
Phil Solomon

"EMPIRE," 2008

September 26–October 1, 2008

Performance Space

Just as the rise and fall of an imagined city (and, by extension, civilization itself) is chronicled in Thomas Cole's series of five paintings called *The Course of Empire*, the rise and fall of various movements of art, film, and technology can be tracked through the course of "remakes" of Andy Warhol's *Empire*. Artists have used Warhol's 8 and a half hour monument as the locus of issues of appropriation (Elaine Sturtevant's 1972 *Warhol Empire State* and Douglas Gordon's 1998 *Bootleg (Empire)*); have updated it to new modes of filmmaking (Amos Poe's 2008 "sequel" *Empire II* thrusts the Empire State Building into the MTV-era); or relocated Warhol's unblinking gaze to other geographical locations (Bernadette Corporation, Claire Fontaine, and Reena Spaulding's 2006 *Imperio*, among others).

Phil Solomon's "EMPIRE" ushers Warhol's conceptual classic into the age of computer graphics. Solomon's digital readymade is a static shot from the videogame *Grand Theft Auto IV* of the Liberty City (née Manhattan) skyline in perpetuity. The Empire State Building is centrally framed, but is placed back into its context within a larger metropolis. Warhol exclaimed during the filming of *Empire* that "the Empire State Building is a star," but in Solomon's version the building becomes a character actor. Instead of Warhol's myth-making low angle camera setup, Solomon frames his Empire State landscape from above, with a wide-angle lens (although there's no such thing as a lens in a videogame) that warps to situate what Louis Sullivan called the "vertical modernism" within the surrounding natural environment of rivers and skies. The result is a city symphony as composed by John Cage or the Lumière's.

As much as "EMPIRE" deals with Warhol and the city, it also is a contemplation of *Grand Theft Auto IV* (GTA). The activities proscribed by the narrative in the perennially controversial game rarely rise above ground level thuggery, primarily car jacking and other random acts of violence, and seldom encourage anything resembling contemplation. But modern videogame teleology has advanced to a place where the player is granted something resembling free will. So instead of eluding cops over petty crimes, Solomon eludes the societal demands of the game altogether and finds a perch in the clouds. From this macro vantage point, it's possible to witness the unseen cosmic structures that govern the activities below. The effect is similar to the legendary class that James Benning occasionally teaches called "Looking & Listening." Benning takes his students out into a real world location and has them "practice paying attention." On the ground, the GTA environment seems to consist solely of cement, neon, and lead, but "EMPIRE" shows us Rothko-like skies, cyclical moons, shimmering bodies of water, and other dazzlingly beautiful phenomena that are otherwise invisible.

One key difference between Solomon's installation and other *Empire* protégés is that, while the work is as conceptually rigorous as the others, it's actually a joy to watch. No work that has come after Warhol's has been able to maintain that balance of existing somewhere between a film, a painting, and a photograph. And Solomon wisely skirts the purely formalist approach that Warhol exhausted with his thrillingly comprehensive film. (Solomon also inverts the attenuated passing of time in Warhol's film.) "EMPIRE" is not to be mistaken for a minimalist work. While it leaves the "action" of GTA far below, there are a dazzling number of events that occur continually that create a sensation somewhere between meditation and entertainment. Whether it's shifting color gradations or subtleties of lighting or the expressionist blurs of rain on "lens" or debris wafting in the path of airplane flight patterns, there is always something to hold the eye while awakening the mind. "EMPIRE" celebrates and subverts the basic operating systems of the game so much that a revision of the game's title seems in order. Let's call it *Grand Zen Auto*.

In his film and video work, Phil Solomon is one of the foremost masters of the cinematic elegy and "EMPIRE" fits squarely into that body of work. As beautiful and expressive as the high resolution imagery is, it still functions as lament for the death of celluloid. The world on this screen wants so badly to be real, but it never will be. The sharp perfection of the images adds a funereal air to the proceedings that is enhanced by the depopulated landscape, which leads to the other elegy contained within "EMPIRE." Warhol—always simultaneously astute and simple—surely intended his title to conjure thoughts about meanings of the word "empire" beyond the literal building. Solomon takes up this idea to reflect on the current state of the American empire, creating an elegant diptych with *American Falls*, also on view in this exhibition. It's telling that both Warhol's and Solomon's Empire State Buildings exist in a skyline without the World Trade Center. As Warhol's film was created in a time of expansion, Solomon's video shows a time of contraction. While watching "EMPIRE," ask yourself, "just what are those pieces of debris floating in the air, anyway?"

Chris Stults
Assistant Curator, Film/Video

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"EMPIRE", 2008
High definition video from Playstation 3 Blu-ray DVD of *Grand Theft Auto IV*, color, silent, running time: indefinite (Wexner Center iteration: 127 hours).

Phil Solomon will visit the Wexner Center on October 1 to present a program of his films and videos and to discuss this installation. Additional programs of Solomon's films will be screened on October 9 and 16. Visit wexarts.org for complete details.

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