



James Clar: The Disappeared

By Michael Wilson

On the northwestern flank of Mount Fuji lies Aokigahara, the Sea of Trees. A dense forest rooted in porous, sound-deadening volcanic soil, it's a popular spot for tourists in search of natural tranquility, as well as for more troubled souls plagued by suicidal thoughts. Famous as a home to *yūrei*—mythological ghosts—Aokigahara prompts contemplation of the metaphysical, acting, in dozens of cases annually, as a secluded interzone. Such is the site's resonance, it crops up frequently in popular literature, film, and music, the perfect eerie setting.

In James Clar's multichannel video installation, *Tibetan Book of the Dead (Chapters 1, 2, 3)*, a figure walking through Aokigahara flickers in and out of existence, merging with the trees behind it in the manner of the eponymous alien from John McTiernan's 1987 sci-fi actioner, *The Predator*. In McTiernan's movie, the effect of semi-invisibility was achieved by combining two different takes, manipulating the results via chroma key to create a shifting outline around which the background foliage appears to bend. In Clar's video, meticulous editing with Photoshop's Content Aware software produces a similarly fractured result. That the video's projected image is also refracted in a pool of water only adds to the work's woozy vibe.

Clar, an artist fascinated by the application of light-generating technologies to visual and physical simulation, alludes here to our accelerating disappearance into an omnipresent digital backdrop. As we merge with extant bodies of networked imagery, information, and opinion, he suggests, the meaning of a "secure identity"—even of individuality itself—begins to decay. It's a point also made by his reference to Robert Rauschenberg's notorious *Erased DeKooning Drawing* (1953), another work rooted in the forcible undoing of a constructed image. Think too of Paul Pfeiffer's videos, in which selected athletes are digitally scrubbed from TV sports footage, resulting in weirdly destabilized, revisionist confrontations.



In another part of *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, projected to overlap with the first, a series of interviews with professional video game players in Japan unfolds in an anonymous luxury hotel suite. Having been instructed to imagine relaxing after a high-stakes contest, the superstar competitors are quizzed about the psychological hardships of their sport (we're in a future in which the activity is taken even more seriously than it is now), and about how the games' contents seep into their subconscious minds. It's a scenario that speaks to Clar's intention to "humanize" the forms, uses, and contexts of high technology, weaving nonlinear narratives around them to focus on their essential qualities and potential. As another medium in which light becomes





the primary means to simulate reality (or at least to conjure up a believable fantasy), the video game is a doubly natural fit for Clar. Having studied film and animation before attending NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program, he has long since been immersed in the paired worlds of the illuminated screen and the projected image, and with their key associations: instant relay, mass entertainment, and transnational commerce. Moving from work with an explicitly sociopolitical bent (inspired in large part by time spent in the hyperglobalized environment of Dubai), to projects that investigate human perceptual quirks, Clar now combines the two, and is focused on installations as much as on discrete objects. In this exhibition, in addition to presenting his own footage, Clar also makes use of Stanley Kubrick's foundational *2001*:

A Space Odyssey (1968) and Gaspar Noé's confrontational psychedelic masterpiece *Enter the Void* (2009). In *Time Compression* (*A Light at the End. A Light at the Beginning*), he combines and rearranges the two movies according to color saturation, moving, frame by frame, from one end of the spectrum to the other. Projecting the result on a transparent surface in such a way that the viewer also becomes a screen, the artist reframes the two visionary originals as, akin to *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, explorations of the interval between life and death. (It's no coincidence that a copy of the eponymous book makes a cameo in Noé's film.)

Even when, as here, his source material is familiar, there's a consistently futuristic look and feel to Clar's project. But he never turns his back on the past. Fascinated by still-developing technologies like 3-D printing, he retains an affection for much older forms of visual sleight-of-hand. *The Ether*, an undulating panel of projected colored light, is generated by something very much like an old lava lamp; a moving container of oil placed in front of a projector. Again, what's most significant is not the vintage of the medium, but the human narrative it unlocks. As Marshall McLuhan (a foundational thinker for Clar), points out, "All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered."

This is how you disappear.

