

HORIZONS + INTERSECTIONS III



STATEMENT

DEREK VON ESSEN

Our environment changes so frequently that it's difficult to imagine the earth's surface as full. Humankind's sprawl over open territory combined with our skill at adapting to new environments poses the question: Do we notice the changes around us? As we transform, degrade and obliterate our natural surroundings for the sake of urbanization and new development, is our progress marked by how far we will go or how much space we have left on this planet?

Infinity is a short word for something so vast and intangible as a never-ending horizon. A skyline displays a variety of buildings and structures, hiding the open ground which spans further than any eye can see. It is a place where two crucial elements to human existence – earth (tangible) and air (intangible), appear to meet – but do not. An officially declared intersection, marked as two [or more] designated meeting points has been created to increase the flow of direction. What was continuous is now divided by way of a connection point. Both horizons and intersections offer space where conflicting elements convene to create a perceived meeting place – ground that is open to interpretation with *Horizons + Intersections*.

In transforming this illusion by way of digital manipulation, the viewer can witness the integration and impact of our global presence. Through mutating landscapes in constant transition, new images are created which themselves cross over into regenerated and constructed environments. Roads appear through once open fields, bridges scale over land where there was previously water – the viewer's perception unclear as to which image is their reality.

cover: *Bitte Mitte*, 2007, Lightjet print, 12" x 34.5"

EXPOSED AT THE LIMIT

ARON VINEGAR

In every landscape the point of astonishment is the meeting of the sky and the earth...

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON, “Nature”

Derek von Essen's ten-minute video, “Horizons + Intersections III”, shows a sequence of horizon lines from urban and natural environments that are perpetually transforming, displacing, and intersecting with each other. The video is accompanied by Don Pyle's soundtrack, stills from the video, and a series of drawings and paintings by Val Nelson that further elaborate and interpret von Essen's video. Whatever “Horizons + Intersections” is, it is emphatically not a work 'about' the horizon, but rather an 'exemplification' of that concept, or better yet, of that condition; it is literally an *exposition* of what it might mean for us to be implicated in the odd and disruptive aspects of ourselves as horizon-bound beings-in-the-world.

The horizon is deeply embedded in our very idea of having a “perspective” or “point of view”, or even in establishing the basic parameters of meaning, orientation, and visibility as such. The claim that all experience and interpretation of the object-world occurs in relation to the horizon is central to phenomenology and hermeneutics. All subsequent investigations of the horizon grapple, implicitly or explicitly, with this philosophical tradition, either to challenge it or continue its project in some form. But our thinking about the horizon is not only steeped in philosophical language, it is also ubiquitous in our everyday speech. We often speak of 'broadening our horizons' or 'exploring new horizons'. Both its philosophical and everyday usages attest to the fact that the concept of the

horizon is intimately linked with issues of openness and closure, the near and far, the future and the here-and-now, encounter and avoidance, understanding and interpretation. The concept of the horizon is, in fact, the privileged allegorical figure for these possibilities. Far from a simple line that designates the limits of vision at the point where sky meets the earth or water, the concept of the horizon simultaneously enables and negates fundamental dichotomies such as inside and outside, distance and immersion, the intelligible and the sensible, embodiment and disembodiment, the subjective and the objective. “Horizons + Intersections” gives a texture to these ideas, revealing the extraordinary force of the horizon in our ordinary experience.

The modern term “horizon” comes from the Greek verb *horizein*, which means the delimiting or drawing of boundaries. More colloquially, the horizon designates the line joining earth and sky, or water and sky, at the limit of our view. Although we can see the horizon “out there”, it is, in fact, a fictional entity that works of art give material form. We can't literally touch the horizon line as Truman does when he comes to the end of “his” world in *The Truman Show*, in a scene that recalls a pre-Copernican world-view in which we might actually come to the end of the world and step out into another one beyond. The concept of the horizon functions more like the structure of desire, in which the object of desire is anticipated and pursued but never definitively attained. This does not mean, however, that the horizon is necessarily a place that we cannot get to, but rather to suggest that it is an “intractable enigma.”¹ The horizon alters and displaces itself with every step we take in a rhythm of contraction and expansion, concealing and revealing. It accompanies us wherever we go, yet always remains out of reach like a reverberation or echo that we are abandoned to but that is slightly out of our range and control. As Emerson makes clear, one of the beautiful things about the horizon is it can't be taken hold of; it eludes any attempt to grasp (at) it.

¹ Bersani and Dutoit note that the ‘intractable enigma’ can never be deciphered and recovered as “knowledge”. See Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, “Carravaggio's Secrets”, in Pamela R. Mathews and David McWhirter, eds. *Aesthetic Subjects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 106-7.

The condition of the horizon tends to disrupt any rigid line we might want to construe between what is natural and what is conventional. This is a constant issue throughout von Essen's videos and stills, in which there is a perpetual displacement between natural places, such as mountains, or bodies of water (all privileged sites for an unhindered view of the horizon), and artificial ones, primarily cityscapes. This overlaying of an artificial skyline with a natural horizon line is relentlessly in evidence throughout "Horizons + Intersections". These lines seem to be forever touching each other without ever completely coinciding or stabilizing. One site is continuously shifting into the other rather than fixing each in its proper place. That is to say, the horizon's essential disposition is always acknowledged in the video. A road might fade into a mountain range, or a sign is stranded in the middle of a road. One might be tempted to consider these startling juxtapositions and transformations as surreal, or provoking a condition of estrangement. But these conditions are really a heightened experience of the daily effects of so-called urban sprawl and, its correlative effect, the encroachment of nature. If there is any sense of the extraordinary here it is not something coming out of the ordinary, but rather that the ordinary is seen as extraordinary tout court. It is a transfiguration that permeates the entire video without forsaking the texture of our everyday world. The rhythms and paces of day and night, the daily events of our lives-driving, walking, talking-unfold in relation to the variable beat and rhythm of Don Pyle's soundtrack.

Von Essen's stills and video yoke near and far, while perpetually renegotiating those relative distances through acts of slippage or erasure. This perpetual renegotiation is worked into the very structure of the videos: the fact that the horizon lines are transfigured in the movement from one frame to the next. One might say that in the video the horizon line is perpetually "next" to itself. I find the following passage by Emerson to capture this

thought nicely: “The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end.”² At first glance this passage seems to simply confirm what traditional phenomenology has always told us: that the horizon line extends from the “null point” of our bodies to the furthest regions that vision can carry us. But more than that, the passage is meant for us to engage in a ‘fantasy’ whereby a series of reverberating or rippling circles expand, and that expansion is a movement of continuous ‘nextness.’ That is to say, the reverberating circle is an allegory about how we might conceive of a world in terms of a *continuous discontinuity*. We not only see the world in views of it, but also ‘seam’ it; that is, frame it through our interpretations, interventions, and negotiations. The provisionality of this seaming is poignantly raised in the video where the boundaries and lines that we construct are as tenuous as temporary fencing, as monumental as a skyline, or as forbidding as a border crossing. In fact, the video elides these divisions and thus redivides them into further lines of contact and disruption.

Val Nelson’s paintings and drawings after von Essen’s photographs drive that point home. One can imagine the endless activity of her pencil lifted up and down as she pursues her incessant mark-making activity. The seemingly agitated drawings with their frenetic, yet somehow silent mood, helps us to acknowledge that we are continuously marking out the contours of our response to and responsibility for the world; how it endlessly seams together, in particular ways for us. Of course this fantasy – and fantasy is, of course, always an interpretation of reality – is enhanced by the possibility of the medium of film and video in which literally anything can come ‘next’ to something else as its ‘natural’ possibility.

² Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Circles,” in *Pragmatism: A Contemporary Reader* ed., Russell Goodman (New York: Routledge, 1995) 25-36.

It is striking how many of von Essen's photographs are organized around a deliberate emphasis on one-point perspective: a shot of a deeply receding street, echoed by the phone lines on either side that carve up the image into deep orthogonals and transversals. Traditionally such perspectives are meant to organize a viewpoint in relation to a distant horizon line where the parallel lines meet, and that makes the intervening space hang together in a rationally oriented way. But most of von Essen's stills hinder a clear view of the horizon line. This inability to access the horizon is marked in the video by modes of delay, transfiguration, reverie, paralysis, or blocked vision. The "drive" towards the horizon is always delayed and detoured by a curving or forking road that veers off towards the edge of the image, a telephone pole that stubbornly occupies the middle of the deep perspective, or the opacity of traffic and advertising signage that block and disperse our vision rather than carrying it forward. And there are other images where the plunging perspective is inverted and the orthogonals punch back at the viewer in a "counter-drive". Pyle's soundtrack enhances this effect – at first it sounds like a train chugging towards a destination – with all the connotations of movement, destination, and encounter that this entails – but that quickly gives way to indeterminate "noises" of a crowd, and an incessant beat and rhythm that speeds up and slows down, and thus is never captured in any legible meaning or lyric. The sounds lure us in, rather than urging us on to some specific destination on the horizon. Through the video and soundtrack we start to become aware that the limits of vision, interpretation and meaning are not 'over there' in the distance, rather they are everywhere we might be at any 'given' moment. That is to say, that there are no given moments over and above what we have to give to them.

Many of the scenes of blocked or delayed vision occur at what von Essen calls “intersections”. When we say intersection we immediately envision something like a Cartesian coordinate, a literal intersection of two perpendicular axes (xy) that cross at a central “origin” point. And of course this primal figure of orientation is what provides us with our 'cardinal' relationship to the world: an abstract diagram of an upright body in relationship to the lateral extension of the world in and as a horizon line. But what happens where these lines intersect? Does it always result in orientation or a sense of balance? Does it always result in an even distribution of the natural (call it the horizontal) and the cultural (call it the vertical)? Is there always a 'gathering' point at the intersection? Can we indeed gather ourselves at this intersection? Often this is not the case. Intersections are no longer so simple (if they ever were). I think Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour put this best in their book *Learning from Las Vegas*: “A driver 30 years ago could maintain a sense of orientation in space. At the simple crossroad a little sign with an arrow confirmed what was obvious. One knew where one was. When the crossroads becomes a cloverleaf, one must turn right to turn left.”³ Can we rely on signs for guidance and orientation in this condition? Can we be *certain* that signs will guide us in the right direction, as opposed to abandoning us to the uncertain criteria for differentiating between being lost and being found?

This is all to say that the concept of the horizon is *always* marked by excess; it is flowing forth, often inundating, and throwing us off balance. This point is brought home in the “final” frames of the video. After endless transformations and displacements we are confronted by the supposedly elemental example of the horizon – the line joining water and sky at the limit of our view. However, notice that this convergence of water and sky does not result in one single horizon line, but rather it produces a surplus third band occurring at that conjuncture.

³ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1977) 9.

Simply put, the horizon is not primarily about boundaries as precise limits, but rather about the possibilities of phenomenon *at the limit*. Heidegger's definition of the horizon captures this nicely: "A Boundary...is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its essential* unfolding. Therefore the concept is: orismos [horizon], i.e., limit."⁴ And then von Essen's video begins at the "end" to unfold ...again...differently.

At this point we are no longer 'in' a horizon or an intersection but *at the limit*: grazing it, hovering above it, around it, caressing it, turning back from it, exposed to it, astonished by it. One wonders and wanders there.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 154.



Frames 609Z20, 249DDDD, 249GGGG, 2006, video stills

DEREK VON ESSEN



i-5 Bridge Mix, 2006, Lightjet print, 11.75" x 15.75"



i-5 034 Bridge, 2006, Lightjet print, 11.75" x 15.75"



i-5 081 Bridge, 2006, Lightjet print, 11.75" x 15.75"



Van Fourth Train, 2007, Lightjet print, 11.75" x 21.75"



Van Pleasant, 2007, Lightjet print, 11.75" x 21.75"



Frame 343, 2006, Lightjet print, 11.75" x 15.75"



I-5, 056 Bridge, 2006, Lightjet print, 11.75" x 15.75"



Berlincover, 2007, Lightjet print, 11.75" x 21.75"



Connaught Town, 2007, Lightjet print, 11.75" x 21.75"

VAL NELSON



Intersection (SUV), 2006, mixed media on paper, 10.5" x 15.1"



City/Country, 2006, mixed media on paper, 10.5" x 15.1"



Semi, 2006, oil + acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



Tracks, 2006, oil + acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



Bike Route, 2007, oil + acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



Landscape with Cars , 2006, oil + acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



Border Crossing , 2007, oil + acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



Pool, 2006, oil + acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"



SUV, 2006, oil + acrylic on canvas, 36" x 48"

DEREK VON ESSEN has created an extensive body of work in photography, painting and graphic arts over the last twenty years. While his work may often be steeped in social commentary, his attempt to examine and bring into focus our human presence in the world, including the relationship we have to our environment, is unceasing. His use of found objects has no limitations and finds its place within an ongoing theme of recycling elements, such as using found conversations (dialogue from passersby in public spaces), combining immiscible mediums while painting and creating digital photomontages and paper collages.
www.derekvonessen.ca

VAL NELSON is an honors graduate of the Emily Carr College of Art and Design. Formerly a dancer and videographer, in the past eight years she has reinvented herself as a painter. Singled out by art critic Christopher Brayshaw for her “loose, intelligent brushwork,” she has received a number of awards, including a Visual Arts Development Award from the Vancouver Foundation, and was shortlisted in 2003 for the New Canadian Painting Competition, sponsored by the Canadian Art Foundation and RBC Investments.
www.valnelson.ca

DON PYLE is a Toronto-based composer, musician, sound artist and producer. He has created numerous scores for films by John Greyson, Wrik Mead, Sarah Polley, Derek von Essen and Simone Jones. His production credits include releases by The Sadies, Peaches, Iggy Pop, Republic of Safety and The Two Koreas. As a composer and musician, he has released twelve albums with various groups he has been a member of, including Shadowy Men on a Shadowy Planet, Phono-Comb, Greek Buck, King Cobb Steelie and Fifth Column.
www.donpyle.com

ARON VINEGAR is an Assistant Professor at Ohio State University with a joint appointment in the Department of History of Art and the Knowlton School of Architecture. His research and publications focus on the history and theory of modern architecture and art from the 19th century to the present. His forthcoming publications include *On Learning from Las Vegas: Skepticism and the Ordinary* (MIT PRESS, 2008), “Photography Degree Zero,” in *With(out) Dimension: The Photographs of Alan Cohen*, Alan Cohen, Denis Cosgrove, and Aron Vinegar (CENTER FOR AMERICAN PLACES/UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2008). In 2005, he organized an international conference entitled “The Concept of the Horizon and the Limits of Representation”, which took place at Ohio State University.

PROJECT HISTORY

HORIZONS + INTERSECTIONS I, II, III



Frame 290C2, 2006, video still

Horizons + Intersections (2004) and *Horizons + Intersections II* (2005), respectively featured Vancouver and Toronto images in video format. *Horizons + Intersections III* covers much broader ground with travels in Portland, Berlin, Hamburg, Barcelona, London and various locations in Canada. The growth of *Horizons + Intersections III* to an installation involving more than video (Derek von Essen) and sound (Don Pyle) developed when painter Val Nelson commented how she'd like to paint some of the transitions to offer her interpretation of the transfigured imagery. Professor and writer, Aron Vinegar was also interested in voicing his own perceptions of *Horizons + Intersections III* through written word. Realising the interplay in these exchanges atop the already juxtaposed concept of morphing manipulated photos was difficult to pass up. DEREK VON ESSEN

HORIZONS + INTERSECTIONS III

Witness the integration and impact of our global presence through evolving landscapes in constant transition. Urban sprawl is addressed with new environments constructed and regenerated from digitally manipulated photographs translated into video, sound, painting and literary interpretations.

DEREK VON ESSEN PHOTOGRAPHY + VIDEO

VAL NELSON PAINTING + DRAWING

DON PYLE SOUND

ARON VINEGAR WORD

