ART PAPERS

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Viktor Timofeev: *Proxyah*
Jupiter Woods, London

John Gerrard: *Farm*
Thomas Dane Gallery, London

An acquaintance of mine works for a successful video gaming company, producing their short, film preview-like teasers and advertisements. Generating footage using free-floating perspectives within the worlds of the games, he considers his work as factually capturing those worlds, and refers to himself as a "documentary maker." This is a peculiar spin on machinima—the term used for videos produced from within video game platforms—but video games are a reality in which we have long invested, so why not treat them as such? It highlights the fact that our world is habituated and crossed through with digital processes; they don't exist in opposition to the "real," but as equal fact on the experiential spectrum. The politics and possibilities of so-called virtual realities have been increasingly explored in galleries (the work of practitioners like David O'Reilly, Jason Rohrer, and Benjamin Nuel are notable examples); two recent shows in London presented very different versions of this landscape, to ask where within it we might stand.

In the darkened Jupiter Woods project space during Viktor Timofeev's solo exhibition, *Proxyah* [January 9–February 8, 2015], a plastic egg sat on a stand in front of two screens. The walls were covered in large black icons that resembled logos designed for a Bond villain; in one, an image of the Earth was framed within an oval, a human arm extending from one side, and a snake's head from the other. On one screen was a serene, silver sea, the view occasionally sweeping from side to side, or drawing closer to the rippled surface. Using the egg like a joystick brought the other screen to life: the drone of an engine revved up, symbols and colors began flashing on screen. The viewer had apparently entered a tunneled, high-security maze: turning some corners seemed to cause a set of four bars to fall down in front of the player, while turning others took him/her out to an open plain, where an X-shaped symbol changed to a Y. It was never entirely clear if my own jerking and jostling with the egg actually had any effect on the sounds of metal clanging and occasional screams erupting from the game. Numbers, lines, and circles were superimposed onto the view, until it shifted, after about 30 seconds, to another screen, where the surface of a small square of land bristled before forming a landscaped terrain, disappearing, and making way for a new set to begin.

The short, disorienting play of *Proxyah v2* (2014), an interactive video by Latvian artist Timofeev is essentially a distorted, maxed-out version of one of the oldest arcade games, by now more of an outdated mobile phone favorite: Snake. It takes more than a few tries to even start to filter what's going on in Timofeev's version; it seems to provide both 3-D and 2-D views of one's movement at the same time, but never makes the boundaries of its world clear. The "point" of playing, it turns out, is to expend energy, and the player's movements are ultimately tallied to determine the particulars that shape the height and curves of the terraformed square that appears at the end of each round. Which is to say that the player is utilized as an exhorbitant, abstract landscape architect.

Across town at the Thomas Dane Gallery, things were somewhat calmer. Visitors to John Gerrard's *Farm* [February 7–March 28, 2015] were given two slow-moving views, one of a solar power plant, and the other of what looked like a generic, non-descript factory. Since his 2007 digital real-time reconstructions of Dust Bowl storms, Gerrard has been producing virtual portraits of physical places, using software that was originally developed by the military to produce moving image simulations designed, in some cases, to run for up to 30 years. This exhibition was more of the same, and included the *Solar Reserve (Tonopah, Nevada)* (2014) work that was displayed outside New York's Lincoln Center for several months last year. The floating "camera" behind the work moves from close-ups of solar panels, slowly swiveling to capture the sun as it arcs across each virtual day, to impossible bird's-eye views of the plant's entire, impressive circular geometry. The blatant aestheticizing of the energy reserve is balanced by *Farm (Pryor Creek, Oklahoma)* (2015), where the frame circles the exterior of the factory building from a medium distance, observing its white paneling, air vents, and security cameras. The reason we are shown this particular "farm," it turns out, is that it is one of Google's data centers, and thus carries with it the implication that some part of ourselves—an email, an iPhone image, or an Amazon wish list—is held behind those blank walls (or rather, within what those temporary digital walls represent).

Farm is a slow mandala: nothing else happens in its slow pan, with the exception of the odd surface glitch. The exhibition press release made a big point of noting that the company denied the artist permission to make the work himself, instead hiring a helicopter to get the tens of thousands of images needed to make the virtual portrait. But what do we stand to gain from Gerrard turning the Google Street View camera back on Google? The idea of watching the watchmen (à la Trevor Paglen) adds a beneficial whiff of urgency to Gerrard's normally laconic, indirect sense of the political. Yet the even, distanced positioning of the provided perspective is telling: we are excluded, passive observers, but we are told that we are implicated in the scene in front of us.

The title of Timofeev's *Proxyah* suggested a sort of utopia for proxies, a place where our avatars might flourish. The game itself, though, presents this paradise as a dark maze, overloaded with abstract, opaque symbolism. Both *Proxyah* and *Farm* created apparently virtual spaces that pose existential questions—Am I actually in a space? What am I doing there?—and both implied that while we ponder those questions, we are being exploited, harvested for energy or data. For Gerrard, we can only watch while this happens; for Timofeev, we are agents, at least, consciously a part of the construction of an oblique new world (not our own). Neither scenario is ideal, but it's clear that the question that binds us to servitude is no longer about whether or not our habitat is real or virtual, but about how we are enabling it.

—Chris Fite-Wassilak
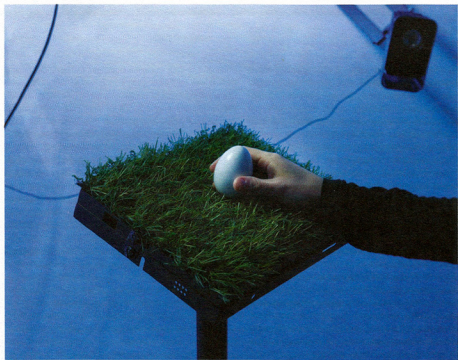
ABOVE: Viktor Timofeev, *Proxyah v2*, 2015, installation view [photo: Damien Griffiths; courtesy of the artist and Jupiter Woods, London]