SCOTT MACDONALD

Continuing Deluge

John Knecht's Video Work

> I once knew a man who invented his own language. He would give directions to strangers in a fictional tongue, relentlessly waving his arms and pointing as he ranted. He wore a fur coat that hung to his ankles, but only on the hottest days of summer. I remember a time when he carried around a very large papier mâché rat that he had found. For a week or more he paraded up and down the street with this giant dead rodent over one shoulder and a baseball bat over the other, shouting, "I finally got that son of a bitch; I finally got him." He could be heard in the bank asking for a withdrawal of fifty thousand nickels. His car was equipped with a series of mirrors placed on the front seat and the dashboard, which allowed him to drive down the street using the mirrors as a visual guide, giving the appearance of a car moving along without a driver. He called himself and everyone else Doctor Wobble Dobble. The man was my neighbor and a daily presence in my childhood. His influence had a profound impact on my becoming an artist.
>
> —John Knecht, program notes on *The Wobble Dobble Series in Six Parts* (2000)

Media artist John Knecht's work, and particularly his recent projects, made for flat-screen gallery installation and digital projection, has been finding an expanding audience on Facebook, as well as in galleries and on his website.[1] The various single- and multi-channel video works that Knecht has produced since the early 1990s, including such recent projects as *Deluge: Studies in the Super Natural* (2010) and *after math* (2017)—which he sometimes calls "electronic paintings"—have roots in both surreal and expressionist painting, and in the early history of animation; from the Thaumatrope and Emil Cohl's *Fantasmagorie* (1908), to Krazy Kat, the Fleischer Brothers' silent and sound films, and the early Disney/Iwerks sound cartoons; as well as in the work of more contemporary experimental animators such as Robert Breer and Susan Pitt. The seam between stillness and motion remains fascinating for Knecht; he says he's never really moved beyond *Monkeyshines, No. 1* and *No. 2* (1890, directed by W. K. L. Dickson and William Heise), believed to be the first films shot in the United States. Knecht has produced moving-image pieces that barely move and series

1. Knecht has been part of many group shows over the years and the subject of one-person shows. These activities have generated catalog essays and newspaper reviews—but little in-depth writing about the work has emerged. There is Joyce Rheuban's "Films by John Knecht," *Millennium Film Journal* nos. 7–9 (Fall–Winter 1980–81): 242–47; and Knecht's website includes a useful video interview conducted by *Signal Culture*: http://johnknechtart.com.
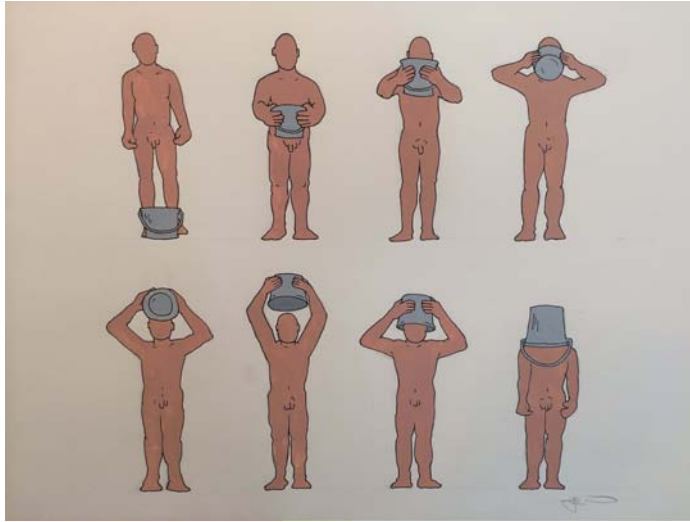
IMAGE 1. *Bucket Man: Self Portrait* (1996) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

drawings that are "animated" by the imagination—as part of a considerable body of film and video work.

The Beacons of Aerolith: A Requiem, a nine-minute silent 16mm film shot in 1979, provides a useful entry into Knecht's long career as a filmmaker and then video artist, since its history spans both eras of his work. *The Beacons of Aerolith* is most obviously a visual requiem for the World Trade Center towers. Shot over a period of six months in 1979, the original footage was filmed—sometimes in real time, sometimes in time-lapse—from Knecht's apartment on the corner of Chambers and Church Streets in lower Manhattan. The canonical skyscrapers are recorded in various seasons and often through smoke and fog. Some of the footage was color enhanced on Knecht's JK optical printer. The film captures the power and immensity of the buildings, as well as the global capitalist world they had come to represent. This footage first became part of Knecht's *Continuing the Adventures of Adriaen Block* (1980), a film he made about New York City soon after moving there; but after the attack on the Twin Towers twenty years later, he reorganized the material into a stand-alone film and titled it *The Beacons of Aerolith: A Requiem*.[2] In 2013, it was released on DVD.

For Knecht, as for most anyone in his generation, the rise and fall of the World Trade Center marks a crucial era in American life and, by an accident of history, a significant era in avant-garde moving-image making. The design of the Trade Center complex was revealed by architect Minoru Yamasaki on January 18, 1964, and construction began, amid controversy, in 1966. Those displaced by the complex were furious, and for many less directly impacted, the Trade Center seemed the unfortunate epitome of modern glass-and-metal skyscraper construction, a kind of architectural bully. The two towers were completed in

2. "Aerolith" means meteor—one crashing into Earth, perhaps.

1972 and 1973, respectively; by the time of the September 11, 2001, attacks they had become a city landmark and, for tens of thousands, an inevitable tourist destination: the "Top of the World" observation decks provided memorable views of the metropolitan area. Of course, the attack on the towers, seen worldwide on television, was not only a physical disaster for the city, but a psychological shock that continues to reverberate for those of us who experienced that moment. Knecht's returning to *The Beacons of Aerolith* in 2013 is evidence of this.

The Beacons of Aerolith can also be understood as an emblem of Knecht's evolution from filmmaker into video artist—in particular, a requiem for his filmmaking and perhaps for a certain genre of avant-garde film. Knecht made his first films during the early 1970s, a moment in American film culture when new forms of cinema—American New Wave commercial narrative films, cinema vérité documentary, experimental animation, and most significant here, what Jonas Mekas had named the New American Cinema ("avant-garde film," "experimental film," "underground film")—had been finding new audiences and institutional support. The particular group of films P. Adams Sitney defined as "structural film"—works of cinematic art that developed from explorations of the fundamental mechanical and chemical elements of celluloid filmmaking—seemed, at least within an expanded artworld, the preeminent motion-picture aesthetic and conceptual achievement of the moment, as well as, for some younger makers, a kind of cine-intellectual bully.

Now that "film" and "video" are entirely imbricated, both conceptually and literally, the fact that during the 1970s and early '80s "avant-garde filmmakers" and "video artists" saw themselves as quite distinct from each other can seem puzzling. But to many of those intoxicated with the evolving history of film, and in particular with the continuing evolution of "structural film" (I include myself), early video seemed a primitive and inarticulate newcomer, not likely to produce works that could be taken seriously—this despite the fact that

IMAGE 2. Still from *The Beacons of Aerolith* (1979) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

IMAGE 3. Still from *The Beacons of Aerolith* (1979) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

by 1980, some accomplished filmmakers (George Kuchar is the most obvious example) were exploring the advantages and possibilities of video. At least to some moving-image artists, "structural film" and other canonical "avant-garde" approaches to filmmaking were no longer compelling, at least compared with what seemed the wide-open and less pretentious potentials of video.

Knecht had arrived in New York City in 1980, after serving as director of the film program at the University of Oklahoma, which was focused on experimental work.[3] By then he had made several 16mm films, including *Dasn't Maint* (1974) and *The Primary Concerns of Roy G. Biv* (1978), both obliquely personal. In set pieces within *Dasn't Maint*, we see Knecht as a country boy reaching toward the idea of becoming an experimental filmmaker; and in *The Primary Concerns*, Knecht explores various ways of working with film and the optical printer and echoes a number of avant-garde film approaches that had become significant for him. For example, the film's longest section seems a structuralist homage to Ken Jacobs's *Tom, Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969, revised 1971); and *Flashy Dancer* (1974) is a brief found-footage comedy Western, reminiscent of the work of Bruce Conner.

In New York, Knecht taught for a time at La Guardia Community College and Hunter College, and made *Continuing the Adventures of Adriaen Block* as a way of coming to terms with his own immersion in urban life. In a series of comic set pieces he imagines himself a modern Adriaen Block, the Dutch explorer who between 1611 and 1614 investigated river valleys in and around what later became New York City, New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. Making *Adriaen Block* was Knecht's personal exploration of the cinematic territory of both the 16mm medium itself and the New York independent film scene; he

3. The University of Oklahoma film program was begun by filmmaker Robert Nelson. The first graduate student accepted into the program was Alan Berliner, fresh from four years studying with Larry Gottheim, Ken Jacobs, and Peter Kubelka.

combines animation, mini-performances, inventive use of visual text, time-lapse footage, and pop music into a somewhat goofy pastiche.

In 1981, Knecht was hired by the Art and Art History Department at Colgate University in Hamilton, New York, where he worked to expand the department's commitment to filmmaking and film exhibition, and in 1984 he finished his longest, and final, 16mm film, *Aspects of a Certain History*—just as he began to work with video. *Aspects of a Certain History* was shown both as a stand-alone film and as part of a gallery installation, *Aspects of a Certain History—Shooting Gallery*, a five-channel film loop with one channel of video, at Sculpture Space in Utica, New York. By 1984, the issue for Knecht was no longer film itself—neither the excitement of becoming a filmmaker nor, as in structural film, the fascination with the elements and possibilities of celluloid filmmaking—but the world beyond cinema and its impacts on him and presumably others.

Aspects of a Certain History was a serious attempt by Knecht to come to terms with his troubling experiences as a combat soldier in Vietnam during 1967–68. On his CV, under "education," Knecht first lists "1967–68, US Army, Combat Tour, 9th Division, Vietnam"—before indicating where he received his BSA (University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh) and MFA (Idaho State). As in earlier films, in *Aspects* Knecht uses a pastiche of means (including documentary footage of Vietnam during the decades when the French, with American financial support, were struggling to maintain control of Indochina) to evoke various dimensions of his experiences before, during, and after his combat tour. *Aspects* includes Knecht's own narration—describing, for example, a package of "gook ears" sent to a friend of his as he awaited deployment (the ears looked like dried apricots)—as well as audio excerpts from a talk by General William Westmoreland at Colgate in 1982, during which Knecht questioned the honesty of Westmoreland's contention that under his command, American soldiers were careful with Vietnamese civilians.[4] For Knecht the war was a transformative horror, and engaging this "certain history" in *Aspects* seems to have made way for the personal lessons of his combat experiences to become a subtext in much of the video work that followed.

During the late 1980s and throughout the '90s, Knecht turned his full attention to single-channel video pieces and multi-channel video installations, becoming what he has for the most part remained: a "home-grown, hair-brained surrealist"—as John Ashbery once described himself (indeed, there are parallels between Knecht's videos and Ashbery's poetry[5]). The video works Knecht completed in the 1990s—*Impermanent Firmament* (1991),

4. My earliest personal memory of Knecht is from this December 7, 1982, event at Colgate University, where Knecht had been hired to teach the year before. I was, and remain, impressed by the courage of his intervention, since at the time Westmoreland was an honored guest at the university and Knecht was an untenured, visiting professor on a three-year contract.

5. Knecht's sudden jumps from one element/mode to another are similar to the often disconcerting jumps within Ashbery's poems. (Personal note: as part of a weekend of activities around Ashbery's work, including his lifelong interest in cinema, at Harvard University in May 2009, I programmed films by three filmmakers who, during interviews, had told me that Ashbery was an influence on them, and talked with Ashbery and the audience about these films following the screening. The films were Abigail Child's *Mutiny* (1983), Phil Solomon's *The Exquisite Hour* (1989, 1994), and Nathaniel Dorsky's *Triste* (1996). Had I the opportunity to do this event over, I'd include *Impermanent Firmament* or another of Knecht's videos.)

The Possible Fog of Heaven (1993), *301 Nails . . . No Air Loss!!* (1995), and *The POXIOX Study: Tales of the End of the World* (1996)—make obvious the fact that Knecht found video liberating and energizing. Even in the earliest of the videos, Knecht combines a considerable range of methods and effects.

Impermanent Firmament, for example, combines various image formats with whacky animation and pun-filled texts. The title and four sections of *Impermanent Firmament* —"FIRE-SAIL," "SIGH-HENCE," "(SEE) U.R. (HEAR)," "INDUSTRIAL COMM-POUND"—are introduced by a black-and-white shot of a man walking through what appears to be the site of a fire or of volcanic activity. First seen in circular framing, then expanding to full screen, the shot is accompanied by eerie music and a text, arranged poetically, that scrolls upward through the frame:

FLOCK SALE!
FLEECED AT NIGHT!
THIS WEEK ONLY:
FIRE SAIL
A streak of meanies
smelled up the night.
It was only a matter
of time before
fruition of the ruined
landscape
would recoil.

"Sack 'em again"
shrieked the gang
at the watering hole.

"Shiek" cried the suckers
as we straddled the
whole.

During the video's four "chapters," multiple images and kinds of imagery are composited within a single complex frame. Adding to the multifarious mix of imagery is Knecht's tendency to combine found footage with animation and, sometimes, to transform found images with animation and color effects. Knecht's respect for the early premonitions of cinema is often in evidence. In these and later videos, Knecht sometimes uses a loop of a simple motion that has two basic states, evoking the Magic Lantern shows that continued to be popular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, even once cinema itself had been invented and marketed.

As suggested above, video allowed Knecht to explore various ways of using text: visual texts scroll upward or downward through the frame, move across the bottom of the frame in various rhythms, or flash on and off. Only a brief moment of vocal text is heard in *Impermanent Firmament*, but this would become a more substantial part of later videos. The density of many moments in the video—three separate images moving in different ways, with a complex text scrolling across the bottom of the frame simultaneously—causes

IMAGE 4. Still from *Impermanent Firmament* (1991) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

Impermanent Firmament (and the videos that followed) to have the disconcerting feel of overload that Knecht's lifelong friend James Benning had created in *American Dreams* (1984) and was developing for *North on Evers* (1991), during the same year when Knecht was working on *Impermanent Firmament*. And then there's color: within the brief sections of the video, there are beautiful moments of primary color, black-and-white images with one color detail, subtle color variations during fades in and out—a range of options beyond if not the capacities, at least the economics of most independent filmmakers of the time. The visual/audio complexity of *Impermanent Firmament* is itself a précis to the longer and far more complex videos that soon followed.

In *The Possible Fog of Heaven*, Knecht focuses on pop icon Elvis Presley as a way of thinking about the dangers of celebrity: the three subsections of the video ("Dilaudid 50," "Percodan 100," and "Quaalude 150") refer to the three drugs that were in Presley's body when he died on a toilet at Graceland, his Memphis, Tennessee, mansion. The mood of the video is grim and verges on the horrific; the imagery evokes nightmare and delusion: men rain from the sky (now, an eerie premonition of 9/11), and a man crosses the frame with his head on fire. However, as is true in *Impermanent Firmament*, *The Possible Fog of Heaven* is something of a paradox. Knecht's pleasure in and dexterity with 1990s video technology allows for a panorama of interesting and engaging visual effects—each section of the video presumably dramatizing the impacts of the particular title drug—combined with both elaborate visual texts that scroll through the frame and an audible delirium of words, written and spoken by Knecht in a virtuoso imitation of Presley's voice.

Presumably, Knecht not only mourns Presley's demise, but also empathizes, or at least understands, his addiction to fame and dangerous painkillers: as a combat veteran, Knecht recognizes how psychic trauma can lead anyone into danger. In any case, his performing as

IMAGE 5. Still from *The Possible Fog of Heaven* (1993) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

Presley's alter ego in *The Possible Fog of Heaven*, interwoven with the many other visual and auditory elements of the video, can be understood as another demonstration of his excitement about the many options that were now available to him as a video artist.

The POXIOX Study: Tales of the End of the World, is a culmination of Knecht's exploration of the opportunities afforded by video—an overload of overload (when Knecht's daughter Anna was five, he reports, "she was saying 'POXIOX' all the time. I asked her what it meant and she replied 'something really, really big, Dad.'").[6] *POXIOX* is a twenty-six-minute, comic sci-fi video that begins with an epigraph taken from the *Koran* (chapter 18, verse 18—in the video Knecht mistakenly indicates verse 16): "You might have/thought them awake,/though they were sleeping." After the epigraph, we see a three-layered image: in the background a man is sleeping; in the midground a layer of various-sized *Z*'s is seen moving upward through the frame as if it were snow in reverse; and in the foreground, a scrolling text indicates that the video takes place at the end of the second millennium, when "the earth had become She'al, the land of forgetfulness where the sleeping inhabitants became lost in a collapsing spectacle, waiting only for the end of the world." This introduction is followed by the film's title and an image of a curtain that opens to present a series of sequences, each of which includes layered and/or composited imagery, plus visual text that rolls across the bottom of the frame, right to left, all accompanied by various musics and, from time to time, vocal texts by Knecht.

To what extent we are to understand the surreal world of this "second millennium" as an interpretation of the actual second millennium that in 1996 was on the verge of concluding is not self-evident, though particular passages provide an implicit gloss on the late 1990s and

6. From Knecht's notes on his videos.

IMAGE 6. Still from *The POXIOX Study: Tales of the End of the World* (1996) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

perhaps inklings of the future. A visual text well into the video explains, "Information was no longer relevant. Only fragments of text remained that denied signification. Suddenly without warning or sequence the flunkies saw the same message on their screens that flew across the reach of the ether and beyond: [pause] TIME TO DANCE!"

POXIOX is too dense and complex for anything like a careful analysis in a short essay like this. Fundamentally, what is clear in the world of *POXIOX* is that nothing is stable. In a voice-over midway through the video, Knecht explains that the population excitedly awaits the new millennium, "the rapture-blast, the unrelenting first step to eternity," and that, "Whatever was left of what was once terra firma appeared only as dust particles on the edges of this globe of what surely must have been the radiance of Eden."

In general, I understand Knecht's videos from the 1990s as expressions of a kind of existential humor, produced by his awareness of how his seemingly stable academic life and home life are only part of Reality, which is—as surrealists have traditionally argued—full of mystery, complexity, instability, and horror. The videos are a form of whistling-in-the-dark humor, his way of channeling his broader awareness, and his insecurities and angst.

In the wake of 9/11, Knecht's videos continued to include complex compositing and text, but they seem, on one hand, somewhat less overloaded and often more directly relevant to specific political issues. And Knecht's tendency to animate objects flying through the frame, which is clear in the numerous flying wishbones, top hats, heads, high-heeled shoes, and *Z*'s that move up and down or float across the frame in the earlier videos, becomes even more obvious in the videos of the 2000s and 2010s. For me, *Deluge* (2010) is the quintessential post-9/11 Knecht piece. This seven-minute single-channel installation work (it has been shown in galleries and as an outdoor public projection (at the Everson Museum in Syracuse, New York, in 2012, for example) is engaging and amusing, but also—like Knecht's other recent work—deeply evocative both politically and autobiographically. There is a specific

IMAGE 7. Still from *Deluge* (2010) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

classic background to *Deluge*: a postscript to the piece indicates that it references *A Cloudburst of Material Things* (c. 1505), a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci.

Deluge begins with imagery of bright, colorful flowers popping up across the screen in what seems to be a garden, or perhaps The Garden. Knecht's garden is visited first by two surreal bees, next by a fairy or angel, and then by a spring rain. The flowers, like everything else in *Deluge*, are animated, but less in the manner of conventional narrative animation where smooth continuity is the goal, than like some of the films of Robert Breer, many of whose animations are energized by continuity-interruptive changes from frame to frame (Knecht has always seen Breer as a mentor). The rain that waters the flower garden in *Deluge* is represented by intermittent animated diagonal lines, moving from the upper right to the lower left. These diagonal lines are among the most consistent motifs in Knecht's videos, though they seem to mean somewhat differently in different videos.

In *Deluge* the lines suggestive of a beneficial spring shower soon transform. The serene music and water-in-motion sounds of the opening moments dissolve to the sound of rain; and a moment later, as more ominous music is heard, a small, animated cement block floats/tumbles across the screen and through the rain, above the now-fading flowers. It is followed first by an animated anvil, then by other cement blocks. The rain continues but soon includes a deluge of items flying across the screen, mostly from upper right to lower left. There is something humorous about seeing these items float by, particularly since Knecht enjoys playing not only with the variety of items "raining" down, but also with standard assumptions about visual perspective. There is no predicting from size or direction which item will pass behind or in front of another. The increasingly surreal barrage of objects big and small, real and surreal, falling through the image, include a nude woman, then a nude man (Eve and Adam?) who tumble by, head over heels. Like Knecht's 1990s videos, *Deluge* creates an entirely phantasmagoric space, the experience of which is maximized by seeing the piece projected large.

IMAGE 8. Still from *Deluge* (2010) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

Deluge is engaging and amusing, but also quite serious. It is metaphorical on multiple levels. Most obviously these days, it evokes the evolving reality of climate change and recent weather disasters like Hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, and Harvey. And yet, even as the issues that the videos seem to reference have become increasingly dire, Knecht's mood in addressing them has grown somewhat lighter than the mood of the 1990s videos—as if advancing age has, over time, caused such a pile-up of political and environmental concerns and terrors that Knecht can only laugh and try to be grateful for, at least, the opportunity to continue making videos.

For those who are aware of Knecht's personal history, a more specifically autobiographical reading of *Deluge* is equally evident. Knecht grew up in the tiny Wisconsin town of Iron Ridge (current population around 900). His father was the local butcher, and farming was the most prevalent local occupation. As has been suggested, being drafted into the army in 1966 and then serving in Vietnam was a transformative experience for Knecht, who remembers realizing, as he exited the plane that had flown him to Saigon, that the war was essentially a racist adventure.[7] His experiences in combat were a fall from the seeming innocence of his hometown into the realities of modern life at its worst—and into a world where most anything could fall from the sky and conventional perspectives on life were no longer relevant.

Knecht's rain metaphor has come to seem nearly inevitable in his videos and installations. The straight-line evocations of rain (nearly always falling from upper right to lower left) are a near constant in *Crisis in Sapville* (2005), *Free-Dumb Rains* (2005), *Upper* (2007), *Mr. Baxter's Trip to a Parallel Universe* (2011), and *Mechanics of the Game* (2012). And even when rain itself is not evoked, other kinds of objects continually "rain"

7. Knecht has said this to me, and no doubt to others, on a number of occasions.

through the imagery. In *Abstraction for the Masses* (2002), a twelve-channel digital installation, animated rocks fall through the frames; seen as an ensemble (available on Knecht's website), this motion is both ominous and balletic. *Free-Dumb Rains* begins with what appears to be a night sky, where meteors, and sometimes tin cans fly through the frame (*behind* the stars). In *Fragments from the Wheels of Ezekiel* (2011), an installation of fourteen flat screens and one projection (the projection subsequently also exhibited as *Anima*), books flapping their pages and covers like birds fly from the lower right toward the upper left of the frame and out of sight—as if books in general and religious texts in particular can no longer help to ground a humanity addicted to war (though it is also clear that the Book of Ezekiel has provided Knecht with a resource for sublimating angst within humor). This continual deluge within Knecht's videos suggests that, whatever may be happening within the world revealed within Knecht's framing—and within our current frames of reference and the timeframes in which we live—there are immense forces, both natural and human-made, continually affecting what we see and perhaps on the verge of determining our future.

If the majority of Knecht's early and more recent work can be called surrealist (in various ways individual pieces evoke Salvador Dali, Max Ernst, and René Magritte), his most recent project, *after math,* seems more fully expressionist—indeed, a kind of new millennium homage to Edvard Munch's canonical *The Scream* (1893). *After math* was instigated by the election of Donald Trump; "math" refers, most obviously, to the final count of votes and US Electoral College delegates in the 2016 presidential election. The installation is a panorama of portraits of people who at first seem serene individuals, but then are suddenly seen (and heard) to scream. In the installation version of the piece, exhibited at Alexander/Heath Contemporary in Roanoke, Virginia (March 3–April 15, 2017), viewers heard screams from all sides, from a diverse variety of women and men.

IMAGE 9. Still from *Fragments from the Wheels of Ezekiel* (2011) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

After math builds on a series of recent portrait projects, especially *Whee! the people* (2005), but also *The Acquiessors* (2008) and *The Vigilant* (2008)—all cine-portrait galleries where animated characters (each presented on a separate screen) do the same simple action in their own ways (a documentation of each of these installation pieces is available on Knecht's website). *Whee! the people* seems a reaction to the George W. Bush administration's response to 9/11. The twelve-channel installation reveals twelve individuals (eight humans and four animals) banging their heads against walls, each within a different composition and making a different sound. Both the humans and the animals are diverse: two women (one either working in her laundry room or hosting a television advertisement for a washer/dryer; the other at home with her son); two men (one of whom looks rather like Bush) in suits and ties, in Knecht's typical "rain"; two men (one with lighter skin; the other with darker skin) in T-shirts; a mysterious man in a white fedora (also in rain); a clown; and an elephant (the Republican elephant?), a rabbit, a chicken, and a cow.[8]

The Acquiessors, a five-channel installation using Nano iPods, shows five people (four men and one woman), each of whom relentlessly nods approval (in silence)—an implicit satire of the tendency of so many Americans during the post-9/11 era to accept virtually anything the Bush administration said or did to revenge the 9/11 catastrophe. *The Vigilant*, now part of the collection of the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, seems, at least ideologically, a companion piece to *The Acquiessors*. This five-channel installation involves three distinct groups of individuals: first, a mixed group of men and women, some of whom make "ahem" sounds as they subtly glance left and right; then a group of men in Knecht rain who look left and right; and finally five rather more abstract men in glowing silhouette whose heads turn back and forth relentlessly. Even if these characters are more concerned, more alert than the Acquiessors, the "rain" and darkness that increasingly engulfs them suggests that their vigilance is not of much help.

The sense of helplessness, albeit always presented with Knecht's goofy humor, is most obvious in *after math*, where the implicit shock of recent political events is powerful enough to distort faces and bodies and can only be expressed with screams. Indeed, the portraits in this piece evoke Knecht's lifelong fascination with outsider art, a fascination he shares with James Benning.[9] The electronic paintings in *after math* are reminiscent of such outsider artists as Mose T (Moses Ernest Tolliver) and Henry Darger, whose paintings are often seen in Benning projects.

The *after math* installation includes individual portraits on flat screens of people suddenly beset with various kinds of visual distortion and auditory reaction, and one large projection. In the large projection some of the same characters are beset, this time not with

8. A two-channel version of *Whee! the people* in which the two businessmen, in Knecht rain, banged heads next to one another, was part of "Beyond/In Western New York," a city-wide exhibition in Buffalo, New York, April 15–June 26, 2005.

9. Knecht has been important for Benning since they met in Wisconsin in the late 1960s. Benning's *North on Evers* includes a portrait of Knecht and Lynn Schwarzer, and Benning has been a frequent visitor to the Knecht-Schwarzer farm in central New York. Indeed, I see Benning's inclusion of Lake Oneida (actually Oneida Lake, in local parlance) as the final lake in his canonical *13 Lakes* (2004) as Benning's subtle nod to the importance of central New York (and Knecht, Schwarzer, and their children), as one of his home bases.

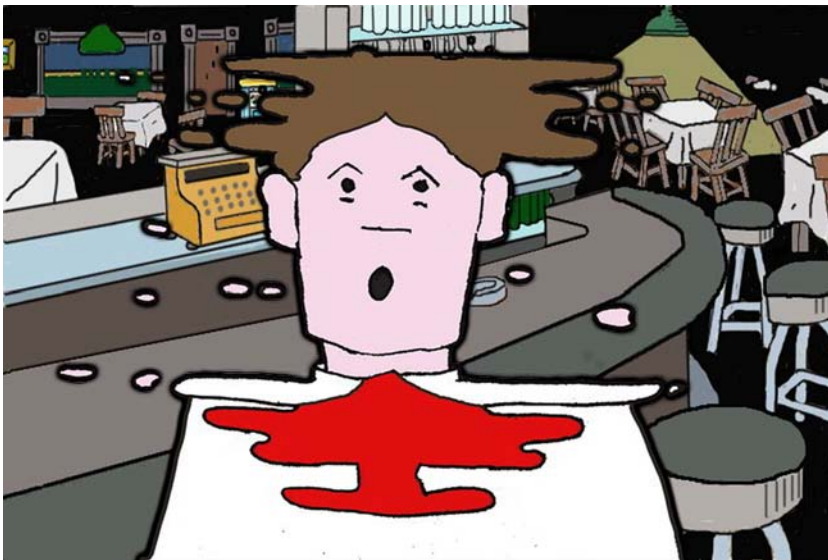IMAGE 10. Still from *after math* (2017) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

IMAGE 11. Still from *after math* (2017) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

Knecht rain, but by what appear to be various kinds of electronic input (along with, from time to time, a falling brick). This larger projection creates a hallucinogenic atmosphere of flicker and buzz, and the experience of the *after math* installation as a whole is an immersion in panic and frenzy—an electronic version of the distortion of face and body, bridge, water, and landscape in Munch's *The Scream*.

As horrified as the characters in *after math* are by the news—and implicitly by the shock that their immersion in modern electronic media has fooled them about how the election

IMAGE 12. Still from *after math* (2017) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

IMAGE 13. Still from *after math* (2017) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

would turn out—there is also humor in the situation, at least for Knecht and, I expect, for many who experience *after math*. We can recognize in the reactions of the various characters, who are after all not so different from many of us, our frequent complacency about the political realities of our world and how we can feel reduced to cartoon characters by events that reveal our self-delusion. The humor of *after math* may also suggest that after venting our disappointment and shock at the events that surround us, we'll be able to move on, this time perhaps with less naiveté.

IMAGE 14. Still from *after math* (2017) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

IMAGE 15. Still from *after math* (2017) by John Knecht; courtesy the artist.

Seeing *after math* as simply a response to the Trump election, however, oversimplifies it—just as a reading of *The Scream* focused only on politics would oversimplify Munch's painting. The way in which the characters in *after math* are beset by sudden horror and (in the larger projection) bombarded by visual and auditory signals relates to our lives beyond individual political events and our momentary political sensibilities. The relevance of *Deluge* to the potential of global warming to transform human existence has been mentioned, but it seems relevant here as well. We can feel serene about our lives at one moment as we tell

ourselves, "Well, if climate change *does* do its worst, at least I won't be around to see it"—only to recognize a moment later that (scream!) our *children* will be dealing with it.

In the years before he made *after math*, Knecht decided to retire from teaching in order to have more time for his artistic work. The transition into retirement, especially for someone as dedicated as Knecht had been to teaching and to working effectively within an institution (he was instrumental in expanding the Colgate University arts complex, including the construction of Golden Theater—that rare small-campus movie theater that can show 35mm and 16mm, along with digital formats—as well as in making Colgate the home of the annual Robert Flaherty Film Seminar), can seem both blessing and (scream!) loss. Even the decision to retire so as to be able to do one's own work is instigated by the reality that, though one is fortunate to have the resources to make this decision, at seventy years old, who knows how long one's stamina for work (scream!) will last?

The humor implicit in virtually every recent Knecht project is evidence that he doesn't feel sorry for himself or for us. *Deluge*, *Whee! the people*, and *after math* attest to Knecht's belief that modern artists should not, cannot hide from the political, environmental, social, and personal realities that surround them, but that they can use artmaking, as artists always have, to confront the challenges that they and all the rest of us face—including the challenge (SCREAM!) of our personal mortality and the mortality of the work to which we devote ourselves. ▪

Scott MacDonald's many books on independent cinema include collections of interviews with independent filmmakers, the five-volume *Critical Cinema* series from University of California Press, and more recently *Avant-Doc* and *The Sublimity of Document: Cinema as Diorama (Avant-Doc 2)*—as well as explorations of particular moving-image artists and films/videos, and of institutions that have kept independent media alive. He teaches film history and programs film events at Hamilton College in Clinton, New York.