

ME TO NMOD
LIKE LOOKS
IT LONG
SO DU BEEN

PHG

SEPTEMBER 14 - NOVEMBER 4 2007

SUE DE BEER, MILES COOLIDGE, SAM DURANT, RODNEY GRAHAM, HENRIK HÅKANSSON, WILLIAM HUNT, KNOWLES EDDY KNOWLES, SIMON DYBBROE MØLLER, JONATHAN MONK, FILIPA RAPOSO, BRUCE NAUMAN, KAY ROSEN, MUNGO THOMSON & CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS

CURATED BY MARK SOO

OPENING RECEPTION

Friday, September 14 at 7pm

FILM SCREENING

Sam Durant's Entropy In Reverse (Gimme Shelter Backwards), 1999, 42 min
Thursday, September 20
730 pm & 845pm
at Pacific Cinematheque, 1131 Howe St
For tickets please call 604.688.3456

CATALOGUE LAUNCH & PERFORMANCE

William Hunt: Saturday, October 13 . 7 pm

STANDING ON YOUR HEAD

Mark Soo

From catalogue text. Launch October 13.

In 1896, American psychologist Dr. George Stratton began conducting experiments in which he donned a peculiar invention—eyeglasses with a complex system of lenses that turned his view of the world upside-down. Understanding that since an image refracted through the lens of the human eye is inverted upon the retina then turned over and corrected by the brain, Stratton wondered what would happen if the retina were presented with an image already upside-down. In his experiment, Stratton aimed, in part, to question how the brain itself would accommodate this reversal. Would it *right* a doubly *wronged* image? "Is the inverted image," he asked, "even a necessary condition of our seeing things in an upright position?"¹

Initially disoriented, Stratton for the most part spent his time indoors. Through the glasses he watched the street below, contemplated the movement of his hands and feet while handling different objects, and generally made observations about the awkward nature of doing one thing, only to witness its appearance at the opposite end of his visual field. "When I saw an object near one of my hands and wished to grasp it," he remarked with a shambling sense of intuition, "the other hand was the one I moved."²

After approximately eight days of uninterrupted use and despite the difficulty, Stratton's brain adapted to the inversion and, remarkably, corrected his vision by learning to turn it right-way-round.³ Accommodating the awkward gap between thinking and seeing and finally achieving a tenuous sense of coordination, he began to experience the flipped image as if it were entirely normal. In so doing, Stratton proposed the unorthodox notion that the way down could *also* be a way up (a thought later echoed by artist Robert Smithson), while acknowledging the reciprocal, and indeed, necessarily interdependent relationship shared by both perspectives in the displacement of one with the other. The

experiment was an extraordinary endeavor and one whose primary point of speculation reveals the relative nature of empirical reality and the slippery relationship between the world and our apprehension of it. These tensions reflect the idea that an image is not stationary and that the world does not remain static. In turn, they demonstrate how the act of perception and the construction of meaning are in constant flux. Out of the complex awareness formed by this simple flip in perspective Stratton recognized significant possibilities for renewed forms of comprehension.

Upside-down-ness—or any shift in position relative to the conventions of gravity and the axis of the horizon—can be understood as an implicit component of perception as much as it is a vehicle for wider social and artistic commentary.⁴ To turn something upside-down is to imply an altered mode of understanding: a different perspective from which to comprehend the world. From the dynamics of disorientation to the depths of repression, and from conceits of abstraction or absurdity to expressions of subversion and dissent, the strategies of inversion have often been associated with the margins of unrest and its wayward potential to transform established aesthetic, social, and cultural formations. Charged with this restless spirit of imbalance, works of art have been hung wrong-side-up in the fervour of religious iconoclasm, while upturned flags have made provocative political statements—their efficacies, in instances, going as far as to incite revolt.⁵

Qualified through often-unusual actions of upending, rolling over, or turning turtle, how do our understandings of these actions mediate—or become mediated by—the cultural landscape we inhabit? When realized as part of an artistic strategy, what happens when one is faced with an artwork the *wrong* way up? Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* of 1917, a urinal overturned on its back, provoked the ontological crisis of art in part through its strident assertions of context, language, and representational function over visual means as a defining criteria for art. El

Lissitzky's *Proun* paintings of geometric and linear forms opened a mutinous challenge to the tradition of a single fixed orientation.⁶ Radically reformulating painting's conventional orientation and opening it to negotiation, Lissitzky sought to abolish notions of up and down in a new conception of three-dimensional space. Lissitzky aspired to a condition of weightlessness (an allegory for social and cultural transformation) while Piero Manzoni's *Socle du Monde* (1961), in contrast, bears the weight of gravity in its ardent determinism to unite daily life with art. In a gesture as absurd as it was tinged with hubris, *Socle du Monde* declared the world itself as its art by means of a large sculptural base resting upturned on bare earth.

In suspicion of the *terra firma* beneath—or above—him, Dutch artist M.C. Escher once remarked, "Are you sure that a floor cannot also be a ceiling?"⁷ For Escher, this meandering logic raised challenging questions about his relationship to the world's certainties. Similarly, Henrik Håkansson's *Untitled (Cocos Nucifera)* (2006)—a coconut palm tree planted sideways in a support affixed to a wall—upends the relationship of the tree and its roots to the earth. Coconut palms, with fronds waving against a sunset backdrop, play toward pastoral visions of a tropical paradise. Shifting the viewer's perspective from horizontal to aerial by transforming the wall into the 'floor,' Håkansson's reconfiguration of the landscape reflects the vexed relationship between culture and its construction (or destruction) of the natural world. In destabilizing the established axis of verticality as the seat of human thought and vision, Håkansson's actions establish the possibility for new and complex forms of meaning through radical reorientations of alignment.

Simon Dybbroe Møller's text work *Upside Down Upside Down Upside Down* (2005), installed using the gallery ceiling as a base instead of the floor, and Christopher Williams' beetle specimens, flipped over and playing dead, both suggest the possibilities and limits of vision and photography. Møller's work displays the words "seeing

without thinking" upside-down in an allusion to the dizzying interplay between cognition and sight⁸ while Williams' insects, frozen in feigned death—in a haunted reminder of photography's suspension of temporal and spatial reality—brings to light associations (to borrow from writer/curator Bennett Simpson) with the "material apparatus and discursive underpinnings of the photographic process itself."⁹ Resembling their mechanized counterpart, Jonathan Monk's *Constantly Moving Whilst Standing Still* (2005) rests as oddly as the insects in Williams' photograph. An upturned bicycle with wheels in the air spinning paradoxically in opposite directions, Monk's sculpture imagines forward movement as a conflicted conundrum.

Monk and Williams works both stand in contrast to collective Knowles Eddy Knowles' deadpan text drawing, depicting the words *nomad* and *monad* flipped and anagrammatized so as to play with their mixed visual and denotative resemblance. Installed in a different location of the gallery each week, the drawing drifts into new relationships with other works over the course of the exhibition, accruing meanings that vary with each shift in location. Restless, these inverted words exemplify the construction of meaning as a nomadic and migratory enterprise: fugitive, transient and contingent on the vagaries of context.

Importantly, the instabilities of inversion arise not only by the direct and conspicuous manipulation of an object alone, but also through the discordant potentials of a subject to its frame. As demonstrated by George Stratton's experiment, perspectival order and spatial orientation (and its impact upon the organization of social relations) are conditioned by learned experience and can be as quickly dissolved by a shift in framework as they can be reconstructed. Motivated by this logic, Filipa Raposo's ghostly-noir video negotiates the gaps in cognitive experience: in a surreal tableau, a lit candle held by the artist strangely maintains its stability within a room that rotates around it. Miles Coolidge's photographs of crooked and broken

furniture found in his neighbourhood work, likewise, to unbalance the spectator simply by turning the picture to suit the object rather than the horizon. By turns playful and bewildering, both Raposo and Coolidge suggest alternate forms of logic through variations in perspective. Drawing together two of his frequent artistic subjects, the Rolling Stones and Robert Smithson, Sam Durant's dual-screen video installation, *Entropy In Reverse (Gimme Shelter Backwards)* (1999) reflects upon the Maysles brothers' notorious documentary of the tragic Rolling Stones concert at Altamont in 1969, running the composite footage literally in reverse. (Smithson, in a curious proviso to his thoughts on the degenerative effects of entropy, added that the irreconcilable results of collapse and disorder could be reversed if filmed and played backward.) Dubbed "Rock and Roll's Worst Day," the violence of Altamont signaled to many the downward-spiraling optimisms of an era. Playing with vertiginous notions of time and the belated consequences of a fractious history, Durant's doublings, reversals, inversions, and reflections wilfully splinter the retelling of the Altamont mythology, foregrounding the subjective distance between understandings of recent history and their relationship to the present day.

Whether standing on one's head or standing in front of an upside-down work, key to the strategy of inversion are notions of transformation, change, and performance. For if upside-down is the intended result, then the actions of turning over, toppling or capsizing are often a means to dramatize the shifts in alignment required of both the artwork and viewer. Through these manipulations, works by Bruce Nauman, Sue de Beer, and William Hunt all register the jostling effects of inversion, (both real and imagined), on the body. Nauman's video *Pulling Mouth* (1969) depicts the artist nonsensically manipulating his open mouth with both hands. Displayed upside-down and projected larger-than-life, the dissonance of Nauman's contortions oscillate between abstraction and grotesque, and are aggressively exaggerated by the absurdity of their inversion.

Equally unsettling is Sue de Beer's video self-portrait which depicts the artist as strangely contorted (the consequence of filming herself hanging upside-down). Displayed right-side-up, de Beer's flip-flop presents an external manifestation of interior psychology—a queasy reflection of ambiguous physical and emotional states. As part of an effort to understand the artist's image however, viewers might consider whether it is de Beer, or they themselves who are the wrong way up. Similarly, in William Hunt's *The Impotence of Radicalism In the Face of All These Extreme Positions* (2005), the artist performs a self-penned acoustic song while suspended upside-down. Struggling with the effects of gravity to play the guitar and sing, the spectre of failure and vulnerability while upside-down form both an empathetic yet seditious voice in Hunt's embodiment of the solitary singer-songwriter.

Through a different sense of performance, the rivulets of Rodney Graham's *Inverted Unfinished Drip Painting* (2007) humorously refute the demands of gravity in a work that evokes the painter Morris Louis. The painting is derived from the creation of an elaborate and eccentric persona centred on the life of a middle-aged man in the early 1960s inspired to dabble in the arts (indeed, the painting comes complete with period gold-leaf frame).¹⁰ In a fittingly upside-down chain of thought, Graham seems to make studied practice of the character of an amateur painter who, in turn, makes careful study of an historical artist's practice.

As its title indicates, Kay Rosen's wall painting *Leak* (1997) describes an accidental loss of content through a hole. The word "roof" is inverted and painted over the word "floor." Letter-by-letter, both words mimic each other except for a missing "l": the leaky hole in the roof. Elliptically connecting words and their associations through inversion and mirroring, Rosen unsettles conventional principles of language to produce newer, compound readings. *High Noon* (1993), another work by Rosen, conflates a painting of the word *noon* with its height on the ceiling. Here, the processes of looking and reading,

inseparable from the physical presence of the work, coheres through the emphasis on a shifted point-of-view. In the face of the reference to an impending confrontation, Rosen's phrasing instead suggests a clarity found through asymmetrical forms of looking. Mungo Thomson's *Between Projects* (2001) demands a similar contortion of its spectators, but toward divergent ends. Thomson's hand-carved pencils invert notions of industriousness with the frivolity associated with boredom and idleness, exchanging a gesture identified with aimless thought (throwing pencils at the ceiling) with one of concentrated labour (carving each pencil from scratch).

When George Stratton finally removed his glasses, he found that sight returned to normal after a brief spell of confusion. He concluded that, "the difficulty of seeing things upright by means of upright retinal images... (seemed) to consist solely in the resistance offered by long-established experience." Stratton further proffered that, "a person whose vision had from the very beginning been under the conditions we have in the present experiment artificially produced, could never possibly feel that such visual perceptions were invented."¹¹ Exploring the multiple perspectives between wrong-side-up and right-side-down, the artists in *Been Up So Long It Looks Like Down To Me* investigate the strategy of inversion and its exchange of positions as a complex framework for new orders of visual, sensory and cognitive experience. As avatars of unconventional thought, they echo the experiments of Stratton in testing both the logic and emotion of human perception while examining possibilities for interpretation through extreme shifts in perspective. In doing so, their works attempt to draw relationships to how these transformations in orientation can index, reshape and alter our understanding of "fixed" cultural relations. Although Stratton's experiment was conducted over 100 years ago, his simple process of inversion—of flipping or being flipped by an image or object—is today no less amusing, frightening or perplexing a device in which to imagine the surrounding world.

1 George M. Stratton, "Some preliminary experiments on vision without inversion of the retinal image," *Psychological Review*, 3 (1896).

2 Ibid.

3 Raymond Corsini, Ed., *The Dictionary of Psychology*. Routledge: New York, (1999): 1055.

4 Vancouver author and critic Michael Turner presciently alludes to the scope of inversion through the model of the camera obscura: "In the photography of Rodney Graham, a tree is exhibited as the eye and camera see it. The image—what we describe as "inverted"—provides for one of the most potent political-economic metaphors of our time: the camera obscura." See "Glass and Mirrors," in *Intertidal, Vancouver Art and Artists*, ed. Dieter Roelstraete and Scott Watson, exh. Cat, (Antwerp: Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen and Vancouver: The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery 2005): 28.

5 Although it is technically unconstitutional to hang the US flag upside-down, interestingly, it can also by law be displayed inverted as "a signal of dire distress in instances of extreme danger to life or property"; a humorous, yet acute embodiment of the charged invective of rebellion combined with calls for the humble urgency of help. See the United States Flag Code, Title 36, U.S.C., Chapter 10.

6 Yve-Alain Bois, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility," *Art in America* 76, no. 4 (1988): 160-81.

7 Darlene Geis, Ed., "M. C. Escher, 29 Master Prints." Harry N. Abrams, Inc. (1981).

8 With the text piece installed relative to the ceiling, Møller suggests that the room itself is an ocular chamber and that we might be standing not on the floor, but on the ceiling.

9 Bennett Simpson, "What does the jellyfish want? Bennett Simpson on the art of Christopher Williams," *Artforum*, April 2006.

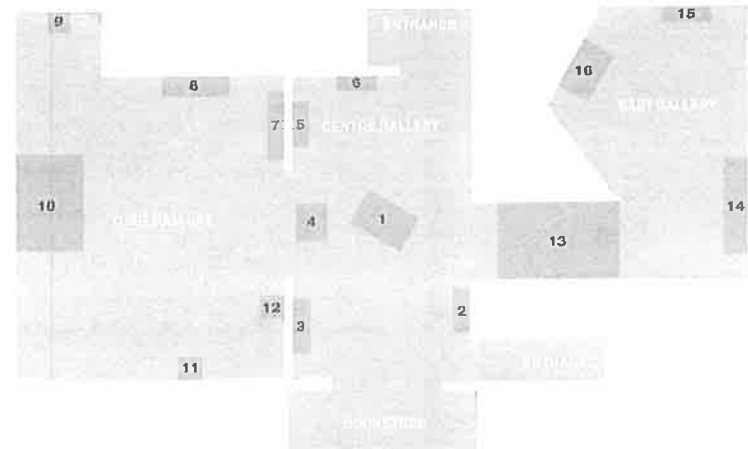
10 Rodney Graham, e-mail correspondence with the author, September 2007.

11 George M. Stratton, "Some preliminary experiments on vision without inversion of the retinal image," *Psychological Review*, 3 (1896).

THANK YOU

Presentation House Gallery would like to express sincere thanks to the many individuals who have contributed to making this exhibition possible. Our appreciation in particular to the lenders: Bob Rennie and Carey Foulks and Rennie Collection Director Wendy Chang, Dr. Paul Marks, Nancy Kwon, Didier Krzentowski, di Rosa Preserve, and the Art Institute of Chicago. Thanks to Blum & Poe, Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Donald Young Gallery, Franco Noero Gallery, Casey Kaplan Gallery, Electronic Arts Intermix, Ibid Projects, John Connelly Presents, Galerie Kamm, Marianne Boesky, David Zwirner Gallery, and Yvon Lambert Gallery for their help facilitating artworks, and to Jim Sinclair and the Pacific Cinémathèque.

LIST OF WORKS



1 Jonathan Monk
Constantly Moving Whilst Standing Still, 2005
bicycle, motors
70" x 43" x 20"
Collection of Dr. Paul Marks, Toronto

2 Knowles Eddy Knowles
Un Plus Un Plus Un (Nomad/Monad), 2004/2007
marker on paper, mdf frame
16" x 20"
Courtesy the artists
This work will move weekly throughout the gallery.

3 Miles Coolidge
Couch, 2006
c-print
41" x 52"
Courtesy Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York

4 Mungo Thomson
Between Projects, 2001
handmade pencils (wood, lead, rubber, tin, enamel)
2" x 13" x 12"
Collection of di Rosa Preserve, Napa

5 Simon Dybbroe Møller
Upside Down Upside Down Upside Down, 2005
black vinyl, 5" x 46.5", placed 59" from the top of the ceiling
Courtesy Galerie Kamm, Berlin

6 Christopher Williams
Tenebrionidae, Asbolus verrucosus, Death Feigning Beetle, Silverlake, California October 1, 1996 (#1), 1996
silver gelatin print
25 3/8" x 29 3/8"
Collection of Nancy Kwon, Los Angeles

7 Kay Rosen
Leok, 1997
enamel paint on wall
dimensions variable
Courtesy the The Art Institute of Chicago, Jacob and Bessie Levy Art Encouragement Fund, 1999-300

8 Rodney Graham
Inverted Unfinished Drip Painting, 2007
liquid acrylic on linen
90" x 48"
Rennie Collection, Vancouver

9 Sue de Beer
Loser, 1997
single-channel video, DVD
Courtesy the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York

10 Henrik Håkansson
Untitled (cocos nucifera), 2006
palm tree, sodium light, base dimensions variable
Rennie Collection, Vancouver

11 Filipa Raposo
Untitled, 2004
single-channel video
Courtesy the artist

12 Miles Coolidge
Stool, 2006
c-print
14" x 15"
Courtesy Casey Kaplan Gallery, New York

13 Kay Rosen
High Noon, 1993
enamel paint on ceiling
dimensions variable
Courtesy the artist and Yvon Lambert Gallery, New York/Paris

14 Sam Durant
Mick with Open Mouth, 2003
photocopied mylar on mirror
68" x 46.5"
Collection of Didier Krzentowski, Paris and Catriona Jeffries

15 Jonathan Monk
Untitled, 2007
postcard
4" x 5.75"
Courtesy the artist

Jonathan Monk
Untitled, 2007
postcard
4" x 6"
Courtesy the artist

Jonathan Monk
Untitled, 2007
postcard
4" x 6"
Courtesy the artist

Jonathan Monk
Untitled, 2007
postcard
4" x 6"
Courtesy the artist

Jonathan Monk
Untitled, 2007
postcard
4" x 6"
Courtesy the artist

PERFORMANCE

16 William Hunt
The Impotence of Radicalism in the Face of All These Extreme Positions, 2005,
performance, approx. duration 10 min. Courtesy the artist & Ibid Projects, London

FILM SCREENINGS

Sam Durant
Entropy in Reverse (Gimme Shelter Backwards), 1999
dual-projection video, 42 min
Courtesy of the artist, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles, and Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

Bruce Nauman
Pulling Mouth, 1969
16 mm film transferred to DVD, 8 min, b&w, silent
Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York