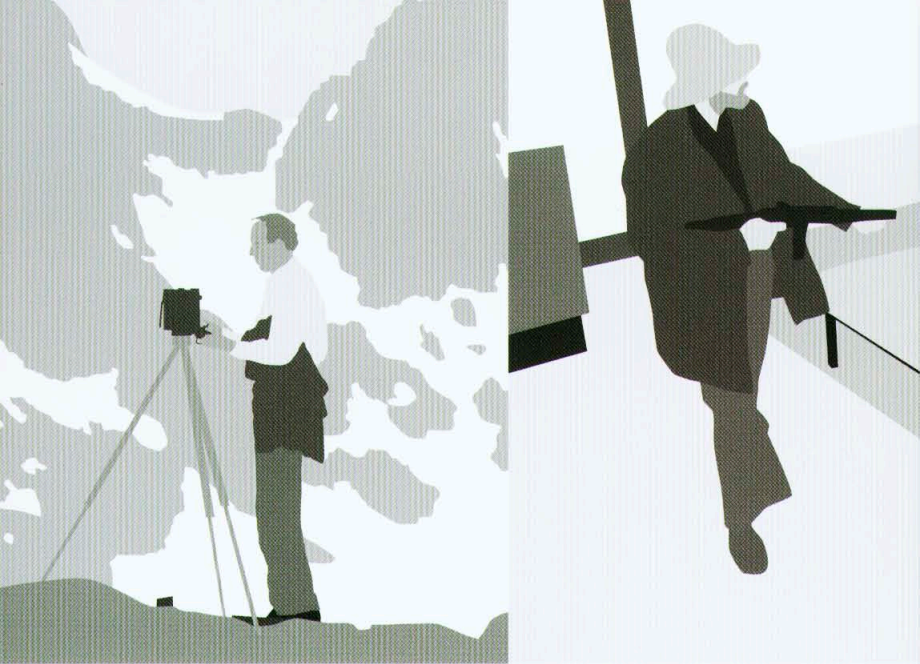




kota ezawa
matrix 154



Remixing History

We live in an era where quotation and sampling operate on such a deep level that the archaeology of what can be called knowledge floats in a murky realm between the real and the unreal. — Paul Miller, aka DJ Spooky¹

Since the early twentieth century, photographic images have achieved an increasingly vital role in society. Long hailed for their immediacy and “truth” value, photographs became an integral component of magazines and newspapers in the 1920s, and by the mid-1930s whole publications were being created around this highly accessible form of information. Illustrated magazines, such as *Life* and *Look*, devoted more and more of their pages to photographs, privileging pictures over words. Today, publications like *Life* are an anachronism, replaced by television and the internet. However, their legacy resonates in the “visual sound bites” of contemporary mass media. Filmed, shot, uploaded, spliced, played and re-played, images speak louder than ever. But what are they saying? The deafening roar of their endless quotation seems to dull any message, meaning or impact.

For San Francisco-based artist Kota Ezawa the ubiquity of images has inspired a body of work that manages, in a most unexpected way, to recapture the drama, tragedy and complexity of the camera’s expanded vision. Using



found imagery, Ezawa transforms seminal moments from media history into vector-based animations reminiscent of classic cartoons. A cross between Andy Warhol and *South Park*, the resulting footage is then re-presented in any number of formats, including digital projection, 35mm slide or 16mm film. Ezawa's material ranges in source from the iconic to the obscure, from commerce and politics, to entertainment and art. Previous projects have employed televised footage from the reading of the verdict in the O.J. Simpson trial (*The Simpson Verdict*, 2002), and scenes from Mike Nichols's 1966 film *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (*Who's Afraid of Black, White and Grey*, 2003).

MATRIX 154 features two new projects by Ezawa—*The History of Photography Remix* (2005) and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (2005). The former is an expanded version of the artist's 2005 slide installation titled *On Photography*. Originally conceived as a selection of twenty slides representing iconic photographs from the history of art, the work has evolved into a series of forty pictures drawn from a vast array of sources. The images are largely familiar, many by well-known photographers such as Ansel Adams, Gary Winograd, Diane Arbus, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Cindy Sherman. Others are derived from the world of photojournalism, depicting unforgettable faces and events, including Marilyn Monroe, Patty Hearst, JonBenet Ramsey, the Allied liberation of Nazi concentration camps, US nuclear testing at Bikini Atoll, and the rash of UFO sightings that flooded the media during the spring and summer of 1952.



The History of Photography Remix is based predominantly on Ezawa's own memory of images seen in books, magazines, television, and the Internet over the years. The photographs are then culled, digitally scanned, and manually traced using graphics software to create a simplified version of the original. The final result is both amusing and arresting. By translating familiar photographs into the unlikely medium of animation, Ezawa enables us to see each image in a new way. For example, how many times have you seen pictures of earth from outer space? Probably too many to count. These images have become so ingrained in our collective consciousness that they border on cliché. However, seeing Ezawa's drawing of the subject is like looking at earth from the moon for the very first time, just as the crew of Apollo 8 saw it in 1968. Inscribed with a poignant sense of nostalgia and loss, the drawing is a testament to Ezawa's belief "that stylization...can transform an image from a means of representation to a direct solicitation of viewer's emotion."²

Graphic manipulation is just one of several tools that Ezawa employs to reinvigorate historical moments and images. Much of his recent work is equally indebted to the stylistic techniques of hip-hop music pioneered by DJs in the mid-1970s, which include "sampling" and "mixing." In *The History of Photography Remix* Ezawa draws upon these methods to create a montage of imagery from vastly different sources that "turn the linear event of the history of photography into an open ended DJ session."³ Montage is used to similar effect in Ezawa's new 16mm animation *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (2005).



Presented for the first time in MATRIX 154, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* depicts the assassinations of presidents Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy quoted from D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation*, and Abraham Zapruder's amateur 8mm movie of the Kennedy shooting. As in *The History of Photography Remix*, the footage from both sources is abstracted and graphically simplified to accentuate its content and meaning. Focusing on the brief moments before, during and after each assassination, Ezawa reduces these emotionally charged sequences to a series of precise and powerful gestures. Despite their disturbing subjects, the juxtaposition of these two events provides a fascinating commentary on their role in the history of filmmaking and in the construction of collective memory.

In 1915, D.W. Griffith released his epic film *The Birth of a Nation*. A deeply distorted and blatantly racist story of the American South, it is one of the most notorious films ever produced. Ironically, it is also considered one of the most significant productions in cinematic history for Griffith's innovative editorial techniques. Much like a modern DJ, Griffith intercuts scenes and narratives to create connections across time and space.⁴ In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Ezawa replicates this technique with abrupt cuts between images of John Wilkes Booth and Lincoln in the moments before the assassination. Although used by Griffith to create a more realistic and historically authentic sequence, when converted to animation these cross-cuts serve as sharp reminders that *Birth of a Nation* is a fictionalized account.

above + cover: Stills from *The History of Photography Remix*, 2005.

35mm slide installation. Courtesy of the artist, Haines Gallery, San Francisco, and Murray Guy, New York.

Abraham Zapruder's grainy 8mm movie of the Kennedy shooting holds an equally complex position in popular culture, as both a historical document and a token of memory. Ironically, the very characteristics that would typically lend an aura of authenticity to photography or film—full color and linear progression—have been subverted and distorted from its very first public exposure in pages of *Life* magazine.⁵ Here, where images were touted as incontrovertible proof, Zapruder's film began its long and convoluted journey as one of the most highly contested evidentiary documents in history. Over the past forty years, the relentless quotation of assassination footage in journalism, literature, art and cinema has only succeeded in obscuring the meaning and "truth" value of Zapruder's film. However, Ezawa's stylized animation imbues the imagery with a renewed authority.

Viewed together, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The History of Photography Remix* form a unique meditation on the status and function of photography, both moving and still. In both works, Ezawa reminds us that a photograph, like his drawings and animations "is not only an image...it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask."⁶ As such, every photograph is a sign of disappearance. Each is inscribed with a sense of bereavement and loss for a time or person that belongs to the past. By reminding us of photography's burden of death, Ezawa subtly imbues his pictures with a weight and significance seldom experienced in today's image-driven culture.

Joanna Marsh

Associate Curator of Contemporary Art

Footnotes

¹ Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky, "Loops of Perception: Sampling, Memory, and the Semantic Web," *HorizonZero*, www.horizonzero.ca.

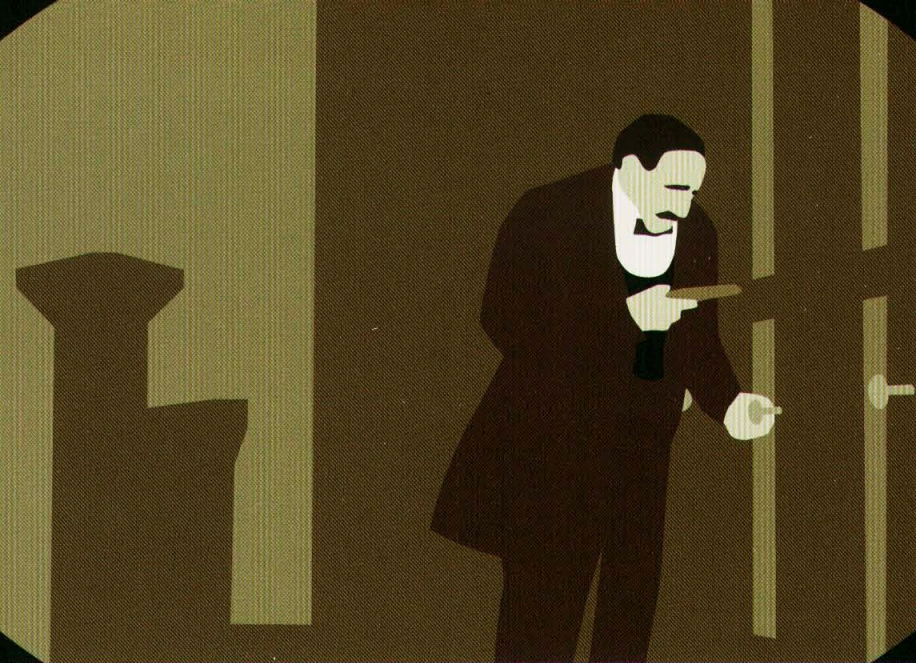
² Kota Ezawa, interviewed by John Smith, "From Fame to Form and Pop to Hop: Kota Ezawa and John Smith in Conversation," *Camerawork: A Journal of Photographic Arts*, 32, no.2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 12

³ *ibid.*, 13

⁴ For more on the relationship between hip-hop and early twentieth century editing techniques see "Notes for Paul D. Miller's *Rebirth of a Nation* – remix of D.W. Griffith's 1915 film *Birth of a Nation*," on the artist's Web site: www.djspooky.com.

⁵ On November 29, 1963, *Life* magazine published a sequence of thirty black-and-white frames from Zapruder's film. Because the magazine neglected to identify the images by their proper frame numbers and omitted the image of the president's head wound, the film's fundamental chronology was eliminated and its efficacy undermined. For more information on this widely published subject see Art Simon, *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996).

⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 154.



Kota Ezawa

Born in Cologne, Germany, 1963
Lives and works in San Francisco

Education

MFA, Stanford University, 2003
BFA, San Francisco Art Institute, 1995
Staatliche Kunstakademi Düsseldorf,
Germany, 1990–94

Solo Exhibitions

2005

Lennon Sontag Beuys, Murray Guy, New
York, NY

On Photography, Santa Monica Museum of
Art, Santa Monica, CA

2004

Version, New Langton Arts, San Francisco
(two-person exhibition)

2003

Who's Afraid of Black, White and Grey, Haines
Gallery, San Francisco

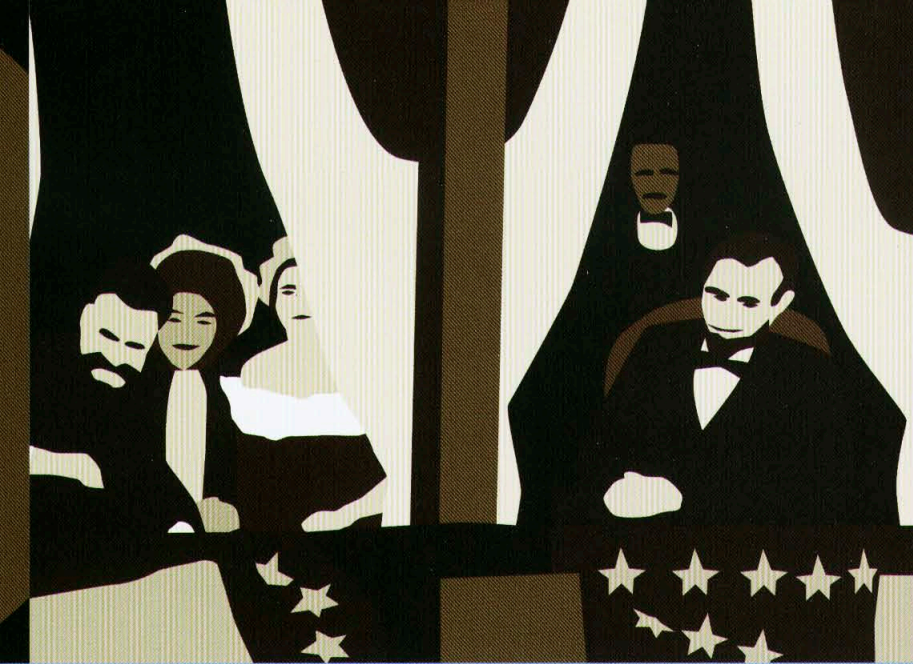
2001

AAA, with Karla Milosevich, Grove
Street Windows, San Francisco Arts
Commission Gallery

above: Three stills from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 2005. 16mm projection.

far right: Still from *The History of Photography Remix*, 2005. 35 mm slide installation.

All works courtesy of the artist, Haines Gallery, San Francisco, and Murray Guy, New York.



Selected Group Exhibitions

2005

Drawn out, Gallery 400, University of Illinois, Chicago, Illinois

Bay Area Bazaar, Pulliam Deffenbaugh Gallery, Portland, Washington

I still believe in miracles: 1. drawing without paper, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, France (catalogue)

Seeing Double: Encounters with Warhol, The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

in words and pictures, Murray Guy, New York City

2004

Shanghai Biennale 2004, Shanghai Art Museum, Shanghai, China (catalogue)

California Biennial, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, California (catalogue)

Temporal Scape, Haines Gallery, San Francisco, California

Baja to Vancouver: The West Coast and Contemporary Art, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, Washington; Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, California; Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada; CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art, San Francisco, California (catalogue)

Color Value, Gallery 400, University of Illinois at Chicago, Illinois

2002

Bay Area Now 3, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, California (catalogue)

Murphy & Cadogan Awards Show, San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery, San Francisco, California

2000

Fall Out, Otis Gallery, Los Angeles, California

1999

Spiel des Lebens, Hauptpost, Düsseldorf, Germany (catalogue)

1997

Better, San Francisco Arts Commission Gallery

1995

Rhine Video, Anthology Film Archives, New York

1993

Düsseldorf, Cologne—A Village Gaze, Anthology Film Archives, New York



Selected Bibliography

2005

Goldsmith, Meredith. "San Francisco California." *Art Papers*, January/February 2005

Higgs, Matthew. "Openings: Kota Ezawa." *Artforum*, February 2005

Turnlir, Jan. "California Biennial." *Artforum*, February 2005

Zellen, Jody. "Santa Monica." *Art Papers*, July/August 2005

2004

Bing, Alison. "A Room for Debate." *SFGate*, October 13, 2004

Bonetti, David. "News - San Francisco." *Contemporary*, Spring 2004

Buckner, Clark. "Critic's Choice: Art: Version, New Langton Arts." *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, October 13, 2004

Coupland, Ken. "Distant Recall." *RES*, November/December, 2004

Feldman, Melissa E. "Kota Ezawa at Haines." *Art in America*, April, 2004

Knight, Christopher. "Coastal confluence." *Los Angeles Times*, February 1, 2004

2003

Baker, Kenneth. "Who's Afraid of Computer Animation—Or Modern Art by One of Italy's Greats." *San Francisco Chronicle*, November 22, 2003

Hackett, Regina. "SAM Explores the Distinctive Cultural Terrain of the Pacific Corridor." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, October 9, 2003

2002

Baker, Kenneth. "Ezawa animates OJ Verdict." *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 25, 2002

Tromble, Merideth. "Bay Area Now 3." *Stretcher*, November, 2002



Works in the Exhibition

The History of Photography Remix, 2005

35mm slide installation

Courtesy of the artist

The Unbearable Lightness of Being, 2005

16mm film projection

Courtesy of the artist

MATRIX Talk

6:00 p.m. Thursday, November 3, 2005

Kota Ezawa will give an informal talk about his work in the MATRIX gallery

MATRIX 154 is made possible by the members of the Contemporary Coalition: Mickey and Janice Cartin, Emilie and Raul de Brigard, Howard and Sandra Fromson, Robinson and Nancy Grover, Carol and Sol LeWitt, Jeffrey and Marcia Marsted, The Ritter Foundation, The Helen M. Saunders Charitable Foundation, Philip and Robin Schonberger, Walter Wick and Linda Cheverton Wick.



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