

Rachel Rose

by Aily Nash



below: still from  
PALISADES IN  
PALISADES, 2014,  
HD Video, 9 minutes,  
31 seconds.

previous spread:  
still from A MINUTE  
AGO, 2014, HD  
Video, 8 minutes,  
43 seconds. Images  
courtesy of the  
artist.



Rachel Rose's videos investigate many compelling ideas (mortality, global warming, history, technology) and locations (a cryogenics laboratory, zoos, Philip Johnson's Glass House, the Palisades Interstate Park). But that's not where the brilliance of her work resides. She creates deeply experiential pieces that convey the sensorial aspects of these ideas, and this is what makes the work salient; I feel them before I think about them. Rose has the rare ability to impart an experience of materiality through the moving image. Manipulating sound and image, she translates what a place or an idea feels like by collaging and layering. Her camera pans and glides through an exterior space, conveying an interior mood—a tremor or apprehension, seamlessly transposed from one environ to another. The fear and unease felt with sudden severe weather or the complicated layers of history intrinsic to a particular landmark are expressed formally.

In Rose's first video, *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, there is a line that resonates with me as a way to think about her work: "All you are is means to mutate material." Rose is deeply engaged with the materiality of the digital, and she extends this to how we perceive

our relationship to the world. For Rose, material is linked to the notion of a spectrum of time in which living beings continue to "mutate materials." In her videos, disparate histories and eras coexist and come together within one image. In a sequence in *A Minute Ago*, with a continuous right pan, two disparate locations are united—we are transported from the midst of a sudden summer hailstorm on a Siberian beach to Philip Johnson's Glass House in Connecticut. The latter was shot on two separate occasions, while the Siberian footage was pulled from YouTube. Overlaid are the effects Rose created in postproduction so that all these elements coalesce in a single moment, or a single frame.

Rachel Rose has made three moving-image works to date: *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* (2013), *Palisades in Palisades* (2014), and *A Minute Ago* (2014). With many new pieces in the works, Rose has forthcoming solo exhibitions this fall at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Serpentine Galleries, Castello di Rivoli, Frieze London, and the Aspen Art Museum.

—Aily Nash

AILY NASH: You started out as a painter, then you studied art history, and you've transitioned into making moving-image work for installation. How did you land in this current mode of operation?

RACHEL ROSE: I was trying to expand what I thought I could do, or was interested in. In that process, I developed doubt about making art. Robert Irwin says that the key to the tool that you use to make something is whether it has the dimensions to deal with your questions. I was looking for a tool. Idealizing documentary films led me to learn how to research, write, shoot, edit, and design sound. That combination right now has the dimensions to deal with my questions.

AN: What initially led you to make documentaries?

RR: I didn't understand how I could be an artist and also care deeply about the things around us that affect how we live and think. Art felt like a vacuum, so formal. Documentary film, to me, symbolically meant going out into the world, being openly curious, and then trying to make work that produced meaning from that.

AN: You could investigate something?

RR: Yes, going outside of myself and outside of the conditions that I thought made a thing a thing. But when I actually learned how to shoot, edit, put together a project—cold-calling people, traveling to shoot—I found that what I loved most was piecing those materials together. That itself also was meaning. Then I thought, I can't be a documentary filmmaker. I'm too attached to the surface and the materiality of putting a work together and unfolding how that connects to the feeling within the work. So I guess I'm an artist.

AN: Through researching and organizing a film project, you found that you were making meaning in the way you brought together disparate elements—and that's palpable in the experience of the work itself. In *A Minute Ago*, you combine various distinct places and occurrences into a single image. Can you speak to your approach of colliding not only images but also time through this technique?

RR: In *A Minute Ago*, the quick shifts in time are brought about by collage. When something suddenly comes in, like a hailstorm or a larger catastrophe, it feels as though that thing's been cut and pasted into your reality. That's akin to the cut-and-paste structure of collage. I tried to infuse every point of reference within the work with collage: from compositing the hailstorm to the outside of the Glass House, to suturing the Johnson of the past with the house in the present. When I shot in the house, I replicated the camera movements from that original Johnson footage, so it felt like the two times were one. That's another kind of collage in the edit itself. With the sound I brought together pretty disparate times, too. For example, in the opening sequence you hear the sound of Pink Floyd's *Echoes*, a concert they played in an empty amphitheater in Pompeii in 1971. At the end you hear the sound of an audience at a Big Sean concert in 2012, erupting with no performer. Like Johnson being back in the current house, together these two sounds form one space.

AN: We experience all those layers of time through sound and images.

RR: You might not identify the image or sound, but you get a sense that things are shifting, and that they are sutured together. And that's integral to the design of the Glass House itself and to the property, it's one giant physical collage. You have a Mies van der Rohe chair next to a Nicolas Poussin painting inside this steel and glass structure situated within an artificially pastoral landscape.

AN: Materiality is very palpable in your films; you have us vacillate between experiencing the image-ness of something and the material-ness of it. For example, in *Palisades in Palisades* we're flowing through materials—print textures, canvas, and fabric—strobing back and forth and rhyming with each other.

RR: I had the woman in the video wear a canvas jacket to connect the canvas of the painting to her body, and then also to the grayness of the rocks. Although everything she wears seems very casual, it was considered from the perspective of the materiality of the edit. She's like a "throughway" for the cuts. I was thinking about that landscape and

the history of its representation—from the cross-hatched canvas of the painting to the cross-hatch of an engraving to the pixel in the video, which has a similar geometry. The jacket was this weaving that runs through everything in a way.

AN: In *A Minute Ago*, you shot Poussin's *Funeral of Phocion* with the glare of the glass over the image, reminding us that it's a physical object in a specific place. We're seeing more than just an image, but an object in space.

RR: Sometimes those choices are artificial. In *Palisades in Palisades*, the glare of the flash that pops up on the Revolutionary War painting of soldiers before a battle, that's fake. I added it in the edit.

AN: Why?

RR: I was placing the painting in two different moments at once. It was a way of saying, "You can be there *then*, with these soldiers," who, in the painting, are depicted in the Palisades where my protagonist stands in the film, "but you can also be here with me *now*," making these connections. You can be in both times at once. One of the other paintings I use, of George Washington with his wife and his daughter, first appears on the screen as a painting, and later as a paper print of that painting submerged in the water in my bathtub. Of course, you would recognize it as a reproduction before, but showing its flimsiness as a sheet of paper at the end expresses more fully this sense of impermanence. In the beginning of the video, there are these little specs that float around on top of the frames. You might think they're flies, but they're specs of dried ink released into the water from that same print in the bathtub. I was trying to have the materiality cycle in on itself.

AN: The way you zoom in on these prints really accentuates their surfaces, as much as the woman's pores and the wrinkles in her skin. And at this point in the video you also make apparent the apparatus; your edits indicated to me a leveling of objects—the tool/camera and its objectness with that of the subject. Why was it important for you to give the equipment presence?

# I'm thinking about how we experience, or try to experience, infinite space and time through the most finite, basic methods.

top: still from *A MINUTE AGO*, 2014, HD Video, 8 minutes, 43 seconds.

bottom: still from *SITTING FEEDING SLEEPING*, 2013, HD Video, 9 minutes, 49 seconds.

RR: I wanted you to be aware of the moment in time when I'm recording it, bringing you into that present. But also, I was excited about the camera, which I worked with through this remote-control rig. It was three of us operating it together—myself, the camera assistant, and the camera operator who had the rig on his body. We moved together over pretty far distances, as you can see in the video, constantly focusing the lens by hand. As a result, you get these movements from very far away to this super up-close materiality that you described. There are no cuts in between, so the scale shift almost feels animated, even though it's totally real. More than real—it's actually how we experience distance change all the time. So the camera movement is central to the meaning, it's like a silent verb in the work.

AN: In all three videos, *A Minute Ago*, *Palisades in Palisades*, and *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, place seems to be the foundation for the work.

RR: *Sitting Feeding Sleeping* was about taking an internal, emotional experience and attaching it to these exterior places—the cryogenics lab, the robotics perception lab, zoos—that I projected as sharing my emotion. It was like latching on for some type of communication. In *Palisades in Palisades*, I wanted to invert that process and the positioning of the site. I focused on one space, the Palisades Park, and seeing what was within it, what was already integral to its present and its history. I'd done a lot of research on the effects of park design on film. The park circuit, the pathway, has been linked to the development of narrative in the novel and from there to narrative in conventional film. Looking at the design of a park now, there's this re-creation of narrative back into nature.

AN: It also creates a time-based space, where we are guided through a narrative.

RR: Exactly. Along the pathway there are, naturally, all these little

vignettes—here's the boulder, and here's the river, and there's the tree or whatever, and they all carry their own interior narratives.

I wanted this park to be belittled by a deeper time. So I needed a park on top of a cliff, a place where you have a sense of literal depth, like it drops down, and where one can feel how liminal and short its existence is in relation to a deeper time. Once I had decided on the Palisades, I researched its history. Fort Lee in New Jersey wasn't only a major site for the Battle of Fort Lee during the Revolutionary War, it was also the location of the film industry before Hollywood. The term *cliff-hanger* comes from that specific cliff. I had no idea the park had such significance when I chose to work with it.

AN: There are shots of Anna Karina intercut with your protagonist, Diana. And the Nancy Sinatra song "Bang Bang"—how can we not associate it with *Kill Bill* and Tarantino?

RR: Well, it's Tarantino after Godard, which is Anna Karina. And in the beginning, there's the voice of Meryl Streep, saying, "I am the voice of dead people." It's dubbed from an interview she gave, describing what it was like for her to play in Brecht's *Mother Courage*. So that's another layer of women in film history. Nancy, Anna, Meryl, Diana—in each instance I'm working with replaying time.

AN: Is it because of the cinematic history of the location that you wanted to bring those connotations in?

RR: Yes, and this closeness between park design and film narrative. Because the first film serial (similar to a TV show) was produced on today's site of the Palisades park; its landscape has seeped into this history too.

AN: What was this film serial?

RR: It was called *The Perils of Pauline* (1913). In each episode, this character, Pauline, faced different obstacles. And in one, she hangs off that cliff I shot

in the Palisades; that's the scene from which the term *cliff-hanger* came.

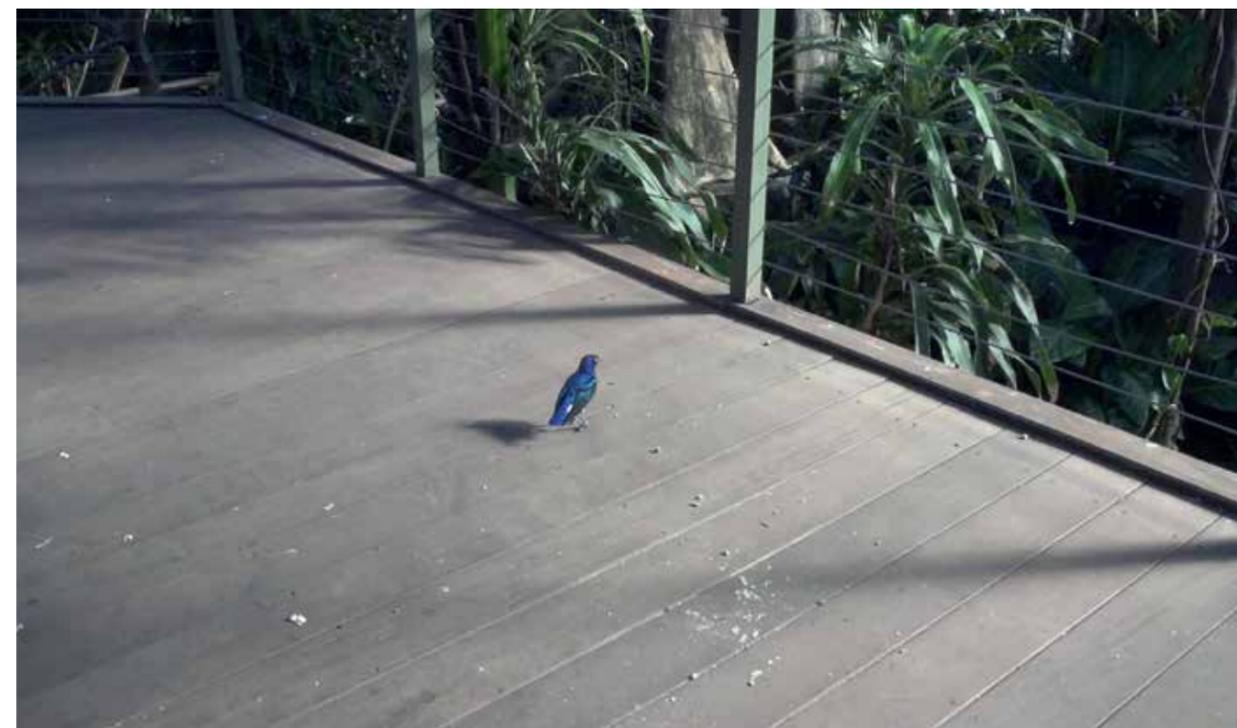
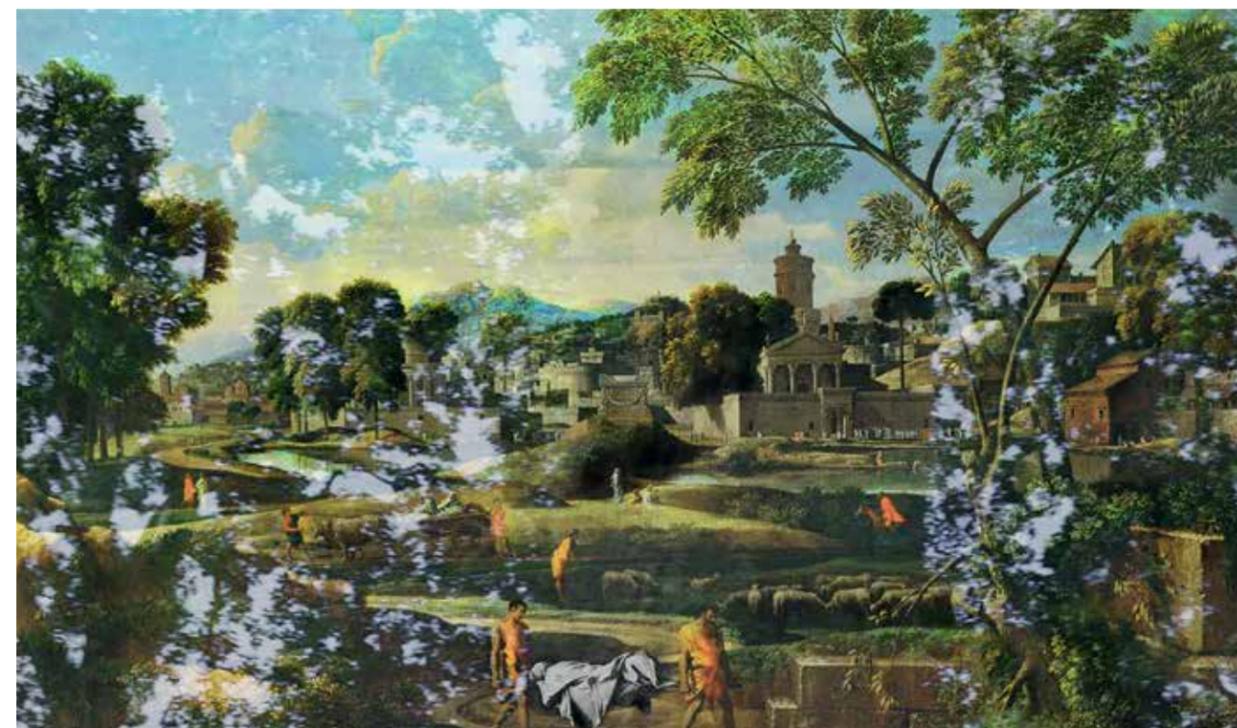
AN: I Shazamed a musical clip from the beginning of *Palisades in Palisades*. It was from a portion of the opera *Tristan & Isolde*, but used in Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* soundtrack, right? Another layer of tormented women in cinema history—

RR: Yes, it's not a random piece of classical music, it's one that you recognize from movies.

AN: These layers of cinema history are being sampled, referenced, and recycled both in sound and image. Let's talk more about the sound design in this work. Beyond these clips from the movies, there are also sounds that we associate more with animation, or that function like uncanny sound effects—like when Diana blinks her eyelashes and you hear these distinctively incongruent metallic clinks.

RR: My approach to sound was similar to the camera movement. It was about transitioning from really far away to really close up, and in that respect from something being metaphorical to it being purely material. For example, amidst the camera movement around the boulder into the small rock, you hear birds, wind, some squawks, and bullets ricocheting through—all the sound is artificial, even when it sounds like it's not. Or, when you're up close to her eye, you hear the sound of metal jangling together, which is like animation, but there's also this Revolutionary War past in the work, and you can't quite place the sound. So the audio is really scripted to bring up different moments in time for you.

AN: I'm curious about your work process. You said that in the initial stages of your earlier videos, there was a collision of a personal or conceptual question that you were investigating, alongside a formal technique or a new image-rendering process that you would work out in tandem. Can you speak about that?



RR: Usually a work starts with just a subtle basic feeling, which translates into a question like, What the fuck—I feel really uneasy about the state of weather now. It’s something basic that I feel, but don’t really have room to pay attention to because of the nature of living. It’s in the back of my mind, yet it keeps coming up. And then I try to think, What am I projecting onto this? What am I feeling about it? So in the case of the weather, I’m feeling uneasy.

AN: By weather you mean global warming? Climate change?

RR: Exactly. I don’t describe it that way because I want to address it not politically, not morally, but through its underlying structure and the feeling associated with it. In *A Minute Ago* I approached it from that perspective. But in all of my work it’s like that—I’m first marking the general feeling, the general territory I want to work in. Then I try to hone it down more specifically, maybe to some tangible experiences I’ve had with that thing. I sort of hyper-break it down for myself. For example, with *A Minute Ago*, it was an experience I had in a coffee shop when all of a sudden this crazy storm came in. There was a gust of wind, and then it went away. Everyone in the coffee shop paused and a few minutes later we just went on with our lives. I kept thinking about that and about glass as this barrier. So I looked into the history of glass and glass manufacturing. Looking around New York City, so many buildings are conceived around glass, and how did that come to be? My research led me to Ohio and I shot in a glass museum in Toledo. In the end I didn’t use that footage in the film. My research tends to be sprawling. It’s exploratory, very free-form, but I’m also simply trying to figure out what I’m going to do. The glass question led me to think about its equivalent in technology—compositing, which is basically collaging within the frame. I wanted to learn compositing in postproduction, and then I thought about compositing in-camera, which is how I arrived at the method I used while shooting in the glass house.

AN: Your installations are usually single-channel, have no seats, no booth, and

the apparatus is always visible, laid bare, with the projector and player on or near the dark-colored carpeting that you’ve designated as the seating area on the floor. And the projected image is low to the ground. Is it important to you that the work functions in space sculpturally? How did you arrive at this setup, and why are these the ideal viewing conditions for the work?

RR: In making an installation, I’m not interested in conventional cinematic space, where you’re sitting upright and in the dark to watch something. I want to have more flexibility with how you absorb the work. Each piece has a different set of conditions for how it’s shown. In postproduction, I’m imagining how the edit will appear in space. I always think about natural versus artificial and projected light, about how you’re hearing the sound, how you’re sitting, about the scale of the screen and from what distance you watch. I think about weight and weightlessness, reflection and opacity. At the Serpentine, I’ll be showing *A Minute Ago* and *Palisades in Palisades*, distinctly but within a larger installation that brings the works together. I’m opening the barrier between inside and outside of the works, taking *Palisades in Palisades* and stretching it around *A Minute Ago*. The inside of *Palisades in Palisades* is *A Minute Ago*, and the outside of *A Minute Ago* is *Palisades in Palisades*. The Sackler Gallery, where I’m showing it, was actually an artillery hub for the British Army. It’s within Regent’s Park, designed by John Nash; Olmstead was looking at John Nash’s work when he influenced the designs of parks all across America, including the Palisades Park, where I shot. So there’s this cycling inversion inside the work too.

AN: I was thinking about the countdowns, and how they function differently in various spaces. In a linear screening setting, or even on one’s computer, the countdown would be at the end of the work, but in an installation, in some sense, it’s the beginning.

RR: Yes. The countdowns are fun to make. I think of them differently for each video. In the new one, there actually isn’t a countdown. It loops naturally, the end is the beginning.

AN: Can you tell me about your new video, the one you’re working on for the Whitney?

RR: It’s based on an interview I did with an astronaut about the experience of his body in outer space and his body back on earth again. I shot it in a neutral buoyancy lab, which is where astronauts once used to go to practice doing payloads on the outside of the space station. Neutral buoyancy labs are five-story pools filled with water that have sections of space stations built into them. It’s the water that most simulates what it’s like to be in outer space. Now, they’re used for space robotics research. I’m thinking about how we experience, or try to experience, infinite space and time through the most finite, basic methods. Even as sublime an experience as being in outer space, in pure darkness, floating away from a space station, comes about through the barriers of metal, glass, and skin. In the installation, I’m working with the transparency and the opacity of the projection screen in front of a large glass window.

AN: The window looks out into the city?

RR: Yes. The idea is that at certain moments you’re fully in the video, and then in other moments you’re aware that it’s just light being projected on the scrim. Behind that scrim is the city. As you’re watching the video, I’m trying to modulate your sense of being weightless or, at the next moment, fully aware of yourself as being within the limits of Earth, looking out at the Meatpacking District.