

SWARM REGARDS : part one (reflections on SWARM13)

By: Jacquelyn Ross Written On: September 14, 2012



Elizabeth Zvonar, Universal, 2012.
Image courtesy of the Or Gallery.

SWARM REGARDS is a micro-series of reviews on the happenings of SWARM 13 on September 6 & 7, 2012: an annual festival of artist run culture organized by the Pacific Association of Artist Run Centres.

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Is it possible to feel nostalgia for something one did not experience? Swarm 13 presented a number of exhibitions that seemed fixated on ruptures in time and imaginings of the future which looked strangely like the past – whether through science-fiction speculations, artifacts from fictitious narratives, or appropriations of technologies new and old. Yet through and through, the works seemed to maintain an allegiance to the personal and even the private, pressing on the connections between an individual and the world, both actual and virtual. I was left reflecting on the spectrum of approaches taken to investigate such grandiose themes as the depth of memory, images of the future, or models for rhizomatic thinking, and was impressed by the modesty of each work's method. Somehow, all of these topics are related in my mind, in the same way that books of diverse content become somehow related to each other on a bookshelf, if not by proximity alone. Proximity is the key word here: where this conglomerate of artist-run culture that is the first week of September might act as a kind of experiment in creating assemblages. One no longer needs to rely on science fiction to provide them with images for the future: a proximate – or approximate – distance between ideas instead becomes a tidy pairing for the personal kinds of time and space explored in these exhibitions.

Science Fiction 18: The Future from Memory at the **Or Gallery** presents the works of three female artists: **Allison Hrabluik**, **Emma Kay**, and **Elizabeth Zvonar**. The exhibition manages to dodge popular clichés that plague the science fiction genre, instead staying afloat by pinning itself to a point of view that is itself adrift and unresolved. Emma Kay's text video entitled "The Future From Memory" (2001) recounts everything the artist has ever read about the future in painstaking yet inexact detail. Written in the past tense using a kind of cool, pseudo-scientific language, the text describes a future condition in which enormous social and geological transformations have taken place. While the text recedes into the filmic distance like a Star Wars title, the viewer reads along with the artist's obtuse remembrances, attempting to process the precise language before it dissipates entirely. Likewise, Zvonar's collages show a fascination with the possibility of flattening the unknown as a means of expanding it, where images are cut into black holes, and where photographs collapse at their centres. Tapping into the mystical archive of science-fiction fantasy, a hand extends into the light like a prophecy from *A Wrinkle in Time*; a nude figure slips into the landscape like a smooth piece of peach-coloured driftwood, erected from the earth. Similarly, Allison Hrabluik's two-channel video projection, "Abet" (2012), furthers these anomalies in perception and representation. Tracing quivering lines across the wall like the edge of some bright planet, her experiments in light and shadow, movement and sound seem to fit the sci-fi bill first and foremost as images that cannot be easily identified. Is it a camera lens retracting from focus, or the edge of a wool blanket? And what is the rhythm of the mind's imprint on the eye?



Emma Kay, *The Future From Memory*, 2001. Image courtesy of the Or Gallery.

Western Front's exhibition, *IRL*, enacts everyday experiences of space travel too, but by eliminating the imaginary entirely. Technology is transformative – pushing us into a virtual terrain. But even the virtual has a material body. Highlighting recent internet art, *IRL*, internet slang for “in real life”, suggests that there are at least two planes of existence in the age of the ‘net. While an infinite topography might extend into the ether, it is in fact the result of an enormous interaction that occurs right here IRL, initiated by the user and the objects that make it happen. These experiences, and objects, become sculptures in the exhibition, testing the possibility and limitations of material contacts with the virtual. **Oliver Laric** deconstructs the mediated nature of images via the calculated format of narrated video tutorials, and **Aleksandra Domanovic's** compressed research into old Yugoslav news themes expands into quantifiable paper stack sculptures. **Olia Lialina** and **Dragan Espenschied** resurrect the aesthetics of the past to redesign computer applications from the present, while **WALLPAPERS'** enveloping digital projections create pixelated environments where images move seamlessly over the walls of the gallery space and the bodies of the room's occupants. Employing technology in its most blatant forms, what we may already know, we can learn again: digital images might propagate like clouds, but what of the material residue?



Aleksandra Domanovic, *Untitled (19:30)*, 2012. Image courtesy of Western Front. Photo by Ben Wilson.

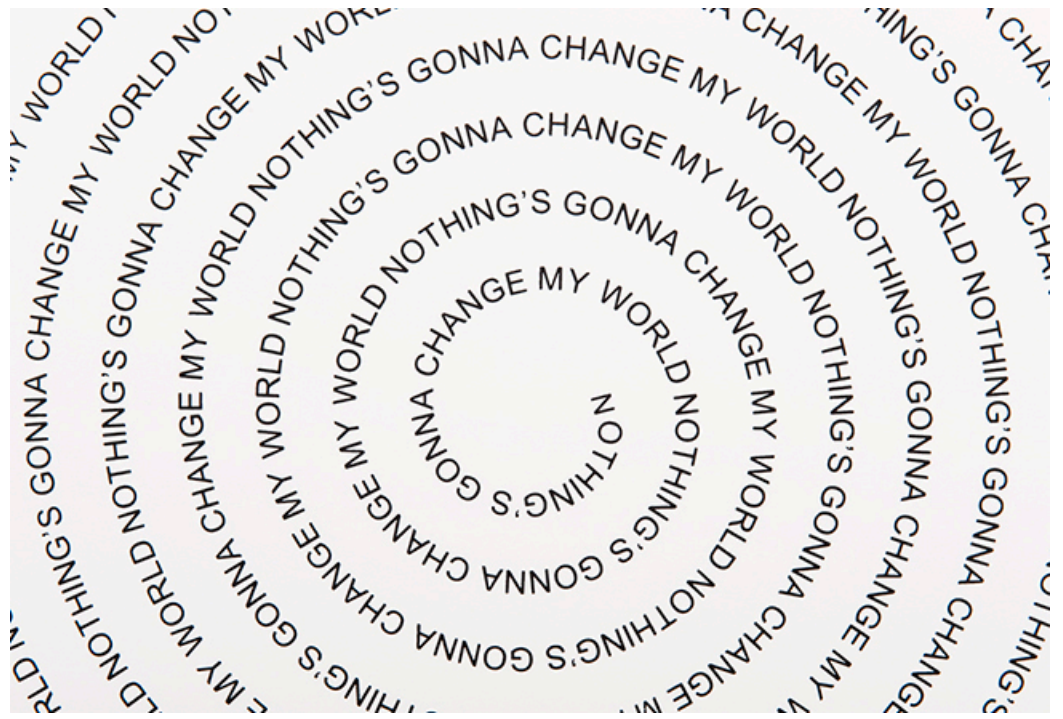
Presented by **Unit/Pitt Projects**, **Shannon Oksanen** and **Valerie Sonnier**'s exhibition *In Search of Lost Time* moves backwards into a cinematic space full of nostalgic references to French film and romantic monuments to the lives of driftwood lost and found. Childhood memories become avenues for exploring tangible relationships between the living and the dead, spaces occupied and deserted. But rather than chart an individual narrative, the show instead produces a kind of everyman's story that is neither mine nor yours. I wonder whether this is all part of the isolation of growing up, gaining perspective, and growing old, and am reminded of Svetlana Boym's book *The Future of Nostalgia*, in which post-Communist monuments find second lives (and second burials) as they take on new meaning through time. There seems a proximity that becomes more distant when touched, like the surfaces of Oksanen's muted portraits, or Sonnier's dark drawing of an old abandoned house that looks much more like a 'sketching out' – or filling in – of some half-remembered place. At some point, the themes of these exhibitions begin to merge together, the connections between which make both more and less sense as they do so. Wading through this murky territory that may just as

well be the desire to place oneself, I begin to long for a system to make meaning in the fog.



Valerie Sonnier, detail view, 2012. Image courtesy of Unit/Pitt Projects.

Kathy Slade & Lisa Robertson's exhibition at **Malaspina Printmakers** comes with a promising subtitle: *"It was a strange apartment; full of books and tattered papers, and miscellaneous shreds of all conceivable substances, united in a common element of dust."* The format of the exhibition is inspired by the eccentric Mnemosyne Atlas of the 19th century German art historian Aby Warburg, in which images from a vast and disparate collection of sources were laid out on black panels in obscure image-constellations, charting Warburg's intuitive record of memory and meaning as he navigated a personal library of more than 60,000 titles. Slade and Robertson's salon-style image library intervenes into this tradition as a conversation in the present, mapping the tangents that describe the exchanges between two intellectual collaborators and friends. Pairing screen-printed images with an indexical accompanying text, this atlas flutters between quotes from Jorge Luis Borges' "The Library of Babel" to reflections on chance, ping pong, and metamorphosis. What at first seems like a straight-forward dichotomy between image and text quickly gives way to more complex relationships, asking the viewer once more to consider their position in this chain of knowledge. Moving across the images on the wall I begin to think, too, about the space between each piece, and the invisible threads that somehow tie them all together. If there is room for poetic space in an age that seems perpetually fixated on either nostalgia for the past or a promise of the future, it seems these exhibitions weave together a network of voices in an attempt at articulating something about the present. The distraction of lived experience becomes a fitting opportunity to explore the uniquely misshapen spaces we occupy, as well as the lapsing of time that is the only true marker of an individual's subjectivity.



Kathy Slade & Lisa Robertson, detail view, 2012. Image courtesy of the artists.

Full Disclosure: At the time of writing, Jacquelyn Ross is an employee of Western Front Artist Run Centre.

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