

# ARTFORUM

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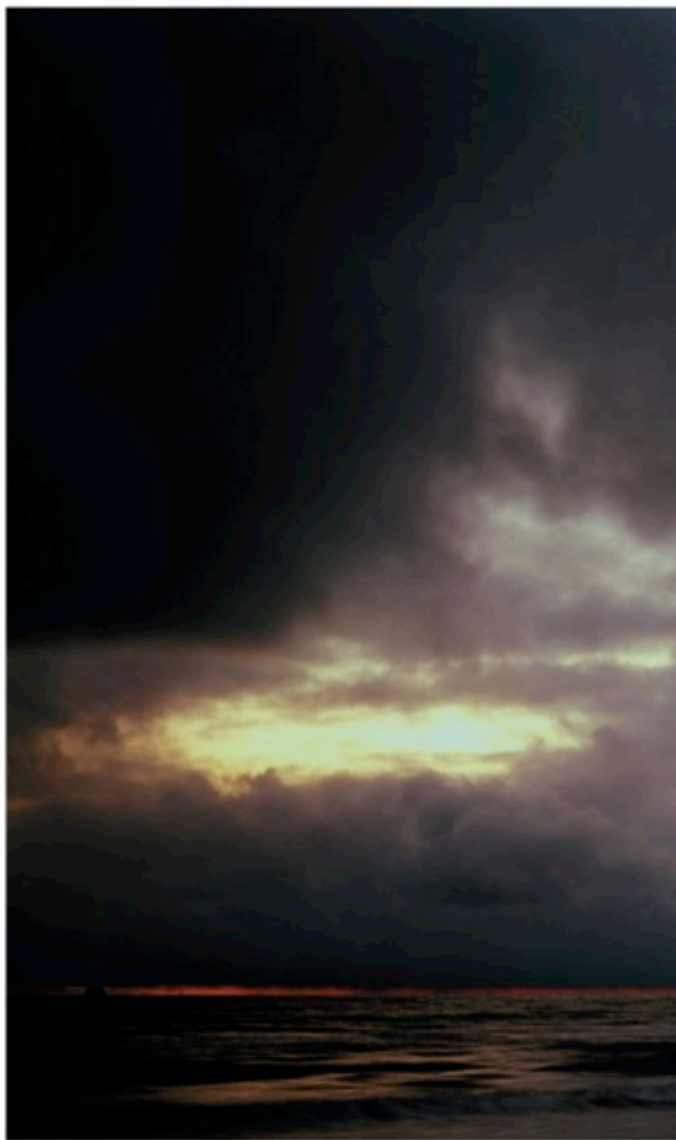
## KEEPING DISTANCE

Martin Herbert on the Art of Marine Hugonnier

**MARINE HUGONNIER** spent September 12, 2001, contemplating the immediate future. As did we all, you might say—but the Paris-born, London-based artist projected forward in a uniquely literal fashion. When the towers fell, she'd been on her way from the UK to the Alaskan village of Cape Prince of Wales, a little settlement notable primarily for its utterly remote location. There, at the narrowest point of the Bering Strait, you can look across the waters—as Hugonnier did, often through the viewfinder of a camera—and see Cape Dezhnev, the easternmost point of Asia, some forty miles and a whole hemisphere away. Over there, on the other side of the international date line, it's already the next day.

The series of eleven large-scale photographs that Hugonnier shot from this metaphysically suggestive standpoint is titled "Towards Tomorrow." Beyond the democratic accessibility of their natural beauties—richly breaking dawns, ornate cloud formations, sea and sky split with Minimalist precision—these images are fully activated only through knowledge of their subject's strange temporal doubling. In this respect the 2001 series is emblematic of Hugonnier's subsequent practice: Over the past half decade, in increasingly labyrinthine and nuanced ways, she has explored how what we apprehend visually depends decisively on where we stand—physically, epistemologically, ideologically. Increasingly, she has highlighted the complex ethics of framing and determining any view of reality.

Prior to the September 2001 trip, Hugonnier—who trained in philosophy before taking her master's in anthropology, turning to visual art only in her late twenties—had typically produced works predicated on austere phenomenological concerns. These early projects



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Previous page: Marine Hugonnier, *Towards Tomorrow*, 2001, one of eleven color photographs, 118 x 70 1/4". This page, top: Marine Hugonnier, *Flower*, 1998-2000, fresh flowers, spray paint, and vase, dimensions variable. Bottom: Marine Hugonnier, *Ariana*, 2003, stills from a color film in Super-16 mm, 18 minutes 36 seconds. Opposite page: Marine Hugonnier, *The Last Tour*, 2004, stills from a color film in Super-16 mm, 14 minutes 17 seconds.



were often aimed at heightening perception and, in a prefiguration of the concerns elaborated in "*Towards Tomorrow*," were intended to hone the viewers' sense of themselves as subjects engaged not simply in looking but in looking in time. Her sculpture *Flower*, 1998-2000, consists of a bouquet of white lilies and yellow roses whose petals have been coated in spray paint, the effect of which is that the blooms appear preternaturally bright—sharpening one's anticipation of their fading in the future. For *Still*, 2000, Hugonnier positioned a bottle and a tumbler of mineral water on a table equipped with a concealed vibrating device that, every so often, would send infinitesimal ripples across the liquid.

All of which is to say that a survey of Hugonnier's early work shows her to have been a devotee of adroitly calibrated and controlled experiences. But her Alaskan expedition seems to have marked a turning point. Setting out

toward Cape Prince of Wales to make "*Towards Tomorrow*" (after compulsive perusals of a pocket atlas led her to believe she'd be able to see another continent from there), she found herself plunged into a ragged sequence of unpredictable incidents. Having reached Anchorage and flown across Alaska—completing the last leg of this trip in a seven-seat mail plane—she was grounded before reaching her final destination as airports began to shut down in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Hiring a small fishing boat, she and her team followed the Alaskan coastline two hundred miles north, where their hosts, a Vietnam veteran and former POW and his Inuit wife, picked them up and drove them a hundred miles farther to their cabin on the cape. There, Hugonnier and the frazzled vet—an avatar of America's colonial past—stared at the looped news footage that thrust the country into its fear-laden future.

None of this vivid context accompanied the subsequent exhibition of the photographs. But over the sometimes harrowing course of her journey, Hugonnier realized that chancy divagations during the making of an artwork could become its content—a notion that has informed much of her work since, including the remarkable "*Three Continents Trilogy*," a recently completed trio of Super-16-mm films—*Ariana*, 2003, *The Last Tour*, 2004, and *Travelling Amazonia*, 2006—shown together for the first time in June 2006 at London's National Film Theatre. Those films (and many of the other works she has produced in the past five years) have significantly expanded Hugonnier's earlier concern with the viewer's physical and temporal relationship to the artwork into an exploration of how the European subject's vision is culturally constructed—and in particular, how this vision is inflected by insidious reverbs of the colonial past. Call them notes toward an anthropology of images.

In 2002, in the wake of her Alaskan adventure, Hugonnier went to Afghanistan to shoot *Ariana*. An avid researcher, she'd become fascinated by the Panjshir Valley in the north of the country, a lush landscape (described in ancient Persian poetry as a "paradise garden") protectively encircled by a nameless mountain range, and a stronghold of resistance during twenty-three years of war with the Soviets and then the Taliban. Hugonnier wanted to see for herself—and, if possible, record on film—how landscape determines history. As it turned out, that wasn't possible. Deploying a musing epistolary voice-over and documentary images in a manner reminiscent of Chris Marker's 1983 masterpiece *Sans soleil*, the eighteen-minute film tracks her camera crew's attempts to reach a



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mountaintop from which to shoot the valley and its rocky sentinels. They are stymied; the authorities say landslides have blocked the way. Since, however, the spot the crew is trying to get to is located at a militarily strategic point, Hugonnier suspects an ulterior motive.

Finally, however, the Ministry of Culture helps them gain access to a location that affords the aerial perspective they need to complete their visual travelogue—a promontory the locals call “Television Hill,” overlooking settlements and battlefields. “The spectacle made us euphoric,” Hugonnier recalls in voice-over. But now, having arrived at the critical moment of her project, she refuses to set the camera rolling. Panoramas, she realizes, connote power—the controlling gaze. (No accident, surely, that they attained popularity as a form of mass entertainment in the nineteenth century, at the height of the European colonial adventure.) By denying her audience this panoptic vision, Hugonnier broaches the issue of the inherent morality of specific vantages. The film suggests that image-making may not only reflect attitudes toward otherness but may also perpetuate or even establish them.

*The Last Tour*, the next work in the trilogy, rebuffs this colonizing optic, using fiction as its refractory device. Set in the near future, the film is shot mostly from a hot-air balloon soaring over the Matterhorn and features an unseen narrator who observes in voice-over that this flight is the last that will ever be taken over the natural splendors below. The film takes place at “the end of the Age of Spectacle,” an accompanying text explains; we are never told exactly what this means but are left to infer that it entails the cessation of all such scenic outings. At the close of the fourteen-minute film, Hugonnier’s crew releases some fireflies from a glowing box—a nod to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1975 newspaper article “The Power Void in Italy” (aka “The Fireflies Article”), which uses the disappearance of fireflies in that country as a metaphor for the contemporaneous rebirth of Italian fascism. In Hugonnier’s lateral rethinking, as the narration makes clear, fireflies disappeared at the end of the twentieth century along with the concept of ideology. They return at this future date when the region, now inaccessible to humanity, becomes terra incognita, a blank spot on the map. But the fireflies are not harbingers of utopia. More likely, since cartographers abhor a vacuum, they signal that humans are herein inaugurating another age of ideology—that another era of discovery and territorial reclamation is about to begin.

Like *Ariana*, *Travelling Amazonia*, the trilogy’s final film, could be construed as an exegesis of a particular cinematic trope—in this case, not the panorama but the “traveling shot.” In conversation, Hugonnier interprets the invention of perspective as political, a figure of supremacy. Projecting out into pictorial space, Europeans altered their own collective mind-set, formulating for themselves vantages hitherto attributed only to God, and extrapolating from optical to actual dominion. Whether or not Hugonnier considers her own confessed wanderlust a culturally inherited hangover from this extended scramble for land, *Travelling Amazonia*’s twenty-four-minute span performs the colonialist psychology and process in microcosm. It is film made complicit in, and synonymous with, exploitation and dominance.

The work is set on the Transamazon Highway—the 3,700-mile road, its construction commenced in the ’70s by Brazil’s military dictatorship but never completed, that was intended “to unite men without land to a land without men,” as the laconic narration glosses. Hugonnier and her crew select a spot on the highway and then travel to the nearest village, where they have a camera dolly and rails built so that they can shoot a smooth traveling shot on the bumpy road. The materials used (rubber, wood, metal) are abundantly available precisely because of the expansion into the jungle



**HUGONNIER'S TRILOGY IS AN EXPLORATION OF HOW THE EUROPEAN SUBJECT'S VISION IS CULTURALLY CONSTRUCTED AND INFLECTED BY REVERBS OF THE COLONIAL PAST.**

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This page, top: Marine Hugonnier, *Travelling Amazonia*, 2006, stills from a color film in Super-16 mm, 23 minutes 52 seconds. Bottom: Marine Hugonnier, *Anna Hanusova* 27.06.01, 2001, still from a color video, 10 minutes 7 seconds. Opposite page: Marine Hugonnier, *Territory* (L.R.B. 2004, stills from a black-and-white film in 16 mm, 23 minutes 50 seconds.



facilitated by the road. The shot the crew finally produces, seemingly modeling this historical procedure and its thwarted outcome, is pointedly absurd—it rolls slowly a short distance down the dusky track, trees looming on either side, and is eventually swallowed by darkness. Yet this is only half the film. As Hugonnier and her crew traveled with their equipment from the village to the set, she shot footage of the people they encountered, most of whom are shown dilating on the failure of the Transamazonia project, highlighting the disjunction between lived reality and sociopolitical abstraction. Always maintaining a respectful distance, Hugonnier's framing of these individuals counterbalances the invasiveness of the final camera movement and the historical process it analogizes.

To better understand Hugonnier's filmic ethics, consider a moral code for cinema outlined by French critic Serge Daney. In his 1992 essay "The Tracking Shot in *Kapo*" (written shortly before his death), Daney expresses his revulsion at a scene in the titular film, a little-known Italian movie, directed by Gillo Pontecorvo, about a concentration camp. An inmate commits suicide on an electric fence, and the director uses a forward traveling shot to close in on the dead body—a move that, to Daney, is utterly reprehensible. His countercredo—that cinema's func-

tion is "to tirelessly touch with my gaze the distance from me at which the other begins"—fundamentally inflects Hugonnier's own thinking. She reads that distance, marks it, and generally chooses not to overstep it. Treading lightly and leaving plenty of space for the audience's subjectivity has been her modus operandi from her earliest sculptures through works such as 2001's *Anna Hanusova* 27.06.01 (a film conceived in response to the rise of far-right politician Jörg Haider's Freedom Party, documenting a live Austrian radio broadcast, arranged by Hugonnier, of former concentration-camp internee Hanusova playing a sparse Arvo Pärt piano piece) to the present day. A hallmark of her films is a repeated use of intercut black screen—a technique designed to emplace viewers in the present (the present moment, the present era), allowing them to pause, interpret what they've seen, and consider what might be coming next.

All of which, of course, is anathema to current formal techniques in cinema, television news, or documentary. Because of her choice of subjects, Hugonnier has repeatedly been characterized as working in a "pseudodocumentary" style—a misnomer. Her work displays more kinship with projects such as Walid Raad's counterfeited archives of civil war in Lebanon, Phil Collins's videos of unbuttoned interactions in Ramallah and other zones of political or military conflict, Omer Fast's subdivisions of the documentary format's visual and verbal facets, and Kutlug Ataman's apparently informal but typically scripted video portraits. All of these bodies of work display a comparable awareness of the



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point at which a subject is bruised by ideologies permeating the form; all are produced by artists who cannot forget the "I" that is controlling the camera nor ignore all the factors that have built its specific subjectivity.

Hugonnier's long view and philosophical mien distinguish her, however. While the landscapes she visits often embody hot geopolitical topics, her works typically underplay local issues in favor of more enduring tensions. When she filmed the black-and-white Super-16-mm triptych *Territory I, II, III*, 2004, in the Middle East, she focused not on people but on assumptions encoded in the built environment. Filtering a bus tour of the West Bank through what *Territory II* calls "the logic of appropriation," Hugonnier directed her camera at settlers' buildings inspired by traditional Arab architecture and Palestinian buildings influenced by modernism. It's as if each culture jealously wants what the other has—a hallmark, Hugonnier argues with typical attention to the historically axiomatic, of the colonial impulse through the ages. (In this case, of course, only one side has extended that desire into an annexation of territory; the other plays it out on home turf.) There was undoubtedly much that she could have filmed, and didn't.

The ethics of the moving image is an old issue—T. J. Clark makes this clear in *The Sight of Death* (2006), his recent analysis of two Nicolas Poussin paintings, in which he repeatedly quotes Jean-Luc Godard's statement that "tracking shots are a matter of ethics." That well-known aphorism dates to 1959—and, as Clark elucidates, it's merely an update of an argument about painting. But it is timely nevertheless. In *Afflicted Powers* (2005) Retort, a collective of which Clark is a member, describes 9/11 as "an occurrence in a war of images. . . . [I]t is a confirmation of the terrorists' hopes that after the first few days, in the US, the fall of the Towers became exactly the image that *had not to be shown*. . . . [A] moving image of capitalism screaming and exploding." Artists often seem to have no place in this bloody arena. And yet who is better equipped to determine what precautions those who produce images should take in an age when images are weapons? Hugonnier has occasionally gone to the extreme, coming close to an apparent refusal to add more visual cargo to an overloaded sphere: *Leader* (*Oukaimeden, Morocco*), 1996–2004, is a photogram of a length of 16-mm film shot at night in a Moroccan mountain range. There is no visual data, just a Richter-esque slab of gray that, like a stalled leader strip, seems a visual correlative of endless anticipation. But a more substantive answer to the question above asserts itself when Hugonnier works in her characteristic mode—not declining to add images but declining to do so without transparency and due consideration. Her art is one of conscience and rectitude, drenched in the subjective real, carefully reflexive—and, in its refusal of a power that operates on multiple scales and in myriad registers, respectfully attentive to what should and shouldn't pass through the lens. □

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