

CHARLES ATLAS

Scary, Scary, Community Fun, Death

February 17–May 13, 2018

The American artist Charles Atlas (b. St. Louis, Missouri, 1949) has been a leading figure in the domain of film and video art for almost fifty years, creating complex video installations and seminal films documenting dance and performance. Atlas rose to renown with collaborative projects involving choreographers like Merce Cunningham (1919–2009) and Michael Clark (b. 1962) as well as the fashion designer and performance artist Leigh Bowery (1961–1994). His network of creative collaborators and associates largely coincides with his circle of friends: many of his works from the 1980s and 1990s are portraits of fellow protagonists of the New York underground scene and the contemporary milieu, employing a sub- and pop-cultural idiom to scrutinize aspects of biopower and the politics of bodies and identity. To this day, younger generations of filmmakers regard Atlas's visual language as a key reference; a prominent example is his cinematography in the fictionalized documentary *Hail the New Puritan* (1986), in which the camera becomes the subject's active counterpart. One defining feature of Atlas's work is his ongoing investigation of the expressive potentials of time-based media. He started experimenting with the defamiliarizing impact of techniques such as chroma key compositing back in the late 1970s. His more recent video installations, which are often highly technically complex, are abstract and playful explorations of an iconography of geometric series or numerical sequences, examining questions of the segmentation and structuring of the visual space as well as contemporary issues in the politics of representation. The Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst mounts the artist's first institutional solo exhibition in Switzerland, bringing together works from the past two decades, including a new work realized especially for the exhibition, in which Atlas looks back on his own work in the form of an artistic retrospective.

Atlas's work draws creative inspiration not only from his interactions with his associates but, more generally, from everything he experiences. Steeped in popular culture—the influence of Hollywood and television, in particular, is palpable throughout—his works can be read as time capsules, condensed recollections of moments in the artist's life. This focus on contemporary realities defines his oeuvre on the thematic as well as on technical levels. The work *2003* (2018) revisits the filmic portraits he created in the 1980s and 1990s. Starting point are the video portraits, which were created in 2003 in the exhibition space Participant Inc. in New York. Friends, acquaintances, and random visitors were invited to express themselves before and for the camera. Here Atlas first left the decision of what would happen before the camera to chance and used a live video mixer to edit the footage on the spot. Gesturing back to his early work, the omitted scenes broach the question of identity, which emerges in the composition as an oscillation between self-presentation and the perceptions of others. A playful aspect is pivotal: the sheer pleasure of staging the self and breaking with social conventions in order to re-negotiate issues of sexuality and gender. For the exhibition, he combines these video portraits with recordings of television contributions from the same year. *2003* juxtaposes personal self-representation with the content of the mass media.

Randomness as the relinquishing of control is thematic in *Institute for Turbulence Research* (2008). The video installation belongs to the body of work *Tornado Warning* that refers to his memories of tornado warnings in the Midwest, where he grew up, and the sense of precariousness they prompted in him. The artist for once breaks up the tightly structured visual space that usually is characteristic of his work: oblique projections of sometimes quasi-holographic rotating pictorial elements on walls and translucent screens coalesce into a disturbing whirl of visual impressions accompanied by somber music. This oppressive chaos contrasts with the sense of order in *Plato's Alley* (2008) the silent counterpart to *Institute for Turbulence Research*. Black-and-white geometric shapes slowly fan out across the screen before merging again, to be supplanted by series of digits, a numerical system that promises structure and control, though it is unclear whether that promise will be kept. It is the first work by Atlas that deliberately eschews all human and interpersonal themes.

With *Glacier* (2013), Atlas reproduces the daily flood of images by means of an immersive installation. He invites the viewer to lose himself or herself among video sequences of crowds on sidewalks, nature footage, and scenes of industrial production. The imagery blends seamlessly into a visually

Curator:
Dr. Raphael Gyga
(Curator, Migros Museum
für Gegenwartskunst)

An accompanying monograph
will be published by
JRP|Ringier in the second
half of 2018.

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harmonious overall experience whose purpose remains vague. Atlas worked exclusively with found footage, primarily from the archives of the information services and media company Bloomberg. As a purveyor of digital data, Bloomberg commands an enormous stock of generic imagery that is used in a wide variety of contexts. In our information culture, still images and videos are no more than aesthetic placeholders to be managed and traded, the stuff of a profitable business.

For his most recent work *The Years* (2018), Atlas also uses archival material. Unlike *Glacier*, however, it is not impersonal image and film sequences that have been chosen for their arbitrariness. Over the screens of the multi-channel installation run silent sequences from the artist's personal pool. A form of cinematic collage that Atlas has already used in earlier works, but for the first time extracts from 77 of his works are combined to form a cinematic retrospective of his oeuvre. Atlas scrolls through a period of 12 years of his career on each screen. But *The Years* is not only devoted to the past. The retrospect raises the question of the future of the work complex beyond the artist's death. With a projection of a group of «witnesses» who follow the artist's retrospective view of his work on the screens, Atlas refers to the reflections that form the starting point of the installation. Questions about the transience of artistic creation and the possibilities of film documentation.

Charles Atlas lives and works in New York City. Over the decades, his work has been presented in numerous exhibitions in the U.S. and abroad, including, most recently, at the Museum of Modern Art (2017); the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis (2017); the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016); and the Tate Modern, London (2013). His contribution to the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017 was honored with a Special Mention Award.

Artist's Talk: Charles Atlas

Monday, 19.02.2018, 6 pm

Moderation: Ian Wooldridge, in English

Zürcher Hochschule der Künste (ZHdK), Auditorium 1, room number 3.KO1, free admission

Screenings

Three screenings to be held in conjunction with the exhibition will illustrate the diversity of Atlas's work on film. The focus will be on his collaborations with Merce Cunningham and the resulting groundbreaking dance documentaries as well as on Atlas's associates in the underground scene of 1980s and 1990s New York. The highlight will be the presentation of his iconic *Hail the New Puritan* (1986), a singular work that interweaves the leading actor Michael Clark's dance performances with a fictional-documentary narrative.

The screening program was compiled by art historian Elsa Himmer.

Thursday, 01.03.2018, 6.30 pm

Short film program «Documentation of Dance» (1976–2005, 59 min.)

With an introduction by Elsa Himmer

Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, admission free

Thursday, 12.04.2018, 6.30 pm

Short film program «New York Underground» (1984–1993, 52 min.)

With an introduction by Elsa Himmer

Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, free admission

Wednesday, 18.04.2018, 6.30 pm

Hail the New Puritan (1986, 85 Min.)

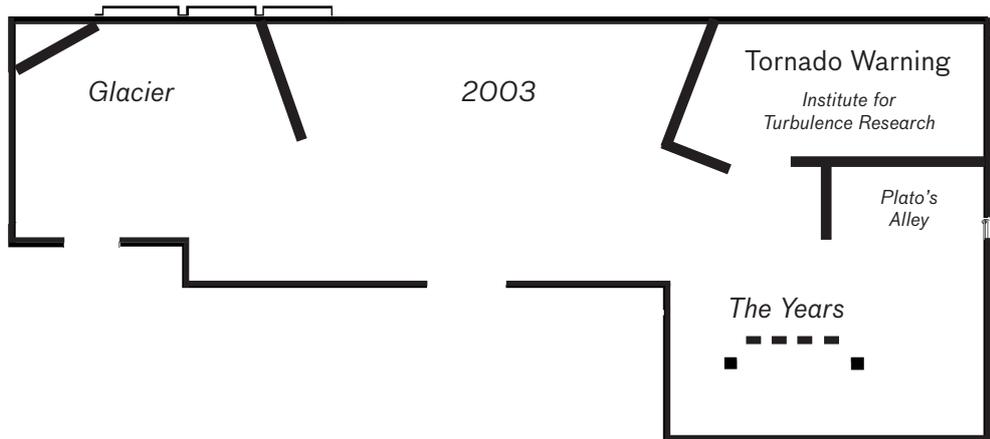
With an introduction by Martin Jaeggi (author, curator and lecturer)

Riffraff Kino, CHF 18.– (advance booking / box office, riffraff.ch)

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Glacier
2013
4-channel synchronized video projection
(color, sound)
Music: Bruce Gilbert
12 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

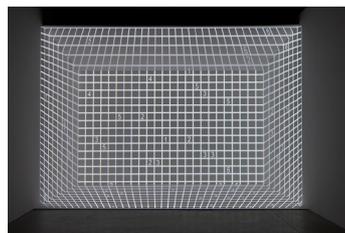


2003
2018
4-channel synchronized video installation:
2-channel video projection (color, sound) and
2-channel video on monitor (color, sound)
36 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

Tornado Warning
2008
Two-part video installation
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York



Institute for Turbulence Research
2008
5-channel video installation: 4-channel synchronized
video projection (color, sound), Voile screen and
single-channel video mirror unit projection (color, sound)
6 min.



Plato's Alley
2008
Single-channel video projection (b/w, no sound)
6:38 min.



The Years
2018
6-channel video installation: 4-channel synchronized
video on monitor (color, sound), costum-built pedestals
and 2-channel video backprojection (color, sound),
plexiglass surface
18:55 min.
Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York

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