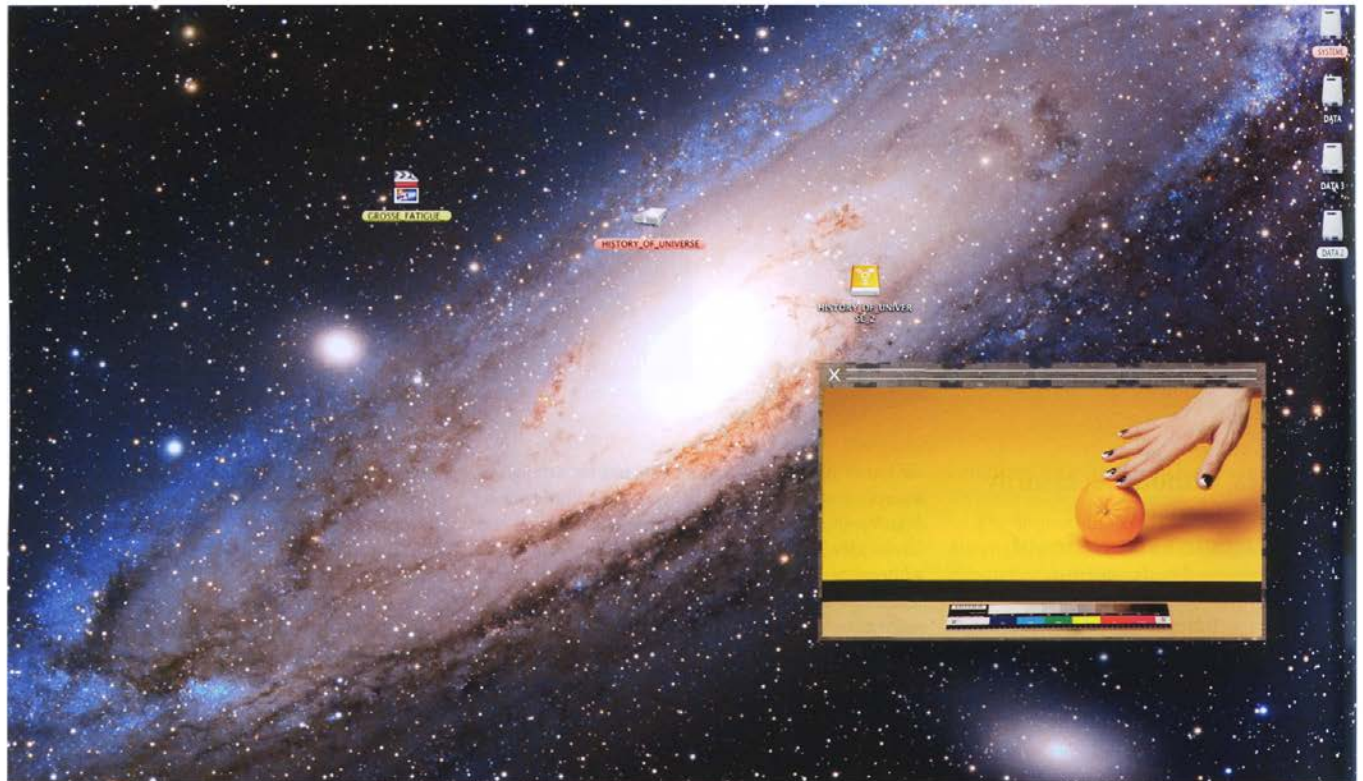


METRO PICTURES

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All images, this and opposite page: Camille Henrot, *Grosse Fatigue*, 2013, video, color, sound, 13 minutes.

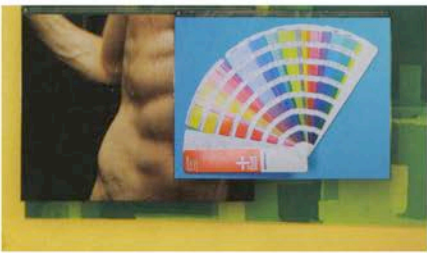
VENICE 2013

The Whole Earth Is Heavy

PAMELA M. LEE ON CAMILLE HENROT



In the beginning there was no earth, no water—nothing. There was a single bill called Nunne Chaha. In the beginning everything was dead. In the beginning there was nothing; nothing at all. No light, no life, no movement, no breath. In the beginning there was an immense unit of energy. . . .
—Grosse Fatigue, 2013



IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE DESKTOP. So commences *Grosse Fatigue*, Camille Henrot's thirteen-minute video based on her residency at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, a place in which the imperial claims of scientific knowledge find diverse expression in the world's largest museum and its rituals of collecting objects and managing information. Set to a spoken-word narrative about the creation of the universe, *Grosse Fatigue*, among the first time-based works one encounters in curator Massimiliano Gioni's Arsenale (and the winner of the Fifty-Fifth Venice Biennale's Silver Lion), tracks the range of such research agendas with an expanding field of images that pop up, roil, collide, and implode

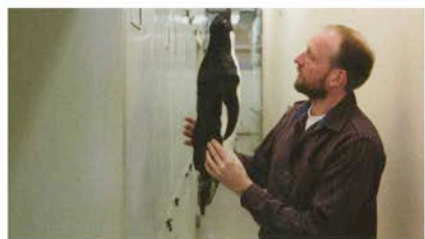
across a computer screen, a digital tabula rasa that itself perpetually reinvents the world.

Though most of the work's imagery seems culled from the realms of natural history, physics, and anthropology, the logic connecting its representations is not entirely apparent at first viewing. Yet the excessiveness of Henrot's visual archive seems to be the point—*Grosse Fatigue* is a black hole of browsers, founded on a highly mediated notion of creation. Fish skeletons are gently prodded in their preservative baths. Feminine hands, with nails painted red and green, finger black-and-white photographs of tribal peoples recalling outdated ethnography textbooks. Someone flips through the pages of a *SkyMall* catalogue. In quickening succession, we see dead bees and shells and more well-manicured hands manipulating objects; a Darwinian proxy in the form of a giant tortoise, and, later, turtle eggs being laid in the sand; vignettes of Smithsonian office culture, including a mylar HAPPY BIRTHDAY balloon slowly twisting against fluorescent lights. We watch as wooden African artifacts are posed against brightly



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colored backgrounds with Fujicolor test strips in front; we see a male torso, and later a female torso, moving in water, with soap running down. There are screen grabs of Google searches and a photo of J. Robert Oppenheimer. Perhaps most disquieting of all (particularly considering the number of video clips in the piece) is the sizable population of dead birds presented throughout. A drawer full of toucans—row upon row of sad avian stiff—can only fail to impart the “immense unit of energy” announced in the voice-over at the beginning. The collection telegraphs the exact opposite, in fact: what the narrator, musician and artist Akwete Orraca-Tetteh, later describes as “violent relaxation” in the creation of the universe.

What binds these disparate images, objects, and gestures together, keeps them circulating in the same epistemological orbit? The accompanying narrative—cowritten with the poet Jacob Bromberg and set to a propulsive hip-hop beat by the artist's partner, Joakim Bouaziz—is an analogous mash-up of oral histories of the Creation, name-checking demigurgic figures ranging from the Great God Bumba, Amma, Prah, Ometeotl, Ra, and Andumbulu to Yahweh, and delivered with a sense of near-messianic fervor. But no matter how prominently Carl Jung figures in the Biennale's Central Pavilion, Henrot's video is no paean to a transcendent collective unconscious. On the contrary, *Grosse Fatigue* shatters any image of a fully integrated system of knowledge or totality.

Henrot introduces her approach through an image both sublime and banal: that of the Milky Way. The image is sublime because few things, of course, are

as evocative as this galactic phenomenon, its unimaginable scale and inky depths forcing questions of time, genesis, and the limits of representation all at once. But it is equally banal due to its ubiquity as digital wallpaper. As the desktop icons in the video's opening make plain, the Milky Way is as much the de facto screen saver swirling across inactive monitors everywhere as it is the astronomical face of the cosmic nous. Indeed, Henrot shows us how the universe is something to be controlled, quite literally at our fingertips—as repeatedly demonstrated by the hands that touch, manipulate, and palpate objects and screens, whether a scientist tenderly cradling a dead bird or as suggested in an ad for Samsung's best-selling mobile device, the Galaxy smartphone. Meanwhile, the image of a woman touching herself suggests an erotic climax to the chaotic swirl of cosmic imagery.

The dual meanings of this astronomical image insinuate the peculiar order of things within *Grosse Fatigue*; as a result, the piece can be read as a kind of metatext to Gioni's “Encyclopedic Palace.” A good portion of the Biennale, after all, addresses the “personal cosmologies” of artists conventionally granted outsider status, from the therapeutic abstractions of Hilma af Klimt to the architectural drawings of Achilles Rizzoli, a near-solipsistic and mystical universe.

Grosse Fatigue provides an endlessly more divided take on the cosmos in several ways. First, there is the implicit opposition it establishes between *zoe* and *techne*—how the vitality, even chaos, of life succumbs to something like a rationalizing order, as emblemized by the hard geometry of the mobile shelving units in the Smithsonian's collections or the

cold, minimalist cabinets that make an early appearance in the video. Likewise, there is Henrot's meshing of multiple research platforms in the production of such museological knowledge, in which the online database—her initial point of entry into the Smithsonian's holdings—is crossed with the desiccated artifacts of the collection's archive. And finally, there's a confusion between the subjective interests of the researcher and the institutional protocols that enable her work: How to draw a line between the arcane motivations of the individual, perhaps born of personal obsessions, and the official histories and narratives represented by the museum (which is itself complicated by the personal investments and caretaking of its researchers and staff)? Together, all these platforms do not cohere in the making of a world—the institutional fantasy of creating a totalizing perspective in which the whole stands as more than the sum of its parts—so much as dramatize the peculiar lifelessness of both matter and information as so many proliferating bits and fragments. Digital windows and screens multiply, but they're just as flattened out and drained of life as all those sorry animal carcasses accumulating in cold storage.

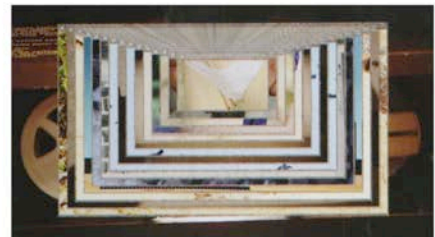
The ethnographic engagements of *Grosse Fatigue* are in keeping with Henrot's earlier output, such as the anthropological literature that takes the form of flower arrangements in *Ikebana*, 2012, or the "ritual" rope jumping of Melanesian islanders in the Republic of Vanuatu staged for tourists in her 2011 film *Coupé/Décaté*. But it is not quite accurate to say that hers is a Foucauldian reckoning with the terms of classical representation. For in the work's relentless knitting together of disparate phenomena—and its visualization of technology—*Grosse Fatigue* showcases the obsessive, occasionally irrational, dimensions at play in even the most seemingly objective research pursuits. Chains of morphological resemblances suggest a highly subjective game of interpretation, but one also ironically used to or even trained by the capricious algorithms of a Google image search: A pair of bleach-splattered pants resembles a Pollock action painting that resembles the Milky Way, while a hand drawing a circle in ink will rhyme with the dome of a bald head, which mimes the appearance of an inflatable globe swinging like a pendulum above a sidewalk. The hyperbolically interpretive lens of *Grosse Fatigue* also echoes a neighboring installation at the Arsénale in this regard: Roger Caillois's extraordinary collection of stones arrayed across a glowing light table. That one can read landscapes or faces into such cold, mineral structures suggests they serve as geological mirrors to each viewer's subjectivity and the spectrum of her psychic projections. The implied interface between empirical stuff and subjective being finds an



updated echo in Henrot's work, where the mechanics of the interface are themselves put on excessive display—a far remove from the privatized visions of the cosmos enshrined elsewhere at the Biennale.

To be sure, there's a tension in the artist's work between the animate and inanimate, between living matter and dead information, as reinforced by the push-pull dynamic between the subjects of natural history and the staging devices of technology. Yet neither force ultimately wins; no humanist cosmos or universalist synthesis of knowledge coheres. Screen captures and video files proliferate wildly; windows are progressively nested within one another in an infinite regress; a frog croaks away on an iPhone as if it's just received a text message. Here the rapacious drive of the search engine results in visual archives of ostensibly little scientific merit or taxonomic order, as if calling out the manic nature of the researcher or the uncontrollable spread of the data surveyed: the exhausting bounds of the Internet, which has replaced the universe as our measurement of ever-expanding space. Why else would screenshots of white cats with bicolored eyes feature so prominently? And why else would Wikipedia files on bipolar and schizophrenic disorders figure into the museological mix? Unlike the diagnoses that mark many artists in "The Encyclopedic Palace" as "outsider," here such conditions assume a highly technologized valence, no longer internalized as private disorder but rendered as online artifact.

Grosse Fatigue may well tell a story of creation, but for this very reason it is just as much a fable of entropy, of the endless dispersion of beings and things into disorder. Yet not even Robert Smithson could have



predicted the cosmic scale of this entropic demise, as accelerated by the online platforms enabling Henrot's research. If Orraca-Tetteh intones about the birth of the universe from diverse religious traditions, what ultimately stays with us is not the genesis but the *exhaustion* of the various objects displayed—their world-weariness—and the dissipating energy demanded to manage them as information. "Violent relaxation," indeed; the feeling of being bombarded by so much information (even during one's so-called downtime) is effectively continuous with our being in the world. It's telling that *Grosse Fatigue* closes with a video window set against the inaugural Milky Way desktop, featuring the same feminine hand rolling the globe-like form of an orange over and over—as if this anonymous hand were attempting to extract some organic vitality from the video's otherwise flattened panoply of images. Yet these pictures multiply and regenerate to no end, instead auguring "the heat death of the universe," as the narrator plaintively sings. □

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