GAGOSIAN

ARTFORUM

Douglas Gordon
GALERIE EVA PRESENHUBER

Pamela Kort

Douglas Gordon, I Had Nowhere to Go, 2016, three-channel video installation, color, sound, 98 minutes. Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography.

Douglas Gordon's recent multichannel video installation I Had Nowhere to Go, 2016, unfolds in unrelenting darkness. The only relief comes from several images and flashes of color that appear for varying lengths of time on the large screen, two small floor-mounted monitors, and mirrors scattered around the gallery walls. This space is dominated instead by the sound of a foreigner reading, in English, dated passages in no particular order. The words ricochet off the metallic-looking walls until the voice goes silent. Suddenly a clatter of bullets and explosions flares up. There are also less spectacular sounds: a halfheartedly incanted song, a kind of humming, a note repeated only to fade away. As one wanders in and around the room, one's own reflection also eerily appears in mirrors sometimes replaced by shards of reflected pictures.

With these simple but highly effective means, Gordon has conceived a work of art that goes beyond cinema as we know it. If a forerunner for such a bleak environment can be singled out, it might be Joseph Beuys's hinter dem Knochen wird gezählt—Schmerzraum (One Counts Behind the Bone—Pain Room), 1983. The work's most immediate cinematic precursors, however, hail from North America: works by Jonas Mekas, Michael Snow, and Andy Warhol, above all.

Mekas is the voice we hear reading selections from diaries that span the years 1944 to 1953. They detail the hardships the Lithuanian poet underwent as a displaced person who after slipping away from an enforced labor camp in Germany was shuttled from one refugee camp to another. Though he reached New York in October 1949, his life there was initially no picnic. Almost half a century later, Mekas published the diaries under the title I Had Nowhere to Go (1991). By chance the book landed in Gordon's hands. Years went by. Recently, Gordon contacted Mekas, asking if he might use certain passages as the basis for a film. That movie, also titled I Had Nowhere to Go (2016), quietly premiered this past year at the Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland.

Endurance is one of the paramount themes of the installation—which requires ninety-eight minutes to experience in full—and not just in terms not just of stamina but of perseverance. The longer one lingers within the space, the clearer it becomes that the most loaded images are harbored in the dark cavity of the mind. With this work, Gordon makes memory images become active; he brings them for a split second into optical reach as something that tangibly survives. Many of these fleeting appearances are dominated by the preparation of food, so essential to human continuance. Scenes featuring a captive gorilla also come into view only to die away. Representative of one of the oldest extant ancestors of man, this complacent ape seems to embody a certain acquiescence, a disposition all but alien to Mekas and those of his ilk. Rather than seek the relative security of commercial filmmaking, Mekas held out for his own brand of diaristic cinema. Softly he tells us: "Saturday, we finally got our own Bolex 16. We have been doing a lot of filming . . . with our own last miserable pennies in the few minutes we have available." Not long thereafter, Mekas also began to promote in word and act all sorts of experimental films. Though in no sense forced to become a displaced person, Gordon felt it necessary to leave Scotland to make it as a video artist: He now lives mainly in Berlin. But I Had Nowhere to Go is about far more than merely self-reflective processes. Ultimately, it also seems to be a subtle but pointed commentary about the plight and prospects of the refugees flooding into Germany right now.