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BLUM & POE

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New York

Wolfgang Staehle

POSTMASTERS
459 West 19th Street
April 16–May 16

At first look, *Watoriki, House of the Mountain of the Wind*, 2003–2009, a forty-five-minute video that Wolfgang Staehle is screening in Postmasters' rear gallery, feels like a fairly staid documentary of life in remote Amazonia. There are shots of cooking in a Yanomami roundhouse, footage taken from the top of a sacred mountain nearby, a helicopter shot of the village clearing. What's so compelling about this video, however, is the way it breaks with standard documentary procedures, thereby making us acutely aware of them. There are no subtitles or captions and no voice-over. What you see is really what you see—and, by implication, what you might have seen if you'd been there—including almost interminable shots of a child grating vegetables, of a man in a hammock at night, even of almost total darkness, relieved only by an unintelligible fleck of light. Even when a Staehle shot is legible, as in his views from the crest of that mountain, his camera often points at a spot where nothing's going on, while his microphone is aimed at lively action taking place off-screen. Pace *National Geographic's* tight marriage of vision and sound, Staehle makes clear that any moment of anthropological "signal" is always surrounded by the static, noisy world in which it takes place. That's the full reality no plotted documentary can handle.

The effect of the four projections in the front gallery is more formal. Each screen captures a full day at a different global destination: We get the Manhattan skyline seen from Brooklyn (on the day before 9/11, as it happens), the Forum in Rome, Berlin near the Schlossplatz, and the hills of Umbria. Rather than being shot in continuous video, however, each of Staehle's "days" is a disconnected stream of stills, taken something like six seconds apart. That makes each of his landscapes feel less like a seamless record of one act of observation than a rapid succession of photographs—evoking classic paintings and tourist postcards—that present some fourteen thousand variations on an identical scene. The difference may sound slight, but in the flesh it's striking.

— Blake Gopnik



View of "Wolfgang Staehle," 2009. From left: *Umbria* (August 30, 2006), *Manhattan* (September 10, 2001), *Forum Romanum* (September 15, 2007), *Berlin, Palast der Republik* (November 29, 2006).

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