

JOURNAL ARTICLE

Aïda Ruilova: and Again...

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Countdowns, 2004,
DVD projection with
sound, 1min 23sec
loop, screened as
single-channel
in 'Creative Time's
59th Minute':
New York, 2005.
Photograph by Charlie
Samuels

Aida Ruilova: and Again...
— Ingrid Chu

1
This process recalls
the early structural
experimentation in
time-based media by
artists such as Vito
Acconci and Dan
Graham, as well as
the more recent Jane
and Louise Wilson,
Gregor Schneider or
Mike Kelley and Paul
McCarthy.

2
I am thinking
specifically of
physical exertion
and how it is expressed
through works of
long duration, such
as Matthew Barney's
Cremaster Cycle,
1994–2002, Sharon
Lockhart's *Goshogaoka*,
1997 and Ruilova's
single-channel works.

overleaf (page 74)
Let's Go, 2004, single-
channel DVD with
sound, 18sec

Tuning, 2002, single-
channel DVD projec-
tion with sound,
45sec loop

overleaf (page 75)
Oh No, 1999, single-
channel DVD with
sound, 42sec

Uh Oh, 2004, single-
channel DVD with
sound, 19sec loop

PLAY: (ENJOY) THE RIDE

While watching any number of Aida Ruilova's videos in succession, it is tempting to grab for the remote control and press PAUSE, REWIND, MUTE or even STOP – anything to regain a sense of composure given what can hardly be described as a comfortable viewing experience. This impulse, however, never meets with an overwhelming desire to press REPEAT since Ruilova already incorporates this function into the editing process, whereby she dices short clips of slightly differentiated scenes with sharp-edged precision. Ruilova creates a similar set-up in each of the dozen or so single-channel videos and projections she has made since 1999. Many run for less than a minute and feature young men and women who scream, grunt, whimper and otherwise taunt viewers with repeated utterances such as 'let's go', 'almost' and 'come here'. These phrases, which double as titles, coincide with the equally abrupt gestures of the various protagonists she captures through tightly cropped camera shots that stop and start and zoom in and out. This repetitive quality, compounded by an installation style that groups monitors with looped tapes, produces the alternately dizzying and mesmerising effect, and compels viewers to watch the videos over and over again.

PAUSE: THE SUBJECT IN QUESTION

As unnerving as they are to watch, the videos offer some satisfaction. By taking them at face value we come to understand how basic combinations of sound, image and structure work to both grant and deny access to Ruilova's work. Nowhere is this more apparent than in her process of rapid-fire editing, for this is what ensures that mere glimpses of hair, gaping mouths, bare chests and turned backs translate onscreen. An example can be found in a single-channel work such as *Almost* (2002), in which a perturbed woman in heavy black eyeliner is hampered in her efforts to escape the confines of a decrepit domestic interior. Standing with her back against a wall, climbing a set of stairs or crouched down on the floor with drool escaping from her mouth, she repeats the title phrase 'almost' in every scene. Or, again, the extreme close-ups in *Let's Go* (2004) give an unkempt, unshaven man with long hair and a black motorcycle jacket a foreboding presence through the insistent focus on his hands. Ruilova creates circumstances that obscure any sense of individual identity in favour of an atmosphere drenched in unspecified emotion – details abound, but they are obscured in the fast edits or eclipsed in shadow. Body parts and mechanical objects move about the frame, in and out of focus, in truncated, repetitive gestures that confront the viewer with a kinetic energy that throws perception off balance.

Ruilova reinforces a sense of futility by finding ways to rev up the intensity level in her work, so that visually, audibly, physically and psychologically 'let's go' is really a no-go, and 'almost' is, well, never.¹ A high level of suspense is achieved by using tightly framed shots, compact narratives, repeated phrases and cacophonous





sounds, while the short running time adds a sense of urgency, producing intense, surreal moments that deliver a sharp impression of dread and anxiety.

REWIND: WHEN 'THE END' IS NEAR

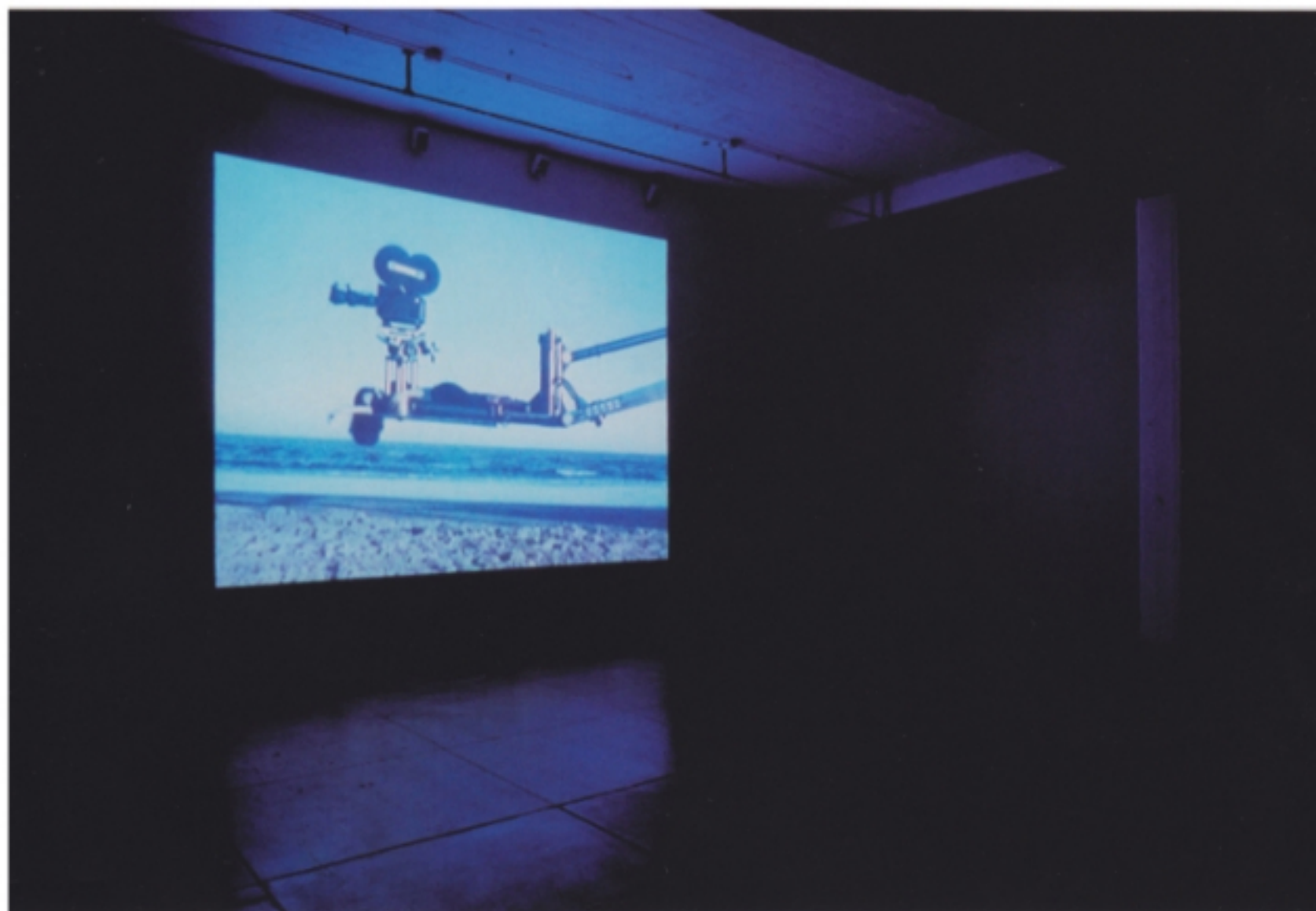
The claustrophobic situations Ruilova uses to frame her protagonists are also what render their bodies abstract and intimate to viewers. Ruilova's agile camerawork, which provokes and engages by condensing rather than extending sequences, shifts the focus back onto viewers by conveying their contingency in relation to the work.² The artist demands from the viewer an active role that results in what Charles LaBelle appropriately articulates as a 'disoriented subjectivity'.³ Through her adroit manipulation of simple collage, editing and framing techniques, Ruilova grabs the viewer's attention in a visceral way in order to effect what LaBelle further describes as 'a horror film's sense of dread and [a] hint at a Nietzschean hell of eternal recurrence'.⁴

3

Charles LaBelle, 'I See a Darkness...', *frieze*, Summer 2003, p.116

4

Ibid.



But it is her insistence on hitting REWIND, on repeating the cut in various ways that delivers the emotional punch. From style to content, recurrence and repetition manifest for Ruilova in many forms. For example, her first large-scale projection, *Untitled* (2002), not only references but remakes the final sequence of Jean-Luc Godard's 1970 film *Sympathy for the Devil*. Here she finds a sympathetic mentor in Godard's onscreen deconstruction of cinematic techniques. Roger Greenspun once wrote of Godard:

In 1 + 1 the camera comes alive on its cranes and tracks. [...] The chief delight of the film lies in this precision and in these scenes. At the end, when it martyrs its one named character, Eve Democracy (Anne Wiazemski), it spreads her

Untitled, 2002, single-channel DVD projection with sound, 58sec, installation view

5
Roger Greenspun, *The New York Times*, 27 April 1970

*body across a mighty camera crane on a [seashore]. The crane lifts her in a great sweeping movement ... across the sky. And at this moment, and not until this moment, it seems possible that the meaning of Godard's film depends not only upon a cause but also upon the camera's eye; not only in sympathy, but in objectivity as well.*⁵

6
Ruilova used a Titan Nova dolly crane to create *Untitled*, which was filmed on the South Texas beaches of Mustang Island during her 2002 residency at Artpace in San Antonio, Texas.

Ruilova claims her inheritance in a 58-second remake that presents a woman moving to the sound of heavy breathing and in sync with the actions of the disproportionately large camera crane on which she lies as it swings in and out of view across the picture plane. Whether or not the particular mechanical device Ruilova employs is obvious to viewers, certainly its scale, central placement and active motion reinforce its dynamic presence against the picturesque backdrop.⁶ Because the crane functions both as an onscreen prop and the support machinery necessary to film its own movement, the scene unfolds both as an image and its reflection.



above and overleaf
Countdowns, 2004,
2-channel DVD
projection with sound,
1min 23sec loop

MUTE: SOMETHING LIKE AN AUTOMATON

Ruilova's interest in objectifying mechanical devices by employing equipment and techniques used in cinema to create her large-scale projections carries through to her monitor works, such as *You're Pretty* (1999) and *Oh No* (2003). Here she incorporates instruments relating to sound, bringing together human and machine in intimate, if equally strained, obsessive and strange ways. In *You're Pretty* another long-haired man, this time bare-chested and be-spectacled, cradles an amplifier and destroys a vinyl record against the floor and wall of a stark, concrete basement. In *Oh No* actions are intercut with close-up details of various parts of a young woman's body as she creates random sounds by walking on an electric guitar.





The title phrases, stated repeatedly, reverberate in concert with sounds emitted through instruments 'played' in such a fashion, making sound visible as the consequence of actions taken. Thus machines are anthropomorphised and human actors rendered mechanical, reiterating the theme of dehumanisation in a technological society that Godard mined twenty-six years ago.

STOP: SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL

Ruilova's own obsessions can be traced through a precise aesthetic that is steeped in an alternative history spanning influences ranging from vampire, horror and French New Wave films to Death Metal and noise music. This aligns her with what LaBelle cites as the continuing trend of those working within 'the Gothic revival [that] is now well into its fourth century and still going strong'.⁷ How, then, can one differentiate between Ruilova and other artists whose work is more aesthetic than politic, between those merely trading in the look and feeling and those offering proof of an aesthetic alternative?⁸

A brief biography suggests some clues. Raised in Tampa, Florida, the 'Death Metal capital of the United States', Ruilova plays in the band Alva which had already released two albums in the early 1990s before she moved into the field visual art. At 31, Ruilova is certainly aware of filmmakers and video artists from the 1970s, and according to Michael Rush it is the performance work of that period in particular that remains 'a vital component of video art, in part because artists, many of whom [were] trained in art schools in the 1980s and 90s, echo work from the 70s'.⁹

It is through the formidable presence of her characters' spastic actions within a range of settings used to invoke prison-like environments that Ruilova's visual dynamic takes shape. Fear, surprise, delight and even humour exists in work that curator Ralph Rugoff calls 'a depraved kind of slapstick'.¹⁰ Ruilova concurs: 'I'm into horror film, but I'm also into comedy that's extreme.'¹¹ Perhaps her 'punk-and-classic' aesthetic, as curator Amada Cruz describes it, is most visible and most subtle in recent works such as *Tuning* (2002).¹² Comprised of a single shot, Ruilova sits next to cult French vampire-film director Jean Rollin, holding his hand. Set within a lush interior this time, the image barely comes into focus before disappearing again, playing up the ability for the moving image to contain, if not retain, an image. Equally effective and strikingly different is Ruilova's dual-screen projection, *Countdowns* (2004). Lasting two minutes, Ruilova literally doubles the duration and display of the moving image from past works. This time recounting the worlds Ruilova has created herself, *Countdowns* is a culmination – and likely a conclusion – of this body of work. Filmed outdoors, distance and proximity collapse in shots that come quickly in and out of view with several figures that appear and then disappear in both natural and built-up environments – including a dark forest, the inside of a drainpipe, the underside of a bridge and a gravel hillside. The numbers that announce the countdown of the work's title are inscribed in various ways onto these scenes – number nine is drawn in the gravel and number two is a melting birthday candle. Extending through a single shot moving out from a fixed point and then repeating, the work recounts multiple references to art history (German romantic landscape painting), film history (reels used to match sound with image) and popular culture (Sesame Street). Yet these references serve to further trademark the artist's sense of closure and claustrophobia, for as Martha Schwendener observes, 'while countdowns are usually finite, Ruilova's video repetitively goes through the motions of counting down, building to a climax that never actually occurs. The countdown is the climax, collapsed into the count itself'.¹³ In destroying the legibility of the 'countdown' as a harbinger of action, Ruilova expands her visual repertoire only to reveal, yet again, a sense of confinement and deep anxiety.

REPEAT: AND AGAIN...

'What's interesting,' as Ruilova has said, 'is the idea of a director doing the same film over and over again for thirty years.'¹⁴

7
C. LaBelle, *op. cit.*

8
In his review of 'I See a Darkness...' LaBelle provides a larger and more succinct argument discussing what at the time was a large number of artists and exhibitions evidencing Gothic sensibilities.

9
Michael Rush, 'Video Art and the Conceptual Body', *Video Art*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2003, p.97

10
Ralph Rugoff, 'Aida Ruilova', *Irreducible: Contemporary Short Form Video*, San Francisco: CCA Wattis Institute, 2005, p.13

11
Karen Rosenberg, 'Biennial Favorites: Aida Ruilova, The Cult Classicist', *New York*, 1 March 2004, p.40

12
See Amada Cruz, 'Let's Go!', Miami: The Moore Space 2004, brochure

13
Martha Schwendener, 'Creative Time and Panasonic Present Aida Ruilova: Countdowns', New York: Creative Time, 2005, brochure

14
K. Rosenberg, *op. cit.*