the sublime was, only the beautiful remains. As with Warhol's *Empire*, in which to the dismay of

many of its viewers 'what you see is what you see', Staehle's application of new technology to the landscape genre leaves little room to believe that there could be more than meets the eye. But it remains an open question whether the world can be better represented by being made more visible. Indeed, a quote from the Heidegger of the mid- '30s, which greeted unsuspecting gallery-goers at the entrance to the exhibition, asks: '... when the farthestmost corner of the globe has been conquered by technology... when time has ceased to be anything other than velocity, instantaneousness, and simultaneity, and time as history has vanished from the lives of all peoples... a question still haunts us like a spectre: What for? – Whither? – And what then?' That Staehle is still willing to pose the question 'what then?' at an exhibition in which the new visual ever-present is so viscerally in evidence affirms his faith in progress delivered by an art wedded to technology, even if the work itself leaves room for doubt.

Daniel Berchenko <dberchenko@book.com>

Daniel Berchenko is a writer living in New York

