Ciel variable
art, photo, médias, culture

Thomas Kneubühler, Absence. Patrick Mikhail Gallery. November 10, 2018–January 19, 2019. Landing Sites. Dazibao. November 15, 2018–January 26, 2019

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Parallel network no.2, **2016, impression jet d'encre,** 91 × 81 cm

formats semblent osciller entre réalisme documentaire et esthétique abstraite. Chaque œuvre est divisée en trois fractions séparées par des bandes blanches. Si l'impression première est celle d'une photographie unique qui aurait simplement été sectionnée, il s'agit en fait toujours de trois prises de vue bien distinctes. Notre perception, en corrigeant automatiquement ces discontinuités, rend plus difficilement intelligible une fragmentation pourtant effective. Farley donne ainsi une traduction visuelle au discret travail de décomposition-recomposition qui s'opère à l'intérieur même des canaux représentés. En effet, le système d'encodage numérique repose sur un protocole de segmentation du monde sensible en unités standardisées (pensons au pixel) qui, bien qu'échappant la plupart du temps à nos sens, représente un bouleversement ontologique influant sur notre perception du monde.

Les clichés de la série *Parallel Networks*, dont quatre étaient montrés à La Castiglione, se focalisent, quant à eux, sur les installations permettant l'émission, la captation ou le relais d'ondes électromagnétiques. Alors que ces dispositifs échappent la plupart du temps à notre attention, ils attirent l'œil et l'objectif du photographe. La série témoigne du rapport concret qui se tisse entre espace urbain et cyberespace, soulignant le fait que le déploiement de réseaux de communication sans fil pose des questions substantielles d'aménagement du territoire. Situés sur les hauteurs de bâtiments d'habitation, religieux, universitaires, industriels ou gouvernementaux, les émetteurs-récepteurs soutiennent des modes relationnels qui bouleversent ceux qu'accueillent traditionnellement les infrastructures auxquelles ils se greffent. L'architecture et la société vibrent sous l'effet de ces antennes-relais. Les effets de solarisation et les dédoublements latéraux paraissent établir une distance avec le réel et faire apparaître le prodige invisible de la circulation des ondes électromagnétiques. Du reste, les technologies de l'information et de la communication semblent avoir hérité du domaine divin – le ciel est inondé de données – et du privilège d'être tout à la fois partout et nulle part.

Per monstra ad astra. Cette locution latine qu'employait l'historien de l'art

Aby Warburg pour signifier « la fondamentale et "inquiétante dualité" de tous les faits de culture[1] » s'avère à même d'exprimer l'hésitation entre menace et promesse, chaos et enchantement technologique qui imprègne le travail de Denis Farley. Finalement, depuis les entrailles jusqu'aux hauteurs de ces dispositifs, l'exposition nous place face à l'ancrage pragmatique, voire insipide de nos technologies dans la réalité mondaine, mais aussi devant le mystère, voire le relai du sacré qu'elles peuvent incarner.

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1 Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'Image survivante : histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg,* Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 2002, p. 286–287.

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Fanny Bieth est étudiante au doctorat en histoire de l'art à l'UQAM. Ses recherches interrogent, sous un angle éthique et esthétique, les rapports au monde, à l'autre et au temps soutenus par l'expérience photographique et médiatisés par la circulation des images.

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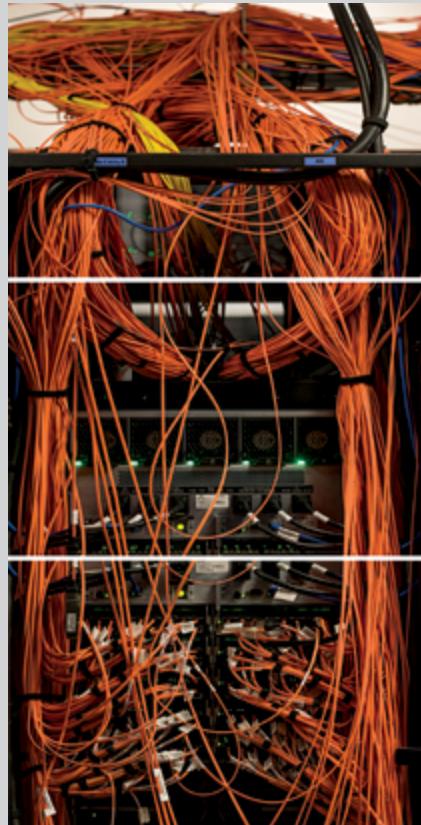
Network_orange-yellow (2), **2017, impression jet d'encre,** 196 × 101 cm

de toutes contraintes ou limites physiques découle un enchantement technologique qui tend à faire oublier que cette circulation repose sur une vectorialisation matérielle dont les coûts économiques et écologiques sont loin de s'évaporer.

L'exposition s'ouvre sur huit photographies de la série *Networks* donnant à voir les entrelacs de câbles plus ou moins ordonnancés qui composent les réseaux informatiques. Par son exploration des zones de contact qu'est l'arrière des serveurs, le travail de Denis Farley interroge, voire brouille la frontière entre le réel et le virtuel. Il attire notre attention vers la physicalité des appareillages sur lesquels reposent nos aires numériques. Mais surtout, la présence humaine semble, pour sa part, se manifester sur le mode de la trace, de l'absence, voire du fantomatique. Cette impression est

particulièrement saillante dans le cliché *Network blue* (2013) où l'œil attentif saura repérer, dans le reflet de la vitre centrale, trois silhouettes – dont celle du photographe – qui apparaissent ainsi tels des spectres dont la virtualité contraste avec la matérialité presque palpable de l'infrastructure. Le trouble est d'autant plus fort que ces réseaux électriques prennent une allure quasi anatomique dont l'organisation s'apparente à celles des systèmes sanguins et nerveux qui constituent notre organisme. Le renversement, ou *a minima* l'ébranlement, des distinctions entre l'humain et la machine nourrit un imaginaire technologique ancien que l'apparition fortuite du nom de « Frankenstein » dans *Network red* (2013) vient rappeler à la mémoire du spectateur.

Mettant en évidence la matière et la couleur de ces lacis de fils, ces grands

Thomas Kneubühler

Absence
Patrick Mikhail Gallery
November 10, 2018–January 19, 2019

Landing Sites
Dazibao
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Thomas Kneubühler has always been concerned with developing new ways of visualizing – and critiquing – power formations and their related infrastructures in the late-capitalist, globalized world. From *Private Property* (2006), in which he aimed to expose the "unseen presence of those who watch," to *Land Claim* (2014–15), in which he mapped the global interconnections among

resource-extraction multinationals and their concomitant exploitation of First Nations communities in Canada, Kneubühler has been interested in making forms of capitalist and sovereign exploitation, and the technological, logistical, and industrial apparatuses that support them, visible. These are practices and infrastructures that have largely been strategically hidden from

sight. Kneubühler's two most recent exhibitions, *Absence* and *Landing Sites* – both presented in Montreal in 2018, the former at Patrick Mikhail Gallery and the latter at Dazibao – build on these preoccupations; in both, however, there is also a focus on the intimate, micro

a way that their subjects' vacant stares never intersect. Thus, despite these disparate bodies being collected together in the gallery space, there is a strong emphasis on the absence of a potential collective agency that could emerge from such forms of alienated digital labour.

out by the approach of an off-screen helicopter (owned and operated, as Kneubühler tells us, by a transnational mining company). In Nunavik, access to the internet is limited; the town is not plugged into the wider fibre-optic matrix of FLAG, and satellite connections

the curtain of contemporary formations of power and their related infrastructures and impresses upon us the fact that the inherent invisibility of these formations is a fundamental part of the violence that they exact on the world.
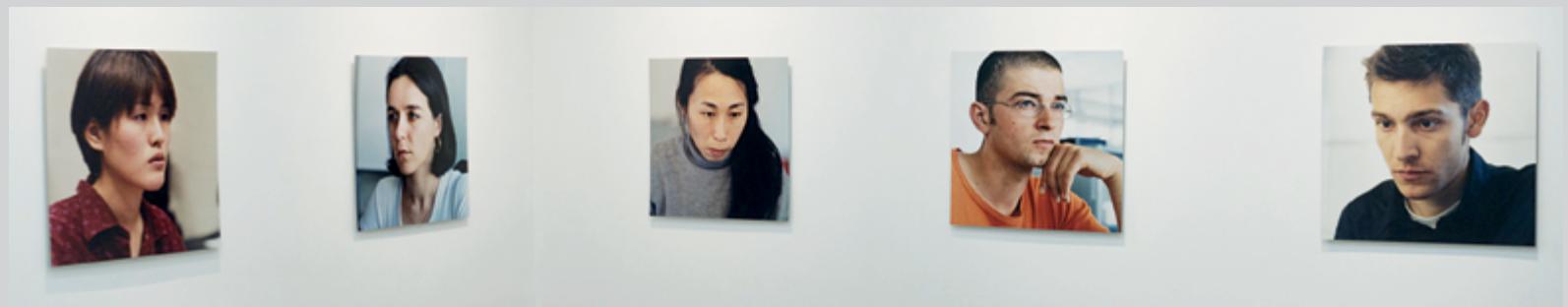
Absence, exhibition view, Patrick Mikhail Gallery, 2018, c-prints, 2001, 75 × 75 cm

impacts of such large-scale networks and infrastructures. In *Absence*, first presented in 2002 in Montreal in the show *La vie en temps reel : Mode accéléré* and subsequently exhibited in France, Germany, and Switzerland, he examines the multifarious impacts – affective, attentional, onerous – of early computing and digitization on human labour. *Landing Sites*, a new multimedia work, is focused on transatlantic fibre-optic cables and the ways in which they have reconfigured the temporalities of human communication and information transfer.

Absence is a collection of sixteen portraits. Each photograph presents a medium close-up of a figure staring beyond the limits of the frame. Each gaze and posture is subtly different: staring up, down, or straight ahead; neck craned or tilted back; shoulders tensed or relaxed. However, all are captivated by what is present beyond the edges of the image – something apparently so engrossing that there's a suggestion it could be staring back. These postures and gazes are somehow immediately familiar, even before we know that the figures are all working at computers.

In *Absence*, we are witnessing sixteen acts of one of the most ubiquitous performances of human labour under late capitalism. Vegetative and hypnotizing, these are the forms of computational labour that we have been increasingly subjected to since the late 1970s. Here, Kneubühler seems to be interested in how both computational and technological shifts have reshaped the affective, attentional, and onerous dimensions of human labour. Moreover, there is a strong emphasis on the alienating capacities of such work. As Kneubühler suggests, "The monitor is the gate to the digital world which makes things visible to the user. Focusing on the computer screen, people are completely absorbed by the machine and forget about their physical environment: they dive into another reality." Within the gallery space, these portraits are spaced in such

The central focus of the *Landing Sites* exhibition is the fibre-optic cable FLAG (Fiber-Optic Link Around the Globe) Atlantic-1, put into operation in 2001, which connects Long Island, New York, with Bretagne, France. It was the first submarine cable that could transmit at up to 10 Gbit/s and, consequently, handle high-quality video. A diptych of photographs, *Landing Sites (East and West)*, portrays the two endpoints of the cable. The *East* image captures a collection of seaweed-covered rocks in the foreground, with several of the buildings on the Bretagne seafront peeking through the mist and fog in the background. *West* looks out to sea from a Long Island beach, capturing several container vessels on the ocean's distant horizon. These ghostly landscapes serve to emphasize the invisibility of such infrastructural technologies, which are so crucial for contemporary globalization, capitalist circulation, and human communication. Indeed, as Kneubühler suggests, such technological apparatuses "are affecting people's lives and changing the world, they are present in all parts of daily life. But still, the essential part of new technologies is invisible: cables connecting people from continent to continent are somewhere under the earth or in the sea."

Another work in the exhibition, a two-channel video piece titled *Ebb and Flow*, focuses on how uneven access to these communications infrastructures is tied into the wider modalities of contemporary settler colonialism and natural-resource extraction. Split across two large screens and staggered through the back half of the gallery space, the piece juxtaposes two locations. The Bretagne seafront makes a reappearance, alongside Nunavik's Ungava Bay. In both videos, children play on their respective beaches, and we observe their activities in long, statically framed, single takes. The children in Bretagne slowly disappear into the coastal fog, whereas the children in Nunavik are audibly drowned

are unreliable at best. These same spaces are also the sites of contemporary neocolonial exploitation, as transnational mining companies scour the land for the precious metals that facilitate the further development and advancement of these communicative – and late-capitalist – infrastructures elsewhere. First Nations territories are continually plundered, and at the same time proper access to communications is repeatedly foreclosed (and the relationship between these exploitative practices is certainly not coincidental). Kneubühler's rich and intricate exhibitions serve to remind us that our myriad forms of digital communication and their related infrastructures do not create, as Tiziana Terranova suggests, a free-

1 Tiziana Terranova, "Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy," *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 43.

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Landing Site (East), c-print, 2018, 122 × 162 cm

floating postindustrial utopia"; rather, they are "in full mutually consisting interaction with late capitalism, especially. . . global venture capital."[1] Kneubühler's carefully researched work both allows us to peek behind