

Anna Gritz

Ben Rivers's, "Slow Action" at Matt's Gallery, London

On Saturday September 30th 1967, Robert Smithson boarded the number 30 Inter-City bus to Passaic, carrying with him a copy *The New York Times*, a spiral notebook, a paperback of Brian Aldiss's *Earthworks* and his instamatic camera. This kit of the modern day explorer was most likely not so different to that used by Ben Rivers when he set out in 2010 to shoot his most recent film *Slow Action*. Smithson explored Passaic, New Jersey, identifying new monuments in the suburban post-industrial landscape and discovering the ruins of an alien prehistoric society. In *Slow Action*, Rivers created an island biogeography in four chapters. Narrated in the neutral tone and scientific language of 1950s ethnographic documentaries, the history, ecosystem, and inhabitants' of each of the four isolated landmasses unfold from the register of the 'great encyclopedia'—as the narrator describes the source.

Two narrators negotiate the utopian potential of the four islands, channeling the perspective of an unspecified 'curator.' Film critic Ilona Halberstadt's alluring, yet slightly metallic voice was intentionally chosen by Rivers for this role to reference Werner Herzog's collaboration with film critic Lotte Eisner in his film *Fata Morgana* (1971). The voice-over narrative was written by Mark von Schlegell independently to River's filmic exploration, with the components only matched after the fact. This split between commentary and filmic imagery is a repeated occurrence during the film that successfully distances the viewer from the material on screen and provides grounds for the multiple accounts of the islands happenings and its inhabitants' behaviour. This device reveals the narration as one possible interpretation of the films imagery, or alternatively, it positions the films imagery as one of many potential illustrations of the narrative. Both the visual and audio material appears dated and the washed out 16mm film is at times distorted. The frames feel rusty and corroded as if found in a metal cartridge washed ashore, set aside for future civilizations to learn about those that have past.

Smithson's act of carrying the lineage of inspiration in his pocket is a well-chosen device used to set the scene, a tool similar to that of quoting. Sources of inspiration become co-conspirators, creating and reshaping the experience of the work. Similarly, Rivers is hardly shy when it comes to naming his inspirations, not that they could be overlooked. For his research he consulted the masters of post-apocalyptic fiction, from Victorian writers such as Samuel Butler, Mary Shelley, and Richard Jefferies, to Herbert Read and more contemporary representatives—JG Ballard, Jorge Luis Borges and Kurt Vonnegut. The four episodes in *Slow Action*, titled *Eleven*, *HIVA*, *Kanzennashima*, and *Somerset* each embrace their own common post-apocalyptic tropes of the classic science fiction paradigm. These coalesce the island's inherent characteristics and pending potential; *Eleven* (filmed on Lanzarote), a crystallized world suspended between prehistory and future; *HIVA* (filmed



Ben Rivers, *Slow Action*, 2010. Still from 16mm film. Color and black & white. 45 minutes.

on Tuvalu), an isolated island society that evolved apart from the rest of the world; *Kanzennashima* (filmed on the abandoned Japanese island Gunkanjima), a locale of the last men in an abandoned world; and *Somerset* (filmed on an unnamed location), the imminent island home to a clade of new savages. The film is thus more an ode to a genre than an independent work and less about creating something anew. Then again, the recurring thematic may be an ailment of the science fiction genre itself, grounded in the untrammelled nature of the subject, which has the ability to go forward as to go back. The last men on earth stray through the lands not unlike the first, with their trepid, bare existence epitomizing the Petri dish—the material from which the science fiction writer probes the limits of the scientific datum.

In *Slow Action*, Rivers continues to skillfully create hermetic worlds that shed light on four of many possible futures. And yet one may want to retort that any science fiction can in due course be reality, especially considering that while this review is being written, the outlines of Japan are being reconfigured.

X

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