David Hoffos: Nothing Never Happens

[*David Hoffos: Scenes from the Dream House* Rodman Hall Art Centre/Brock University: St. Catherines ON. 2010. 29-54.]

You pass from daylight into the exhibition's shadow realm through heavy purple drapes. Inside the expansive but crowded gallery, a low cacophony of synthesized music surges. Mysterious mechanical and faint city sounds, distant laughter, and noises from the night woods surround you. As eyes adjust to the dark, a faint glow radiates from muffled television sets. The monitors are angled in front of seventeen glass windows set into black hoarding walls, behind which are twilight dioramas featuring scenes of twisted familiarity. The theatrical curtains, dusky room, dramatic sounds and flickering images suggest a movie theatre or haunted house.

Scene one: a campground at night. Surrounded by trees is a small, capsule-shaped silver trailer. Its open door leads to an illuminated interior. "Airstreams's" mirrored walls are angled to multiply the scene into an arc that rounds deep into space. The sound of a barking dog amplifies the sense of distance and foreshadows an intruder. Suddenly, a vague specter shimmers to the right of the camper. More startlingly, a woman walks out of the Airstream and looks for the source of a subtle disturbance, finds nothing, and returns inside.

We are a familiar with scale models, but not with seeing tiny, video people moving around inside them. The first encounter with a David Hoffos installation is a unique thrill, both delightful and a little unsettling. The dioramas are meticulous and the use of mirrors to create the illusion of space is ingenious and convincing. "Airstreams's" luminous visitor is also a neat effect, but the animated woman is a shock. Even though her visage is grainy, she seems real compared to the blurry ghost. Within seconds, we recognize the impossibility of the event, figure out the trick and smile. Most people cannot wait to share the experience with their friends. There is a vicarious pleasure in watching another's pristine, startled enjoyment.

The first audiences of *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) screamed in fear and then laughed with relief when one of the bank robbers shot at them from the screen.[1] This reaction could only happen to an audience new to the conventions of cinema. It is this electric response, the jolt of an image seeming to come alive and invade real space, which Hoffos endeavours to recapture with his homemade holograms. This is difficult to achieve as audiences become increasingly sophisticated. With the advent of DVDs and extras, people not only watch films but parse them frame by frame, listen to the director's commentary and witness how the special effects were achieved. Rather than get on the CGI bandwagon, Hoffos goes in the opposite direction and searches for something homier, less sensational but more unexpected. He returns to the origins of moving pictures, to the primal scene where the magician's mirror cabinet met the nickelodeon.

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[1] Porter, Edwin S., director. *The Great Train Robbery*. 1903. USA. 12 min. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Great_Train_Robbery_(1903_film)

Hoffos is an experimenter in the style of cinemagician George Méliès. Méliès was a professional illusionist who brought stage magic to film but also invented numerous cinema-specific effects: the stop-trick, timelapse photography, multiple exposures and dissolves. The late 19th century was the hey-day of the amateur inventor. In this brief interval before industrialization, an *auteur* like Méliès could engage in every part of movie production. Sadly, he was bankrupted by the Hollywood and French 'dream *factories*'. After pioneering cinema and making 531 films, he was reduced to selling toys in a train station.[2] Perhaps learning from this tragedy, Hoffos doubles back to the pivotal moment before movie industrialization and takes an alternate turn. He reimagines cinema not as a mass medium but as an intimate experience designed for individuals. This strategy permits the hands-on dreamer to create events that are affectively distinct, more spectral than spectacle.

Scene two: night. A man throws rocks from a cliff. Below him, waves rhythmically surge the beach. In the middle distance of a starless night a lighthouse flashes. "Bachelor's Bluff" is a small diorama into which a small man seems to be projected. Further observation shows that Hoffos has rehabilitated an archaic magic trick. The man is not a projection but a reflection of a video image on the window between the viewer and diorama. The monitor is just over your right shoulder. Its strategic placement creates the plausible fiction that the figure does not emanate from a screen, is not a reflection on the glass, but actually walks along the cliff *in* the diorama.

It is an extra treat to notice that a second monitor, meters away, produces the waves. That they look so abstract on the screen but completely convincing *in* the miniature reveals the mind's habit of turning peripheral sketches into persuasive appearances when placed in the right context. Additional interest comes from imagining the steps the artist took to engineer his benign subterfuge. This cinemagician does not conceal the mechanics of his trick. That such a thing could work at all, and that Hoffos finds increasingly inventive ways to exploit the phenomenon, is a source of amusement that propels the eager viewer through the gallery to see what marvel he will devise next.

The brain works on recognition; it 'sees' into visual phenomena for familiar, meaningful shapes, it makes images rather than finds them.[3] You can recognize that the animated figure is *on* the glass and then see the diorama through it, but you cannot observe both at once without the figure appearing to be *in* the diorama. Your brain conflates the two phenomena to resemble/reassemble the world of conventional appearances. Part of our delight with the trick is that it shows something of our hardwired psychology—perhaps even a division between our brain and mind. Like looking at other optical illusions or sleight-of-hand, it is a mildly alarming sensation to catch our brain 'seeing' things we know are not true. Strangely, even when you figure out the contrivances behind the deception, the illusion persists. The effect engenders and uneasy amusement. Watching legerdemain can be irritating. Some simply enjoy the deception. Others like trying to

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[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georges_M%C3%A9li%C3%A8s

[3] Seward Barry, Ann Marie. *Visual Intelligence: Perception, Image and Manipulation in Visual Communication*. Albany: State University of New York Press. 1997. P.15.

figure it out. Many, though, just do not like being lied to. While there is pleasure in knowing a trick's secret, there is tension in realizing that you are still helpless before it.

If Hoffos were creating narratives, viewers might grant him the suspension of their disbelief. They may watch his magic boxes like a movie—forget the artifice to enjoy the art. But his machines do not work that way. They constantly remind us of their constructedness; they repeatedly create and destroy their fictions. The protocols for viewing are unsettled, as are we. How long are we supposed to watch? Are they like movies or more like dioramas or pictures? Aside from the ambient sounds, all the ***Scenes*** *from the House Dream* are silent pictures, framed and behind glass, and owe something to painting. They are closest to *tableau vivant* and hallucinations. Each vignette lasts only a minute or so. They are slices of life, all scene and bare incident but devoid of narrative. Happenings occur but only repeat rather than accumulate. The characters are not afforded time to evolve, become swept up in a story or have most of the other characteristics afforded film beings. If viewers want these elements, they must make them up.

Each of Hoffos's populated scenes features a person caught in an interstitial space/moment. As images, they exist in literal interstices, the narrow spaces of the diorama boxes and as reflections on a sheet of glass between the miniature room and the rest of the gallery. As characters, they occupy other verges, between land and sea ("Bachelor's Bluff"), civilization and nature ("Airstreams" "Tree House"). The few given houses are uncomfortable, not at home ("Parlour"). The majority find themselves in transitional chambers away from, leaving or not yet home: airships, spaceships, a stranded train, an airport hotel, a boat, a camper. These are anonymous, identical transit containers occupied for a time by one person then replaced by another, and so on. Closer to home, but not quite at home, children hang out on transit strips ("Circle Street," "Overpass") waiting for something to happen. Every melancholic scene broadcasts the loss of a sense of home, of individual self, of a worthwhile existence. Most of the Hoffos's people are young adults. None are shown doing meaningful work. They seem between the pleasures of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood. While earlier works, such as "Night of the Living Room," had cartoon fun with zombie suburbanites, Hoffos is sober this time. These folks are not hyperboles; they look just like us.

'Interstitial' describes not only certain spaces but also a type of time—a gap between events. Such a time/space is literally impossible, or at least unknowable: nothing never happens. Just as an interstitial space is a minor or transitional site between more significant spaces, an interstitial moment is a time between significant events. Such time/space does occur, it occupies space, has dimension and duration, but to the inhabitant it feels flat and static, repetitive like lapping waves on an endless beach. Most of Hoffos's people wait—for the train to get running, the ship to take off, something, any thing. They are on the verge in a durational sense, they exist at a threshold, "a limit beyond which something will happen."[4] They are held in suspense and helpless iteration. They have the characteristics of ghosts—which are said to return to sites where they lived or died. Is "Bachelor's Bluff" named after the suicide that occurred there? Are we

[4] Soanes, Catherine, Ed. "Verge." Oxford Dictionary of Current English. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2001.

witnessing the apparition of a jilted lover? The scenario repeats like a dream. It is as if the echo will only cease under the correct interpretation. The bachelor will only rest when it finds a home in a narrative. Unless we tell his story, the man is condemned to his Sisyphusian task into eternity. Hoffos earns our attention with novel devices that exploit our faulty perceptions; he keeps it with compelling uncanny content.

The only certain illustration of a paranormal phenomenal occurs in "Airstreams." But is the shade to the right the only one, or is the scene doubly haunted? From the viewer's point-of-view, both the apparition and the woman share the same ethereal non-substance; both are equally unreal, electronic phantoms. Does the woman think she is more authentic than the spirit beside her? What is the basis for her faith? Might the phantasm believe the same thing and be right? The scene's blurring of the boundaries between ontological states provokes unsettling after-thoughts.

Perhaps, like Grace Stewart (Nicole Kidman) in *The Others*,[5] these people do not know they are dead. Grace goes through the motions of a half-life only made possible by repression. Disturbed by an inner emptiness (caused by a secret), she rightly senses that its exposure will end her provisional existence. Ironically, she is a ghost who haunts her home's new tenants and perceives those 'real' folks as haunting her. She refuses to surrender, to move on, because of a professed will to endure for the sake of her children. However, as a religious woman on the threshold of the promised after-life, she may be having a crisis of faith and fears that release from this marginal existence, however intolerable, could lead to oblivion rather than fuller being. (More likely, she is worried about going to hell for killing her children and herself!) Only a few ***Scenes*** *from the Dream House* are assuredly about ghosts. And even they can be taken as metaphors for a contemporary existential crisis where some people barely inhabit their own lives and are afraid to move on to more authentic existences. The installations are not really about ghosts or extraterrestrials so much as they are hyperbolic mirrors held up to post-faith lives.

Hoffos's favourite haunt is gothic suburbia, nocturnal streets lined by unimaginative, cookie-cutter homes and trolled by kids with nothing to do ("Overpass," "Circle Street"). While there might be respite from the doldrums in camping, he doubts it. Suburbia and campgrounds: one generation's utopia, the next generation's dystopia. "Airstreams's" campsite, with its lots and lanes and identical portable homes arranged in a "Circle Street" like loop, simply transplants the neighbourhood's schema into the country. Like a cemetery, a campsite's civic plan is an attempt to domesticate the undiscovered country. People plant themselves in these temporary lodges in the hopes that something more interesting might happen. But all that insulation keeps them from the elements (of surprise). In other earlier and more fanciful works, Hoffos was optimistic. A few of his lucky campers were visited, even abducted by aliens ("Hoffos/Clarke Conspiracy"). There is no escape, now. Nothing happens, over and over again. When something exciting does occur, his characters are oblivious ("Parlour," "Barnett Newman"). Like Grace, they seem to know that something is wrong but not quite what it is or what to do about it.

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[5] Amenabar, Alejandro, director. *The Others.* USA. 2001.

While Grace is paranoid, talkative and tears around her restrictive chamber, Hoffos's characters are lethargic, mute and passive. Most seem resigned to their flat lives, a few seem discontent, but none can overcome their ennui or circumstances to do much about it. Most have settled into Limbo. All appear haunted by the suspicion that existence is some how unreal or less real than it could be. They have not accommodated themselves to the lives and locations they have fallen into. They pass through the tangible world like shades. If these scenes resonate with viewers, then the haunting exceeds these inertia chambers and contaminates our space. How much are we like these characters? Such reflections may have viewers wonder about their own ontological status.

Scene three: a street at night. Identical, suburban split-level homes are arranged in an arc encircling a hill topped by a huge, broad, ominous cylinder, possibly a water tower. Fireworks punctuate the night as children ride their bikes, skateboard or walk down the street. Hoffos plays a sophisticated game with his own illusion. It is easy to see that one house sandwiched between two mirrors creates the effect of a street of replica houses. We can see the mirrors slice through the road. In the diorama space, a figure could not walk along the street without hitting the glass. But, thanks to the reflection trick, a skateboarder glides along the road and right though the mirror. It really is a strange experience watching this little magical moment. While some figures traverse the impossible glass wall with ease, one biker does a small pop-a-wheelie right on the boundary as if there were a real bump. Strangest of all, a child walks up to the border, contemplates passage, then proceeds through. The event is quite unnerving, as if the phantom has consciousness, recognizes that he is not in a real space, may be unreal himself, and must use a special concentration to get through the impasse.

Scene four: an art gallery at night. A security guard wanders the huge room as thieves steal paintings in the adjoining gallery. Being a night-shift security guard must be a neglected terrace in Dante's *Purgatory*. The physically fit man in "Barnett Newman" paces the gallery like a caged tiger. He checks his watch, plays with his keys and hat, ties his shoes. While the scene lasts only a few minutes, it repeats endlessly and you feel the monotony, the man's restless energy, his wasting life. Taking aesthetic disinterest to a new level, he never looks at the paintings. Hoffos pokes fun at the notion that art rewards repeated viewings and that anyone would really enjoy the aesthete's dream of having a night gallery to themselves. There are limits to appreciation, and in this scenario, that frontier includes abstract painting. Hoffos has a bit of fun at the expense of art elitists and Barnett Newman's "Voice of Fire"—a minimal, abstract painting that raised a furor among average Canadians when the National Gallery purchased it in 1989 for $1.8 million. Why would anyone steal anything in this gallery? Museums are graveyards for historically important but otherwise dead artifacts. Drained of life, they are mere valuable things to be protected—and their value seems to eclipse that of people who protect them.

It is mild ironic that this bored man misses an event that would make his life more interesting. It is the closest things to a gag in the show but beneath the joke is a wounding punch line. Some may be amused by the dramatic irony we are afforded by aesthetic distance. From our privileged view behind the theatrical fourth wall (literalized here as a

sheet of glass), we survey what our protagonist cannot and may smile at his obliviousness. Empathy, however, can breech the boundary. To anyone who holds a similar job, the scene may be an unendurable mirror. The repetition of the event every few minutes is not just an opportunity to view it again; it is a reminder of the mind-numbing routine of an unrewarding position. However, Hoffos's magic theatres go just a little further to invade our space with a creeping, haptic awareness.

The unusual affective quality of *Scenes from the House Dream* is apprehended only through direct experience. The installation is a complex machine entered by viewers who transform into participants when they awaken to how their presence completes the work. Alone, wandering in a cavernous, dark room filled with art, I was caught short by how my activity echoed the guard in "Barnett Newman." I also realized that I was observing him as if through a surveillance camera. He knows that he is watched but is inured to the invasion. Perhaps this thickening under a perpetual gaze has prevented him from seeing those other eyes, the thieves', that also watch him. Seeing this doubled gaze sent a slight chill up my neck when I realized that neither the guard nor the thieves were really *in* the miniature gallery but were creeping behind *my* back. I was no longer just a set of eyes but a body, too. I felt very self-conscious throughout my time in the gallery. I was sure that surveillance cameras, guards and other viewers were watching me. There seemed to be a presence lurking in the dark.

The *Scenes from the House Dream* atmosphere is exciting, a little tense, thrilling. It engages participants and does not permit passive viewing. Wandering the congested black halls, you may worry about losing your way, knocking some thing or someone over. When, in this state of heightened sensitivity, you glimpse a fellow viewer leaning against a wall and taking notes, sitting at a table or stretched out on the floor, it may produce a voyeur's tingle, an uncomfortable self-consciousness about being seen peeping into these intimate rooms. The murky women, your fellow viewers, behave oddly. They look right through you as if you were a ghost. You are likely to be startled then delighted when you discover that they are video projections on cutout shapes! The tricks made me distrust anyone else I saw in the murk. Who was real, who not? And others approached me with the same apprehension.

Scene five: a living room at night. "Sherwood Schwartz" is not a miniature, but a full-sized room filled with multiple cutout shapes that support the projection of Modernist furnishings. The scene is static. In the foreground between two chairs is a distorted doll. It is a strange, abstract organic shape amid the geometric regularity of the furniture. I looked around the room for the gimmick or story. Nothing happens. I found my mind wandering, thinking about Sherwood Schwartz, creator of Gilligan's Island and The Brady Bunch. The room resembles the Brady Bunch set. Suddenly, and it is easy to miss, a hand darts out from behind the couch, grabs the doll and pulls it in. It is a jolting event. You think you are looking at a still slide when it abruptly springs to life. Before I had a chance to process it, I was stepping back, as if the person were real. I wanted to get out of the way

Freud names the feeling that something is both home-like and unhome-like at the same time, the uncanny.[6] The sensation can range from a creeping insecurity, a feeling that something is not quite right to fear that something inanimate has autonomous life and might suddenly harm you. A house at night is especially conducive to such sensations. It is a familiar place made strange and uncertain by the dark. Because the object and setting are normally ordinary and comfortable, the uncanny has a doubleness, a cognitive dissonance in which you feel both attracted and repelled. My second reaction to "Sherwood Schwartz" was to wonder what the child was doing behind the chair. On third viewing, I wondered if it was perhaps an adult. Fear leads most people to flee uncanny situations, to reject the object and run from the scene rather than investigate further. To our cathartic horror and delight, the opposite happens in fiction. The idiot college kids go into the haunted house, a little boy enjoys the company of "Chucky" (the homicidal doll) beyond reason. The gallery is a space between fiction and reality where participants linger just a little longer with the uncanny in order to come to their senses.

It is difficult to convey the surprising affect this exhibition engenders, yet what it feels like, how the body, emotions and mind engage the work, is essential. Hoffos's sprawling collection is a Gesamtkunstwerk, a complete artwork that fuses numerous forms into one event that moves you more than specialized works can alone. The word was coined by Richard Wagner who proposed opera as the ultimate comprehensive art form. Some think it was trumped by movies for this honor. Hoffos, perhaps sensing an incompleteness in that two-dimensional and passive medium, is looking to construct an experience chamber that is at once more comprehensive, yet intimate—or, more affective because because of this intimacy.

The exhibition title, *Scenes from the House Dream* implies that considering these works as 'dreams' might be a key to their interpretation. However, hypnagogic imagery is a better metaphor. While it is difficult to determine what time of night the scenes occur, most seem to be set in early evening, before midnight. Children wander the streets, people check their boats, walk the beach, watch television—no one sleeps. The timing is important because these are not nightmares, they do not take place during R.E.M. sleep but in the twilight verge between consciounsess and sleep, the hypnagogic moment.

Hypnagogic states belong to a phenomenological category distinct from dreams. They occur just before sleep and "are transient states of decreased wakefulness characterized by short episodes of dreamlike sensory experience…. These percepts may be of pseudo-hallucinatory (i.e., with preserved insight of unreality) or truly hallucinatory (i.e., experienced as if real) character." They "differ from dreams in that hypnagogic imagery is usually rather static, without narrative content, and the subject is not involved as an actor…. There is more awareness of the real situation in hypnagogic states than in dreaming."[7] This state describes all Hoffos's nocturnal chambers.

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[6] Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." 1919. (http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~amtower/uncanny.html

[7] Weiss, Thomas. "Psychobiology of Altered States of Consciousness. "*Psychological Bulletin*. The American Psychological Association. 2005, Vol. 131, No. 1, 98–127.

Scene five: a room at night. The title explains that this bare room is a "Treehouse," but it seems an ordinary room hoisted in a tree. It does not adapt to nature but is imposed upon it. A man holds a drink and sits in a chair. He appears to be immobile. You are not sure if the image is a video or projected still image when he suddenly moves slightly to drink or to look out the window. In front of him is a flickering translucence but unidentifiable mass. It absorbs him completely at one moment and bores him the next. He shifts his attention to the window, but the scene seems not to impress him. He returns to the glowing shape. Suddenly, and startlingly, he snaps out of the thrall, claps his hands and gets out of the chair. The scene repeats.

Hypnagogic states, uncanny experiences and Hoffo's chambers share the night. Darkness lowers the threshold of consciousness and invites animated possibilities. As with the sublime, these states are exciting because of their double nature. They might bring negative as well as positive stimulation. That they are exciting is what attracts us. Hoffos's installations haunt the mind long after viewing because they operate like hallucinations, their content is compelling but incompletely formed, they perform existential anxieties, a sense of homelessness, perpetual longing, suspense, and the burden of being, but they offer no conclusions or explanations.

In an interview, the artist claimed that "visual slight of hand is not the support of my work, it is the subject."[8] To be sure, a great deal of basement engineering went into these prestidigitations and Hoffos is eager to show his work. His machinations are not concealed: the hoarding walls even have circular openings for the curious to peer in, as into a construction site, to see how everything works. Like the magicians Penn and Teller, Hoffos shows the trick, not to ruin it, but to reveal the brilliant technical skills that go into its making. His subject is the craft as much as the art—but the art deserves as much attention.

A great deal of the meaning of the work is embodied in the design and its unveiling, in the tricks and the mental habits they reveal. Given all the ingenuity and labour that goes into the installations, it is not surprising that Hoffos sees himself as an engineer and a formalist first, but that does not mean that he is not also a visual poet expressing a worldview. Hoffos is eager to discuss the mechanics and genesis of his work, the influence of movie directors such as Hitchcock, Lynch, and Spielberg, but he rarely discusses the content of his work in much more than a glancing way. He might have been able to get away with this sleight-of-hand when he was showing only one or two bits of the puzzle at a time, but now that all the pieces, all the *Scenes from the House Dream*, have been gathered, a worldview emerges that is as engaging, as uncanny as the means that relate it.

[8] David Hoffos interviewed by Jorge Luis Marzo and quoted by Tousley, Nancy. "David Hoffos: The Lethbridge Illusionist and his Cinema of Attractions." Catalogue essay. 1999. P. 7.