

“May I have a bit of thin air, please?”

These were the words with which Alfred Hitchcock introduced *Into Thin Air*, the first episode of the TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*, broadcast in 1955. The protagonist is a woman who vanishes into thin air, an “absence” around which the entire story turns. We could say something similar about the works of the Korean video artist Shin il Kim, born in 1971 in Seoul but now resident in New York.

He has declared that “the video is nothing but light,” and to demonstrate this has developed a special technique that consists in impressing a minimal line on a sheet of white paper, thereby producing an “invisible” drawing, perceptible only under the right light. Photographs of these impressions are then assembled one by one into a video (using stop-motion). The purpose, says the artist, is to “consider the history of art in terms of its limitations,” be they of technique, subject or relationship.

In his first “drawing-videos” like *Door*, *Sphere* and *Water*, all made in 2003, ordinary actions like opening a door, handling a sphere and washing one’s hands are represented in their essentiality, to the point where the object of the action – the door, the sphere, the hands – disappears while we retain an awareness of its presence thanks to the clever use of sound: creaks, swishes, drips. This analysis of language and of the structure of the medium used, through drawings that we could describe as being “in negative,” can easily be traced back to the arguments put forward by Marshall McLuhan in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. In his study of means of communication, the Canadian sociologist came to subdivide them into hot media – high-definition ones like radio, photography and cinema – and cold, low-definition media, like the telephone and television. It is to this second type of communication, which requires the active participation of the listener or viewer to fill in the data not transmitted, that the animated drawings belong. From this point of view, Shin il Kim’s drawing-videos are downright “icy” in the amount of information that he deliberately withholds from us.

This is particularly evident in *Invisible Masterpiece* (2004) and *Between* (2005), where visitors to the Metropolitan Museum and the Gagosian Gallery in New York become the subject of the works: the first work is an installation of three videos in which visitors to the museum look at walls and pictures that are, as the title suggests, “invisible”; in the second work, the motionless image of a tourist filmed from behind as he observes a frame in which appears the video of a second tourist who, in his turn, is scrutinizing a blank wall. An ironic and irreverent game of nested boxes, which “shows” us on the monitor the very attitudes that we assume in front of the artist’s works.

It is precisely the act of looking that is at the center of *The Transubstantiation* (2005), a work devoted to the figure of the leader in society and to the mob psychology that derives from it. On each of the eight monitors that form an octagon suspended in the air – a highly symbolic figure: in the Christian religion it represents the resurrection, in Asia infinity and power – is impressed a silhouette whose pose echoes that of several of the people in Raphael’s painting of the Transfiguration, a work depicting the moment when Jesus, a modern “leader”, abandoned his mortal body in order to assume his true nature of pure light. In the same way, the images of worshipers in the drawing-videos are sublimated into pure light, just as Christ is transformed into wine and bread (Transubstantiation). In the background, excerpts from the teachings of another leader, the Dalai Lama, can be heard, played backward in order to make them hard to understand. A simple modification of the structure that, together with the icy simplicity of the “drawn videos,” obliges us to activate and sharpen our “anesthetized attention” in order to be able to “see” the work.

Our perception is also put to the test in *Decoded Love* (2006-07), a circular section cut out of the floor of the exhibition space from which radiate beams of colored light. Like the drawings, these videos are works “in negative,” in so far as they are produced by the light emitted by five television sets embedded in the ring. Each shows a sequence from *The Toll of the Sea* (1922) – the first color feature film made in Hollywood – which tells the story of a troubled and difficult love affair between Lotus Flower, a young Chinese girl, and the American Allen Carver. As in all his works and in this film in particular, not visible but only perceptible in fragments, the artist seeks to “transfer to objects the idea of existence and nonexistence at one and the same time.”

So if the vanishing of the protagonist of a movie becomes crucial to the account of what happens during and after her disappearance, in the works of Shin il Kim it is the missing elements that set the tone for the perception of the work and that make it visible. Quoting Hitchcock again, “now I’d better get out of the way to enable you to see better.”

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