Lettres du Voyant

Louis Henderson

Link to Video:
Louis Henderson: Lettres du Voyant (40:00, 2013)

Louis Henderson writes with his camera. In his 2013 film “Lettres du Voyant (Visionary Letters)” Henderson tells a story about Sakawa, the Ghanaian magical practice for ensuring the success of internet scamming and the extraction of minerals and data.

In this excerpt, we visit three sites that directly speak of maintenance and repair and their lack thereof. First, we enter a goldmine. In these mines the colonial forces extracted precious metals in the most ignoble ways, and here we see the practice continues. Henderson descends into this mine and scans it with laser measurement technology—in a sense, generating a three dimensional data account of the forceful erosion and disrepair induced through this illicit activity.

Ghana has become the site where former colonial powers have begun disposing of their discarded computers, a practice exacerbated by product development cycles that do not include repair and maintenance. Tons of corporate and private desktop setups end up in the e-waste ground we see, called Agbogbloshie. It has become an extraction site similar to a mine, with access to it controlled by overseers. There we find an industry that pieces together functioning IT equipment from the scraps. Craftsmen repair and maintain these machines, resurrect them into a corporate afterlife.

Unusable parts end up in the field where raw metallurgy is used to extract rare earths and precious metals by burning mainboards and hard drives. Engulfed by this visible smoke and invisible fumes, Sakawa has emerged. In the internet cafes surrounding this area, data scrapped from old computers is used to extract credit card payments via email. Digital photographs, bank account data or email history are used in connection with ritual magic practices to haunt those at their desks that are unaware of their global repercussions or just don’t know how to properly delete their personal data.

The excerpt is a stark reminder that we need to be personally and politically invested in the maintenance and repair of our relations with the world. For that we will not be haunted by Sakawa, or other methods of post-colonial revenge.

Instead of a short bio, we present a brief narrative
account: Louis Henderson is personally connected into Ghana. His step-Grandmother is from Kumasi - where his grandfather is buried in the garden of their house - and his cousins helped him make this film. In a brief conversation leading up to the preparation of this article, Henderson spoke about some of his narrative decisions from the vantage gained by the several years that have passed since he released his film. Rather than deploying voiceover that relied upon a spoken collage of essayistic, poetic, conversational, and scientific text, Henderson now believes his future films ought to be based on a practice of listening to others.

“To work through colonial history through contemporary cinema means to apply new methods of narration that incorporate listening to stories rather than telling stories.” Making cinema not for the art world or film festival world, but for the people of the world. Louis Henderson and Filipa César’s latest film “Sunstone” will be released in 2017.

—Bernhard Garnicnig