EMERGENCE

David Green

Figure 1. David Green, Emergence, 2017, installation view. Photo by Mark Bolland.

Few words in the English language are as loaded as 'emergence.' It is an important signifier in the fields of psychology, philosophy, physics and even religious studies.

I first latched onto the word from its use in Gestalt theory: What initially appears as a field of random marks reassembles itself into figure and ground. The concept is often illustrated using a high-contrast image of a Dalmatian hound sniffing the ground near the base of a tree. Once the brain has vested those marks with meaning, the 'innocent' pattern cannot return for the viewer.

In my installation, images projected through a hanging glass at one end of the gallery extend this Gestalt principle into motion, as otherwise inchoate shapes seen on the screen and floor reconstitute themselves in the cortex of the viewer as bounding animals.

Although the images and visual treatments in this installation developed alongside my research interests in neuroscience and the phenomenology of perception, they entered my art practice intuitively through a kind of osmosis.

In my working process, I have found the need to segregate research and practice into weeks of focused attention. When I have experimented with fitting both pursuits into the same day, it would become impossible to stop myself from imposing a sort of reductive conceptual matrix onto my work in the studio; under these conditions the process of making feels vexed, the resulting work overcooked, formulaic and closed. By the time I came to the final exhibition of my Master of Fine Arts at the Dunedin School of Art, I had become used to dividing my calendar between reading and writing periods (primarily toward completing my dissertation) and periods of studio practice (toward three public exhibitions).

In my studio practice, I want to encourage a sort of unfolding that can occur through the process of "material dialogue" first described by Bruno Latour and Michel Callon in the early 1980s at École Nationale Supérieure des Mines de Paris.[1] This dialogue fosters a satisfying space of collaborative and intuitive response that I hope is carried through to the viewer's experience with the finished work.

In the February 2017 exhibition, *Emergence*, I used slumped glass as an intermediate to split, transmit or bounce light projections through areas of the gallery. For this work the gallery itself become a canvas. Having submitted my dissertation three months prior to the exhibition, I was fortunate to have a ten-week stretch of focused studio work using the Dunedin School of Art's white cube gallery space during the summer holiday period. This enabled me to continuously experiment with a variety of composited image treatments *in situ*, projected through a selection of large sheets of glass that I had prepared over prior months.

Where it arises in philosophy and elsewhere, the word 'emergence' may refer to a sort of synergy: An inexplicable property arising from a number of sub-properties that can be described as being 'other than the sum of the parts.' In physics, a prime example of 'emergence' is the magical combination of oxygen and hydrogen atoms that comprise water molecules. This life-affording combination has the emergent properties of becoming solid, liquid or gas, depending on specific conditions, and will perform under those particular conditions in ways that can only be discovered through experimentation or experience, but not by algorithm. Another example of the emergent properties of water is water-specific surface waveforms; in my work, these are employed as components of motion 'grattage' (to borrow a process term first used by Max Ernst).

Figure 2. David Green, Emergence, 2017, video still detail. Image by David Green.

Human consciousness has been described as an 'emergent' property of the brain. There is some thought that this phenomenon may be a sort of exaptation (or secondary evolutionary development built on primary traits initially adapted for unrelated reasons) resulting from the many parallel distributed processes transpiring in the brain at any given time. Over the last 30 years, neuroscientists have been able to increasingly detail these processes as occurring simultaneously, though generally non-synchronously, throughout our neural networks.

The light caustics that feature in my work could be described as an emergent property of light and glass. When I first noticed them in early experiments, I thought of them as rhizome-like, dynamic neural networks that appeared to 'fire' in direct relationship with visual information projected on the glass screens. Here they manifest as a complex curvilinear ricocheting of photons that retain a subtle visual relationship with what appears as the more coherent image seen as a projection on the glass. Another neurological view (albeit 'poetic') of the caustics emerges if you imagine the reorganised visual signal as being convoluted and remapped onto the cortical folds of the brain in the relational manner that 'place cells' are situated in the hippocampus.

The primeval-looking imagery projected onto the hanging glass at one side of the gallery in *Emergence* intended to engage with our deep memory and love of the animal form, and our attraction to their particular nuances of motion at myth-cultivating distance. The manic reactions witnessed in the opposing triptych created the installation's main question; perhaps it is a jealous response to the animals' grandeur, or frustration with their haughty distance. I wonder if our hyperactive responses, that go quite beyond any need to hunt for food, are part and parcel an unrequitable, unquenchable love gone wrong that consistently ends in murder?

NATURAL HISTORY

In Jonathan Burt's book *Animals in Film*, he highlights the seminal importance of scientific photographers Marey, Anschütz and Muybridge to the birth of cinema; animals were a focal point for each in their early pursuits of motion analysis, which in turn directly informed the nascent motion-picture technology. Of course, there is no more salient way to identify what is called an 'animal' than through the autonomous, idiosyncratic and often high-speed behaviour that could only be precisely captured for the first time with the advent of motion pictures.

Figure 3. David Green, Emergence, 2017, installation view. Photo by Mark Bolland.

Screen images of animals in motion allow us to maintain our evolutionarily close, now ersatz, relationship with them – large and small – even when we have displaced and eradicated them from the expanding human habitat. Burt writes about the deep schism that exists between our intense attraction and the impossibility of intimacy, describing the exquisitely long, single-shot animal set-ups in Bill Viola's 1986 film, *I do not Know What it is I am Like*. In Viola's film, it is the fixed border of the wild animal exterior that can never be moved past – even when we move close enough to see ourselves reflected in their eye. We can see them, and we know they can see us, but we cannot know what it is like to be them, nor can we ever really know what they make of us. In this context, Burt also discusses John Huston's film *Moby Dick*: Despite the complex anthropomorphic projections of emotion and intent onto the whale, particularly by Ahab, the actual relationship remains limited to visual and physical interactions between surfaces.[2]

As humans, we seem to have few options in our engagement with animals. We can fetishise them, dress like them, act like them, dance with them. When that fails to satisfy, we can kill and eat them to absorb their component qualities, energy and aura. Seduced by their grace and beauty, we – like small children – *want* the animals, but all we can manage is to bring them to ground, gaze at them bound, cage them and kill them. Or, in our highly evolved and scientific way, study their component parts anatomically: through butchery, dissection, taxidermy, or behaviourally: through imprinting and other perverse forms of encroachment, subsuming their offspring and damning them to dead-end human margins.

We love them to death; it could be argued that this behaviour is hard-wired into our subspecies. We are amorous, conflicted, confused, impulsive and ultimately violent – like the character of Lenny in Steinbeck's classic novella *Of Mice and Men*. In our creaturely loneliness we may experience each other this way, too. In his posthumously discovered play, *Danton's Death*, Georg Büchner wrote in the early nineteenth century:

> Julie: *Danton, do you believe in me?*
>
> George Danton: *How should I know! We know little enough about one another. We're thick-skinned creatures who reach out our hands toward one another, but it means nothing – leather rubbing against leather – we're very lonely…*[3]

Perhaps the most dangerous implications of our frustrated human desire for intimacy can be witnessed when

Figure 4. David Green, Emergence, 2017, installation view. Photo by Mark Bolland.

intimate relationships between us fail. These dynamics, too, are a traditional subject of motion-picture narrative.

Since their inception, motion pictures have been used as a proxy for actual proximity. Capturing human sexuality was one of early cinema's seminal impulses. Pornography in its many forms intimates intimacy while performing its absence.

UNTAMED

Another iteration of the pornographic paradox, natural history films became an emergent form of cinematic entertainment from the early 1920s. Thieving from the worst kind of theft, the footage used in this installation was appropriated from a 1933 Warner Bros. colonial-era exploitation film called *Untamed Africa*.

Wynant Hubbard, who hailed from the US, is centrally featured in this film. After studying geology at Harvard, Hubbard organised a 'scientific' raid on the area of Africa that is now called Zimbabwe, trapping animals for worldwide distribution to zoological parks and generally looking for cool stuff to drag home. He was white, good looking and a college man, which meant that in the early 1930s he could be used to prop up the exploitation film's credibility by being misrepresented as an ethologist. He had certainly gathered enough information about animals to trap them one way and another. In 1929-30 he had the foresight to film his first exploitation junket. The footage was thrown into a blender and turned into early voice-over travelogues about Africa; this was a time when hack filmmakers could make ends meet by crashing in on far-flung cultural groups, or digging out exotic, ideally weird-looking animals, trafficking a few good yucks for cash from throw-away newsreels that played between the feature films in movie theatres. Wynant became a front man.

In that same year, MGM made an innovative exploitation film called *Trader Horn* which had the novelty of being partially lensed on location in Africa. The feeble narrative is essentially a platform for filming two white men drifting down a river in Africa, making wry comments while randomly shooting and killing real megafauna for the camera. (Apparently, they also get to save a lost young white woman from something potentially sexual, but I found the watching too arduous to find out.) The haphazard production cost the lives of innumerable animals and at least two people.

Importantly for its producers, above and beyond the death and mayhem on offer, the flimsy narrative gave licence to deliver their audiences a wide array of bare African bodies engaging in subaltern cultural curiosities inside a mainstream feature film. The paid acting is bad, the process shots are unintentionally surreal, and the dialogue can only be described as moronic. However, instead of the usual studio fare of primitive and cartoonish backlot backgrounds to go with the cartoonish acting, the jungle footage is clearly real; the 'natives,' clearly not cork-faced Hollywood locals – and naked to boot – virtually guaranteed big audiences in 1933. After the great success of this film (which included winning the highly coveted Academy Award® for best picture of 1931), naturally demand was enflamed for what film audiences love best: more of the same.

As a result of his concurrently running exploitation shorts, Hubbard was nicely placed to have his old footage recycled into the 1933 production *Untamed Africa*. His four-year-old footage more than covered the requisite brief as Wynant triple-dipped while multiply performing his day job of kidnapping and broadcasting live animals to a hungry worldwide audience.

Here is the Anthropocene revealed. Animals pursued, ambushed, are captured both "by the toe" and by the image; the world-wide biological web is eaten away by the uncontainable acid of commodity fetishism. As I write this, their corpses are now dust, but their pixellated tatters continue to haunt cyberspace. In the end we have, as a subspecies, been systematically seduced by things that look good, cost the earth and ignore the basic rights and needs of others.

Figure 5. David Green, Emergence, 2017, installation view. Photo by Mark Bolland.

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In my installation I explore the materiality of light and image, both central to the expanded cinema discourse; here light breaks its boundaries, spills, rebounds and ricochets through the gallery. There are two lighting areas. A single screen referencing parietal art floats on one side; on it are movements and images suggesting the passion, mystery and sense of wonder evoked by the majestic aura of wild animals in the distance. In the other area of the installation, a triptych distributes a larger palette of colours revealing the mischief we get up to in our excitement.

For each glass, a single projector is responsible for both the image and the reflective caustic, whose physical and visual relationship becomes apparent to the viewer – only after investigation. The projectors are mounted like camera apparatuses with associated gear, including matte boxes (beautifully fabricated by artist Andrew Last) and a tripod. The production process is reversed, the 'dailies' reassembled; here the projection/production apparati vomit up the appropriated pornography. The process is broken open, light spilling everywhere, and the viewer is surrounded and enveloped by light. In the triptych a kind of soft looking is required as, even when focusing on a particular image, one is surrounded by relevant spillage in the periphery.

Claire Bishop's thesis regarding Installation Art[4] is highly relevant here: Through this intervention, the intention is for the gallery to become a fully immersive environment. The viewer is activated as collaborator, not receiver, of the narrative by offering them a decentralised experience. Cinema is a medium traditionally employed as the disseminator of formal, linear, centralised, gendered, racist and conservative views; I feel that expanded cinema, particularly in the form of installation art, is more productively but less usefully applied. Here information relevant to a particular idea is distributed through the space. The viewer's body is necessarily activated, their normal moment-to-moment analytical processes awakened by the requirements of navigating a whole space. The brain cannot simply slurp passively from a pre-digested fixed perspective; it has to forage, move towards or away, chew, spit or swallow. Despite the political nature of my writing, I am not actually interested in the viewer forming fixed conclusions around the ideas and images I present; I would much rather share qualia: the soft space of embodied response.

Figure 6. David Green, Emergence, 2017, Opening Night. Photo by Pam McKinlay.

Unlike the traditional cinema, this is not a passive linear experience and necessarily not; in negotiating the video documentation of this installation, I could see clearly illustrated how quickly the overall proposition collapses when represented in a linear format: At one point I ran into composer Trevor Coleman at the exhibition and, from his iPhone, he played me a new composition that he felt was particularly fitting to the installation's imagery. He later offered me the composition to use as a base for cutting my documentation footage, and I immediately agreed. In the weeks that followed the installation, I cut a seven-minute video using his composition, *Polyspirals*. When I had finished, I felt that what I had produced served Trevor's composition well, but completely undermined the decentralised nature of my artwork by determining one specific path through it. In a sense, this was a disappointing outcome and yet a very important exercise; having started in motion-picture production, I could feel with clarity that the installation aspect of my art practice is essential to the ideas I want to explore, not merely an arbitrary framework.

The soundscape for the gallery installation consisted of a soft ambient composition based on EEG data sonification that was meant to gently refer the viewer back to the caustic 'neural networks,' rather than pointing to any particular formed image.

Despite the stridency of my writing in this article, in my installation I primarily wanted viewers to inhabit and make what they will of an immersive and experiential space. In the gallery context, I do not want to provoke an analytical, logic-led engagement, but rather a softer, broader, embodied response. The formed ideas that I express in this article represent the results of my own mental algebra, not my expectation or requirement of the viewer. The installation work *Emergence* is a redistribution of images formerly bound into a 1933 film and confined to a linear perspective that presented a world now gone as disposable. I reassembled the visual artifacts in order to better understand the original space by reconstituting the fragments in a decentralising proposition. In this way, I hope that it was also useful as a thinking tool for the viewers.

David Green's recent MFA exhibition, *Emergence*, at the Dunedin School of Art sparked two collaborations with musician Trevor Coleman, who recently completed his PhD at the Otago University School of Music. Coleman's research includes creating, developing and performing polyrhythmic compositions. Green's research considers the phenomenology of perception and the materiality of light, while his art practice operates in the field of expanded cinema. One resulting collaboration was a live performance by Coleman in the Dunedin School of Art gallery space at the closing of Green's exhibition, and the second was the video piece, *Spiral Requiem*, shot and edited by Green.

1 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2 Jonathan Burt, *Animals in Film* (Trowbridge, Wilts: Cromwell Press, 2002).

3 Georg Büchner, *Complete Plays and Prose*, trans. Carl Richard Mueller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1963).

4 Claire Bishop, *Installation Art: A Critical History* (London, Tate Publishing, 2005).