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Afterall

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AÏDA RUILOVA: AND AGAIN...

By: Ingrid Chu

PLAY: (Enjoy) the Ride

Watching any number of Aïda Ruilova's videos in succession, it is tempting to grab for the remote control and press PAUSE, REWIND, MUTE, or even STOP—anything to regain a sense of composure given what can hardly be described as a comfortable viewing experience. This impulse never meets with an overwhelming desire to press REPEAT, however, since Ruilova already incorporates this function into an editing process whereby she dices short clips of slightly differentiated scenes with a sharp-edged precision. Ruilova creates a similar set-up in each of the dozen or so single channel videos and projections she has made since 1999. Many run for less than a minute, feature young men and women who scream, grunt, whimper, and otherwise taunt viewers with repeated utterances like, "let's go," "almost," and "come here." These phrases, which double as titles, coincide with the equally abrupt gestures of the various protagonists captured through tightly cropped camera shots that stop and start, zoom in and out. It is this repetitive quality, compounded by an installation style that groups monitors with looped tapes, that produces the alternately dizzying and mesmerizing effect that compels the viewer to watch the videos over and over again.(1)

PAUSE: The Subject in Question

As unnerving as they are to watch, some satisfaction comes from taking them at face value. In this way we come to understand how basic combinations of sound, image, and structure work to both grant and deny access to her work. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her process of rapid-fire editing, for it is this that ensures that mere glimpses of hair, gaping mouths, bare chests, turned backs translate onscreen. An example can be found in a single-channel work like *Almost* (2002), in which a perturbed woman in heavy black eyeliner is hampered in her efforts to escape the confines of a decrepit domestic interior. Standing with her back against a wall, climbing a set of stairs, or crouched down on the floor with drool escaping from her mouth, she repeats the title phrase, "almost," in every scene. Or again, the extreme close-ups in *Lets Go* (2004) give an unkempt,



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unshaven man with long hair and black motorcycle jacket a foreboding presence through the insistent focus on his hands. Ruilova creates circumstances that obscure any sense of individual identity in favour of an atmosphere drenched in unspecified emotion -- details abound, but are obscured in the fast edits, or eclipsed in shadow. Body parts and mechanical objects move about the frame, in and out of focus, in truncated, repetitive gestures that confront the viewer with a kinetic energy that throws perception off balance.

Finding ways to rev up the intensity level in her work Ruilova reinforces a sense of futility, so that visually, audibly, physically and psychologically, “let’s go” is really a no go and “almost” is well, never.¹ A high level of suspense is by using tightly framed shots, compact narratives, repeated phrases, cacophonous sounds. The short running time of these pieces adds to a sense of urgency, producing intense, surreal moments that deliver a sharp sense of dread and anxiety.

REWIND: When ‘THE END’ is near

The claustrophobic situations Ruilova uses to frame her protagonists are also what render their bodies abstract and intimate to viewers. Ruilova’s agile camerawork, which provokes and engages by condensing, rather than extending sequences, shifts the focus back onto viewers by conveying their contingency in relation to the work.² The artist demands from viewers an active role that results in what Charles LaBelle appropriately articulates as a “disoriented subjectivity.”³ Through her adroit manipulation of simple collage, editing, and framing techniques, Ruilova grabs the viewer’s attention in a visceral way in order to have her feel the effects of what LaBelle further describes as, “a horror film’s sense of dread and [a] hint at a Nietzschean hell of eternal recurrence.”⁴

¹ This process recalls the early structural experimentation in time-based media by artists like Vito Acconci and Dan Graham, as well as the more recent focus in some cases and forays in others, by artists like Jane and Louise Wilson, Gregor Schneider or Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, all of whom have used video to create works that set up physically, psychologically, and architecturally challenging spaces, both in single channel and as installations involving moving image media.

² I am thinking specifically of physical exertion and how this is expressed through works of long duration, such as in Matthew Barney’s *The Cremaster Cycle* (1994-2002), Sharon Lockhart’s *Goshogaoka* (1997), and in Ruilova’s single-channel works primarily, but also when she installs these together, such as in the 2003 Whitney Biennial where Ruilova exhibited five works in one room. Simultaneously independent and interdependent, the effect of this “jungle gym” set-up showcased how each work was physically reliant on and activated by the others.

³ Charles LaBelle, “I See a Darkness...,” *frieze*, Summer, 2003, p. 116.

⁴ Charles LaBelle, “I See a Darkness...,” *frieze*, Summer, 2003, p. 116.



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But it is her insistence on hitting ‘rewind,’ on repeating the cut, that delivers the emotional punch. And recurrence and repetition manifest in many forms for Ruilova, from style to content. Her first large scale projection, *Untitled* (2002),⁵ not only references, but remakes, the final sequence of Jean-Luc Godard’s 1970 film, *Sympathy for the Devil*. Here she finds a sympathetic mentor in the older artist’s onscreen deconstruction of cinematic techniques. Roger Greenspun once wrote of Godard:

In "1 + 1" the camera comes alive on its cranes and tracks. [...] The chief delight of the film lies in this precision and in these scenes. At the end, when it martyrs its one named character, Eve Democracy (Anne Wiazemski), it spreads her body across a mighty camera crane on a [seashore]. The crane lifts her in a great sweeping movement [...] across the sky. And at this moment, and not until this moment, it seems possible that the meaning of Godard's film depends not only upon a cause but also upon the camera's eye; not only in sympathy, but in objectivity as well.⁶

Ruilova claims her inheritance in a 58-second remake that presents a woman moving to the sound of heavy breathing and in sync with the movements of the disproportionately large camera crane on which she lies as it swings in and out of view across the picture plane. Whether or not the particular mechanical device Ruilova employs is obvious to viewers, certainly its scale, central placement, and active motion reinforce its dynamic presence against the picturesque backdrop.⁷ Because the crane

⁵ Given Ruilova’s interest in Godard’s film, it is worth noting that two versions opened to theatrical release in 1970: *I + I*, Godard’s own, and *Sympathy for the Devil* by producer Iain Quarrier. In his review, critic Roger Greenspun describes how Quarrier’s film ends with a complete version of the Rolling Stones song, “Sympathy for the Devil” being played on the soundtrack and which the band have theretofore been rehearsing and recording in various scenes. More importantly, Greenspun observes, “Several monochromatic stills of the film’s last shot are added to fill out the song’s time.” Quarrier’s choice to extend this last scene make it unclear which film *Untitled* references, Godard’s, Quarrier’s, or both. See http://movies2.nytimes.com/gst/movies/movie.html?v_id=48240.

⁶ Roger Greenspun, *The New York Times*, April 27, 1970.

⁷ Ruilova used an industry standard Titan Nova dolly crane to create *Untitled* according to press materials from Artpace in San Antonio, Texas where Ruilova filmed on the South Texas beaches of Mustang Island during her 2002 residency. First developed in the early 1960s, the Titan Nova dolly crane continues to be used in feature-length Hollywood film productions primarily for its ability to create smooth, sweeping shots.



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functions both as an onscreen prop and the support machinery necessary to film its own movement, the scene unfolds as an image and a reflection.

MUTE: Something like an Automaton

Ruilova's interest in objectifying mechanical devices by employing equipment and techniques used in cinema to create her large-scale projections carries through to her monitor works like *You're Pretty* (1999) and *Oh No* (2003). Here she incorporates instruments relating to sound, bringing together human with machine in intimate, if equally strained, obsessive and strange, ways. In *You're Pretty*, another longhaired man, bare-chested and be-spectacled, cradles an amplifier as he destroys a vinyl record against the floor and wall of a stark, concrete basement. These actions are intercut with close-up details of various parts of a young woman's body as she creates random sound by walking on an electric guitar. The title phrases, stated repeatedly, reverberate in concert with sounds emitted through instruments "played" in such a fashion, making sound visible as the consequence of actions taken. Thus are machines anthropomorphized and human actors rendered mechanical, reiterating the theme of dehumanization in a technological society that Godard limed twenty six years ago.

STOP: Sympathy for the Devil

Ruilova's own obsessions can be traced through a precise aesthetic that is steeped in an alternative history spanning influences ranging from vampire, horror, and French New Wave films, to Death Metal and Noise music. This aligns her with what LaBelle cites as the continuing trend of those working within, "the Gothic revival [that] is now well into its fourth century and still going strong."⁸ How then, to differentiate between Ruilova and other artists whose work is more aesthetic than politic, from those merely trading in the look and feeling, rather than offering proof, of an aesthetic alternative?⁹

A brief biography suggests some clues. Raised in Tampa, Florida, the "Death Metal capital of the United States," Ruilova played in the band *Alva* in the early 90s, relasing two albums before

⁸ Charles LaBelle, "I See a Darkness..." *frieze*, Summer, 2003, p. 116.

⁹ In his review of the exhibition, *I See a Darkness...*, at Blum & Poe, Los Angeles (February 8-April 19, 2003), Charles LaBelle provides a larger and succinct argument discussing what at the time, was a large number of artists involved in an equally large number of exhibitions **evidencing** the trend of Gothic sensibilities in contemporary art practice. Charles LaBelle, "I See a Darkness..." *frieze*, Summer, 2003, p. 116.



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moving on to visual art.¹⁰,¹¹ At 31, Ruilova is certainly aware of the filmmakers and video artists from the 1970s, and according to Michael Rush, it is the performance work of that period in particular that remains, “a vital component of video art, in part because artists, many of whom [were] trained in art schools in the 1980s and 1990s, echo work from the 1970s.”¹²

It is through the formidable presence of her characters’ spastic actions within a range of settings used to invoke prison-like environments that Ruilova’s visual dynamic takes shape. Fear, surprise, delight, and even humor exists in work that curator Ralph Rugoff calls “a depraved kind of slapstick.”¹³ Ruilova concurs: “I’m into horror film, but I’m also into comedy that’s extreme.”¹⁴ Perhaps where her “punk and classic” aesthetic, as curator Amada Cruz describes it, is most visible, and subtle in recent works like *Tuning* (2002).¹⁵ Comprised of a single shot, Ruilova sits next to cult French vampire film director Jean Rollin, holding his hand. Set within a lush interior this time, the image barely comes into focus before disappearing again. Curiously reminiscent of Jan van Eyck’s *Portrait of Giovanni Arnolfini and his Wife* (1434), Ruilova uses perspective in much the same way by playing up the ability for the moving image to contain, if not retain, an image.¹⁶ (does she really set the shot up to mimic the van eyck, or is this a stretch to get the

¹⁰ Death Metal developed during the 1980s as a musical subgenre of Heavy Metal, key characteristics of which are evidenced in Ruilova’s work, including abrupt tempo changes that feature growling and distorted vocals, song structures that privilege narrative story telling of nihilistic themes, and an aesthetic that “is usually identified by violent rhythm guitar, fast percussion and dynamic intensity.” Other artists of note who cite influences to this musical genre, in addition to American artists, perhaps best represented by Banks Violette in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, include Vancouver’s Steven Shearer, The Netherlands’ Marc Bijl and Iris Van Dongen among many others. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_metal.

¹¹ Alva’s debut album, *Fair-Haired Guillotine*, was released on the Avant label in 1997.

¹² Michael Rush, “Video Art and the Conceptual Body,” *Video Art*, Thames & Hudson, Ltd., London, 2003, p. 97.

¹³ Ralph Rugoff, “Aïda Ruilova,” in *Irreducible: Contemporary Short Form Video*, California College of the Arts, San Francisco, January 19-March 19, 2005, p. 13.

¹⁴ Karen Rosenberg, “Biennial Favorites: Aïda Ruilova, The Cult Classicist,” *New York*, March 1, 2004, p.40.

¹⁵ Cruz’s brochure essay for Ruilova’s exhibition, *Let’s Go!*, at The Moore Space, Miami, Florida, September 9-November 4, 2004, presents a concise overview of her work.

¹⁶ Art historians often cite in how a centrally placed mirror in the background of van Eyck’s painting creates this effect. For more information on the concept of the mirror and its specific use in reference to the history of video art, see Christopher Eamon, “Visibility and the Electronic Mirror,” in *Video*



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footnote? If the latter, let's delete this) Equally effective and strikingly different is Ruilova's dual-screen projection, *Countdowns* (2004). Lasting two minutes, Ruilova literally doubles the duration and display of the moving image from past works. This time recounting the worlds Ruilova has created herself, *Countdowns* is a culmination—and likely a conclusion—of this body of work. Filmed outdoors, distance and proximity collapse in shots that come quickly in and out of view. Several figures appear, and disappear in both natural and built-up environments which include a dark forest, the inside of a drainpipe, the underside of a bridge, a gravel hillside. The numbers that announce the countdown of the work's title are inscribed in various ways onto these scenes – number nine is drawn in the gravel, number two is a melting birthday candle. Extending through a single shot moving out from a fixed point and then repeating, the work recounts multiple references to art history (German romantic landscape painting), film history (reels used to match sound with image), and popular culture (Sesame Street). Yet these references serve to further the sense of closure and claustrophobia, for as Martha Schwendener observes: “While countdowns are usually finite, Ruilova's video repetitively goes through the motions of counting down, building to a climax that never actually occurs. The countdown is the climax, collapsed into the count itself.”¹⁷ In destroying the legibility of the “countdown” as a harbinger of action, Ruilova expands her visual repertoire only to reveal, yet again, a sense of confinement and deep anxiety.

REPEAT: And Again...

“What's interesting,” as Ruilova has said, “is the idea of a director doing the same film over and over again for 30 years.”¹⁸

Acts: Single Channel Works from the Collections of Pamela and Richard Kramlich and New Art Trust, P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, a MoMA affiliate, New York, November 10-April 13, 2003, pp. 23-28.

¹⁷ Martha Schwendener, “Creative Time and Panasonic Present Aïda Ruilova: Countdowns,” Creative Time, brochure, 2005.

¹⁸ Karen Rosenberg, “Biennial Favorites: Aïda Ruilova, The Cult Classicist,” *New York*, March 1, 2004, p.40.



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BIOGRAPHY

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