
Framing the Tension of Lake Levels

Water, we are born from it, we bathe in it regularly, and often we seek out its tranquillity. In choosing to use a body of water as the pictorial content in his video installations *Lake Levels (Lake Mackintosh)* and *Meadowbank*, and the remnant of its existence in *Meadowbank Drawn Down* (the last two currently on show at 146 Arts), Derek Hart leaves both works wide open for an analysis that sits within a semiotic and/or psychoanalytical model. While these works are likely to be attributed as being situated as such in any future critique of them, it is vital to establish the process of thought in play at the time of developing the work and the background history that Hart draws from as the definitive point of reference to which all analysis of them should be positioned against. In discussing the work, which was produced as part of his artist residency with Hydro Tasmania, Hart reflects on thoughts of the imperialist gaze but instead of presenting a romantic position from which traditional practices of art have taken, he considers his interest as belonging to one that is scientifically based. Upon hearing of the processes involved in the shooting of the work it is possible to quickly acknowledge this as being the obvious without the need for further enquiry simply due to the fact that an instrument used by Hydro Tasmania to measure the flow, and the rise and fall of the island's dams and waterways was engaged. However, it would be an injustice to give this fact a cursory glance in favour of the evocative power of the imagery that is the final result.

Hart is British born, his heritage is British, his training is British, and his aesthetic sensitivity is British. His relationship with his chosen subject, that of the landscape, attests to this and leaves no question once *Lake Levels (Lake Mackintosh)* and *Meadowbank Drawn Down* are viewed. He follows a long line of traditionalists who depicted the alluring landscape on canvas, such as John Constable, William Turner, and, though a nineteenth century migrant to Australia later in his life, John Glover. This attraction to an expanse of open land that was often unpredictable and sometimes inhospitable in its terrain and/or weather is evident in the work of many British artists that, like Hart, chose to adopt new technologies such as film and video as a means of art production. Here, Hart is in good company with the likes of John Grierson, Basil Wright and Robert Flaherty, all of whom were part of the British government's Empire Marketing Board, which was to become the General Post Office

(GPO) Film Unit – a government department that was responsible for a considerable number of British artists' film in the first half of the twentieth century. While these few produced works that set to document the landscape in the guise of promoting the British Empire, and thus romanticizing to a degree, there are those such as Margaret Tait, Richard Long, Chris Welsby, Renny Croft, etc., with whom a closer link to Hart's work can be made.

These film artists are not unknown to Hart. Having trained initially at Maidstone College of Art, which is renowned for producing a number of significant current art practitioners of film and has boasted a number more on its academic board, followed by training at Westminster University under the direction of Malcolm Le Grice, and finally at Chelsea School of Art, Hart's staple diet of film viewing would've included a number of works made by the above. Each of them adopted and developed methods of working with their chosen subject of the landscape that was heavily process driven. Tait's *Orqui Burn* (1955) is the documentation of a local stream on the island of Orkney in Scotland that follows strict protocols for the shooting of a series of static shots with a hand-held camera taken at specific points following the course of the stream. Richard Long was as systematic with his own *Walking a Straight 10 Mile Line Forward and Back Shooting Every Half Mile (Dartmoor, England, January 1969)* (1969), which is self explanatory in its title. Both pre-date the work of Welsby and Croft but they set the benchmark for many landscape film and video works produced since, including Hart's body of work drawn from his residency with Hydro Tasmania.

As part of the process of collecting data regarding the patterns of its waterways, Hydro Tasmania uses an Acoustic Doppler Current Profiler (ADCP). Suspended from the bow end of the boat, the ADCP armature sits at water level to allow a reading of depth while at the same time, it retrieves information regarding the direction of flow and the level of velocity of the body of water, and maps the terrain of the waterbed. By systematically traversing the surface of the lake in a direction that is cross-section to the bed of the natural river, which existed prior to damming, the resulting cartography maps the sunken region's environmental changes. Using this as a starting point to develop ideas about production for his residency, Hart constructed a camera mount specific to the type of armature that was in use for the ADCP. However, instead of placing at water level the water housing in which the camera was

positioned sideways for filming, Hart chose to lower the level of it to enable a view that was both below and above water. The resulting effect brings in a multitude of dichotomies, some of which are the most obvious while others are more obscure; below and above, in and out, close proximity and distant space, flat space and deep space, abundance and void, content and process, permission and denial, contained and non-contained, etc. With the camera positioned as such, the choice was made whereby, instead of following the cross-section of the natural riverbed, the boat was allowed to drift in the channel that followed the path of the original river. In this way, Hart simulates what both Tait and Long had done previously, however in difference, what unfolds, and compliments the data based information that results from the ADCP, is a record of distance from what was once possibly the midpoint of the river to that of the banks of what is now the lake of the dam.

The strictures of study imposed by the use of a process derived from mechanical means is not new in landscape studies found with artists' film practices. Over the last forty years one British artist in particular has produced a body of screen work with which Hart's Hydro Tasmania work can be most closely connected. As early as 1972, Chris Welsby, who was then a Fine Art student at Chelsea School of Art, produced his first film work, *Wind Vane*, using the direction of wind to determine where the camera would point. Positioned atop a wind vane and fifty feet and forty-five degrees to the direction of the wind apart, two cameras caught the activities of Hampstead Heath's parkland. At times one camera is caught in the view of the other allowing the viewer to see the process of making. The environment's unpredictability that allows, what Deke Dusinberre refers to as, an aleatory system (a system dependent on chance) to emerge is a constant subject in Welsby's work.¹ For example, in *Seven Days* (1974) the direction of the camera of either pointing upwards to the sky or downwards to the stream below is controlled by whether or not the sun was obscured by clouds, while at the same time with the use of an equatorial stand the direction of panning followed the sun's pathway from one horizon to another over a period of seven days. Other works of Welsby's use weather information, tidal movements, and cloud motion in a chance association with the mechanics of the camera.

¹ DUSINBERRE, D. (1976, Summer). St George in the Forrest: The English Avant-garde. *Afterimage* (No. 6), pp. 11-13, page 12.

By imposing his own set of protocols to which the process of shooting his material adhered, Hart established the possibility for relationships of chance to occur between the mechanics of production and the unpredictability of the environment. It is the point of tension that exists between the two that alters the viewer's relationship to an almost unchanging landscape. What the viewer sees or does not see is determined by the chopiness of the water at the time, the path of direction that follows the natural river bed, the strength of sunlight, and the density of the water. As part of his Hydro Tasmania residency initial shooting was conducted on Arthur's Lake. The material gained during this shoot offers a range of tones in the colour of the water from the deepest of greens to a light shade. Some months after filming Arthur's Lake, shooting took place at Lake Mackintosh, which has become the installation on show as *Lake Levels (Lake Mackintosh)*. In difference to the water's colour in the Arthur's Lake material, the colour of the water caught on video at Lake Mackintosh is the colour of black ink. Arthur's Lake offers a landscape of lush vegetation that occupies a mid-ground while Lake Mackintosh's landscape is somber, covered in low-lying cloud and sits in the far distance. Both lakes are riddled with the skeletal remains of trees that add eeriness to the landscape as a whole. With the frame turned 90° with all of this material, to match the way in which the camera was turned in the process of shooting, the bottom section is filled with water while the upper part of the frame shows the landscape as it slowly passes by. The amount of frame area that both sections occupy alters as the water rises and falls, which at times reaches all the way to the top or drops low to the bottom frame revealing the expanse of the water from above.

Most obvious in the two-dimensional composition of the image in both, is the division of the frame into the two distinct readings of space. With the submerged view in the lower section of the Arthur's Lake material, the water is in close proximity and offers very little for the reading of depth of space. While at times the sun's rays break through the density of the water, a sliver of weed drifts by, or the outline of submerged object becomes slightly visible, for the majority of the duration of the material the close proximity of the water almost invades the viewing space as it sits on the surface of the pictorial plane – it provides a flatness that reminds the viewer that the depth of the landscape in the upper part of the pictorial space is an illusion. This experience of the work is further enhanced by the choice to exhibit the material as a four-screen piece, which, as they are placed side by side, allows the tonal

differences in each body of water's green colour to be noticeable. Using a multi-screen presentation of a work to bring attention to the similarities and differences between each shot follows on from the work of Renny Croft. Making work in the early seventies, this artist sought to question the dichotomies of space, moving and still image, and the frame as a device. These are all concerns that present themselves in Hart's *Lake Levels* and can also be seen in the twin screen projection of *Meadowbank Drawn Down*.



Lake Levels (installation)
Derek Hart, 2010

The extent of illusion possible with the use of the frame as a device is foregrounded as the denial of extended space outside of the screen is made obvious in the multiple screen presentation of the Arthur's Lake material of *Lake Levels*. Illusions of a continuum of space that is offered by a single screen cannot exist if another occupies that space of continuum outside of the frame. The water begins and ends at each side of the framed space. As such, in the Arthur's Lake material the body of water appears to be contained by the frame as it, by default, becomes a container. This is not unlike British artist David Hall's black and white work *TV Interruptions (7 TV Pieces): Tap Piece* (1971) where by positioning a glass tank in front of the camera with its lens frame set in line with the outer sides of the tank so that they cannot be seen in camera, placing a tap inside the tank to fill it with water, removing the tap, tilting the glass tank to empty the water without revealing the edges of the tank, the frame of the TV monitor becomes that that contains the water. It appears as if it is the TV that is filled with water. It is this work of Hall's that Hart acknowledges as being

informative to the concepts explored in all of the material shot for *Lake Levels* and in doing so he is quick to acknowledge the use of the frame as a device for illusion in this way.

What also emerges with Hall's *Tap Piece*, and is relevant to the material of *Lake Levels*, is that once the tap is removed from the glass tank what is left to view is the line of the surface of the water – to use its scientific name, the meniscus. Shot in front of a white wall, the above and below space of the meniscus line does not differ in colour, no opportunity for determining spatial constructs within the image exists. All that is on offer is a line that mimics the linear form of the frame and thus negates opportunities for establishing points of references in space that use the frame as a device in doing so. While slightly different, in that the two sections do differ in colour and content, Hart's *Lake Levels* also undermine opportunities for spatial constructs to be achieved through points of reference within the image in the lower section of the work. At times this becomes more predominate as the water rises eliminating all view of the landscape on the horizon and thus presenting momentarily, a flat two-dimensional image that is a band of blue and a band of green in the Arthur's Lake material, or a band of blue and a band of black as seen in Lake Mackintosh. At these points the line of the meniscus substitutes the horizon line of the landscape. However, at all times the meniscus, as a surface tension that sets to hold the body of water in combination with the container – the screen frame in this case, appears fragile as if at any moment what sits below it will pierce its thick skin to invade the adjoining space of landscape and blue sky.

While the differences between the colours of the water in the Lake Mackintosh and Arthur's Lake material of *Lake Levels* is noted above, and both add to a negation of space by flattening the illusion of depth and thus highlighting the surface plane, what cannot be missed is that while the Lake Mackintosh material does flatten the image with its monotone qualities in the black of the water, the bottom section of the framed space that is black should also be read as a void. This then changes perception of space in the work. As a void the blackness of the water offers indefinite space that adheres to no limitations and, as it exists in all four projections, has the ability to pass beyond the frame into the space of the next without any need for attribution of continuum. This space, void of all, rises and falls slowly and acts as a transitional tool that simulates the wipe technique. Rising often to the top of the frame it constantly

denies the viewer opportunities to become enchanted with the romance of the landscape. It leaves them within a void, which not only invades its adjoining screens, that in the darkness of the projection space of the gallery envelops the space within which they stand.

As both Hart's *Lake Levels* and *Meadowbank* works sit securely within context with the works of many of those whom are considered as part of the British canon of artists' film and video, there is an extensive resource of subject matter for discussion that can be drawn from them. Amongst the canon are Margaret Tait, Richard Long, Chris Welsby and Reny Croft, who between them they produced some of the most significant landscape works in this area of film practice. While each one of them were actively producing a number of years ago, with Welsby still producing landscape work for gallery installation today, their work provided an undeniable grounding for the work that Hart embarked upon as part of his Hydro Tasmania residency. With the use of strict protocols and mechanical implements they sought to define the landscape through processes that adopted a scientific appraisal. By surrendering aesthetic decisions in favour of adhering to the strict guidelines put in place, the relationship between artist and landscape is no longer subjective, thus, any evocative power found with the resulting image is completely free of the will of the maker. The artist becomes part of the mechanical process through which the production is given opportunity to occur. In establishing his protocols that followed the procedures used for mapping the waterways of Tasmania, Hart's role provides only one single part of the mechanical process. What is presented in the final work of *Lake Levels (Lake Mackintosh)*, *Meadowbank*, and *Meadowbank Drawn Down* is a landscape that is devoid of a subjective relationship to Hart. As such, while Hart succeeds in removing his relationship to the landscape from one that sits within the romantic, the viewer's own relationship to the landscape image, while it is constantly being brought into question by the tensions of the dichotomies that exist, is given freedom to impose a romantic view.