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Tim Knowles, Pe Lang + Zimoun, *Unpredictable Forms of Sound and Motion*. Bitforms gallery. New York. January 24 — March 7, 2009

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## Actualités/Expositions

New York

### Less than Transient, More than Phenomena

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or *Unpredictable Sounds and Motion*, curated by Steve Sacks, the recent exhibition by Tim Knowles and Pe Lang + Zimoun based on the phenomenological and technological at Bitforms gallery in New York's Chelsea district, the London-based Knowles presented two rather whimsical, walkabout projects. One, consisting of a pair of largish C-prints, *Nightwalk – Valley of the Rocks #1 and #2* (2008) from an ongoing series, documented approximately 30-minute, after-sunset treks in Devon, spurred, no doubt, by the English custom of walking in general and the art habit of walking in particular by, say, Richard Long, Francis Alÿs and Janet Cardiff. Knowles, however, unlike the others, is interested in movement itself as data and a kind of mark making. For his constitution-

als, Knowles mounted a camera on a tripod, the shutter open for a long-exposure photograph that recorded his passage into the darkness. Carrying three strong flashlights fitted with diffusers in a backpack, they illuminated Knowles' route along a ridge, 'drawing in' the landscape as he progressed. The *Nightwalk* photos, like all of his projects, are for the most part literal, matter-of-fact transcriptions of a commonplace, circumscribed task—in this sequence, following a certain path or compass bearing. Chance and process are the heart of Knowles' practice and the *Valley of the Rocks* are exceptionally glamorous instances of his pre-conditioned, time-based interactions with the unexpected, uncontrolled forces of the external world. Nonetheless, they also have allegorical undertones, visually suggesting updated, high-contrast Baroque sce-





Tim Knowles, *Windwalk - 5 walks from Charing Cross*, 2008.

narios with a vestige of mythic or existential narrative, referring, perhaps, to the darkness of a Platonic cave, as suggested by Sacks, where shadow is difficult to distinguish from substance or to the Manichean divide between light and dark, goodness and evil.

It is critical to Knowles that his investigative process is clearly visible and comprehensible. To achieve maximum legibility, he often presents his projects as installations, showing the drawings, videos and photographs that are the results of his experiments—his exposés of the secret, invisible life of movement—as well as the props he used to conduct them as he did in *Windwalk—5 Walks from Charing Cross*, 2008, the other half of his Bitforms project. *Windwalk* focuses on the artist as a post-Baudelairean *flâneur* stripped of sentimentality and metaphor—well, almost, since it does raise issues concerning free will, determinism and consciousness, his fate contingent, cast to the winds, so to speak—who strolls the city to observe its rhythms objectively as some combination of human intervention, natural forces and pure happenstance—rather than subjectively as personal experience.

One component of the installation was a pristine white helmet—Knowles calls it *Helmet Vane*—fitted with a wire contraption that resembled a sail and turned in response to the wind, functioning as a weathervane. It was hung like a Tatlin corner relief and seemed a descendant several times removed of one of Leonardo's flying machines. Starting out from Charing Cross, the designated center of London, Knowles wore it, a video camera hoisted atop one shoulder, on his nocturnal walks through the streets of London, his steps tracked by a GPS device he also carried with him. In contrast to the rural setting of *Nightwalk*, he passed shut-down institutions, commercial buildings and lighted apartments while the Millennium Wheel in the distance bobbed into view now and then and a few late-night pedestrians glanced at him quizzically, his passage increasingly erratic as directed by his helmet vane.

Shown on five pristine white monitors playing simultaneously, each video was a document of one of the near 45-minute, wind-choreographed performances, a mapping of how it blew, shaped by the city, with Knowles in its wake. The walks ended when he reached a cul-de-sac, that is, when he couldn't figure out a way to proceed further, hemmed in by architecture or other impediments. While this unreeling chunk of time and space wasn't terribly exciting—no high speed car chases, the Wheel wasn't blasted to smithereens—it was real, engaging in its low-keyed, jostled narratives, its idiosyncratic playfulness and DIY sensibility, its absurdity. Knowles has created larger installations and this one might have had an entirely different effect had it depended upon immersive, full wall projections, say, pulling the viewer into the scene as a participant rather than a voyeur but the modesty of the installation suited the unpretentiousness of the enterprise. The final component of *Windwalk* was a C-print of the GPS system's tracking of his five promenades. It resembled a wiry abstract drawing, each of its five jittery lines with its zigzags and backtrackings emanating from a center point (Charing Cross) and although schematized, it was, in some ways, the most complete visualization of the project

since it was visible all at once. Knowles is more focused on the means of capturing transience—which he approaches from many engrossing directions—than on transience itself.

Swiss artists Pe Lang + Zimoun, in their New York debut, contributed three recent, delightfully ingenious sound works—they call them *Sound Objects*—that were part acoustic sculpture, part industrial design, signaling their interest in the systemic and serialized, the phenomenological and hybridized. Their scale can also be monumental but was presented at bitforms in more manageable, whittled-down iterations that did not suffer in the downsizing. In fact, they looked good, the elegant, wall-mounted white wooden type cases used in two of the *Sound Objects* are home office-sized at just below three and a half feet square, suggesting a miniaturized Sol LeWitt crossed by an somewhat enlarged, industrialized Joseph Cornell, partitioned into 100 and 400 divisions respectively. Each compartment was outfitted with the same mechanized gizmos, one type per case.

The Lilliputian assemblage of the smaller grid consisted of short metal chains, like the ones used in key chains, draped on a small rod held up between two tiny black wheels powered by a compact motor. When activated, the entire ensemble rattled and rolled, quickly desynchronized—pitting uniformity against individual aberration—the chains making a rustle that sounded like rain or wind, a John Cage or Steve Reich concert or lap-top music. More grating was the 400-division grid, each of its compartments supplied with a cell phone shock absorber—a little black bulb—attached to a vibration motor that, turned on, emitted a surprisingly raucous hum, what things on the verge of a nervous breakdown might sound like. The last *Untitled Sound Object* consisted of numerous red and blue coated wires weighted at the ends with miniscule, vibrating motors. The wires were threaded through a board and dangled downward. This somewhat less rectilinear configuration—the wires suggested a three-dimensional drawing—required that one motorized wire be plucked and released to start a chain reaction of movements and entanglements, an apt metaphor for all kinds of networks and the consequences of connectivity. Altogether, as literal interpretations of buzz, they are witty visualizations of our products, ourselves going crazy, 21<sup>st</sup> century urbanites can all relate to.

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Pe Lang + Zimoun, *Sound Objects*.