



© Dmitriy Kozlov, 2006. From the "Last Riot" series. Photo: © J.S.P. and courtesy Triumph Gallery, Moscow. A Multimedial Art Center, Moscow.

AES+F's Last Riot: Massacre by the Innocents?

23 February – 15 June 2008

1 – 6 Selected stills from AES+F, *Last Riot*, (2005-2007), from the 'Last Riot' series
 ©AES+F AND COURTESY TRIUMPH GALLERY, MOSCOW
 © MULTIMEDIA ART CENTER, MOSCOW
 EDITION EXHIBITED: PRIVATE COLLECTION, SYDNEY

“Delacroix was passionately in love with passion, but coldly determined to paint it as clearly as possible”

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, 'L'OEUVRE ET LA VIE D'EUGENE DELACROIX' (1863)



WWW.CITYGALLERY.ORG.NZ

OPEN DAILY 10AM – 5PM
 FREE ENTRY
 CITY GALLERY WELLINGTON,
 CIVIC SQUARE, PO BOX 2199, WELLINGTON
 TELEPHONE: +64 4 801 3021
 EMAIL: CITYGALLERY@WMT.ORG.NZ

 ERNST & YOUNG
 Wellington MUSEUMS TRUST 
 Absolutely POSITIVELY
 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED Wellington City Council

Principal sponsor: Ernst & Young. City Gallery Wellington is managed by the Wellington Museums Trust with major funding from the Wellington City Council.

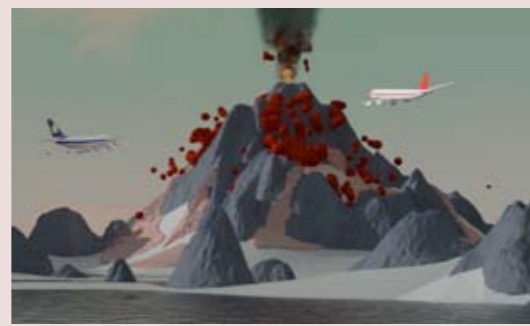
AES+F's work has been compared to that of nineteenth century French painter Eugene Delacroix, indeed a number of scenes in their video *Last Riot* may seem unnervingly familiar to us; they appear to draw on imagery from a wide spectrum of sources. The participants have the sublimely detached expressions of allegorical figures in seventeenth century works by Nicolas Poussin or Guido Reni, while indulging in ruthless acts recalling torrid scenes from the Romantic movement. They have flawless bodies, akin to those in air-brushed advertising commercials, behave like soldiers in the popular computer game 'America's Army', and share a similar computer generated aesthetic. Whatever clouds of glory these infants trail, it has little to do with innocence – cultural, historical, or political. *Last Riot*, which has been called 'mad and mythic', draws heavily on both art history and contemporary culture, its power to shock us perhaps very close to its ability to lull us with familiarity.

Last Riot's location is a virtual world, generated from 'real' elements of history, the present, and a projected future. Art historical references abound, the imagery appropriated with popular culture's characteristic irreverence. Despite shouldering a familiar pictorial legacy of the narrative epic, its conventions are shrugged off with the disconcerting substitution of children and adolescents in the scenes. The bare-chested boys join a long-established tradition of the idealised, youthful male nude, epitomised by Michelangelo's well-known statue *David* (1501-4). In one tableau we see reference to a *pieta*¹ scene, the body of a child draped seemingly unconscious across the others. There are resonances with Michelangelo's *Dying Slave* (1513-14), and the Laocoön group, a connection which brings us to consider the work's erotic potential. The inclusion of girl children (from pre-pubescent through to teen) intensifies its incongruity; eerily Amazonian in their behaviour, they too wield weapons with the ease of habit and conviction.

We recognise numerous references spanning the cool neoclassical detachment of Poussin's work to Reni's *The Archangel Michael* (1635); the drama in Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827-28) to Théodore Gericault's *Raft of the Medusa* (c1818). A common feature is identifiable in the impassive faces of these brutal youngsters, in their aloofness from the savagery they enact. Violence is performed in an almost perfunctory manner, with the seeming inevitability of a repeated ritual. In the choreography of the scenes – the balletic contorted bodies and decorative treatment of the gory skirmish – there is a stillness, a staged aspect hailing seventeenth century history painting. Compositions and figures we associate with their art historical context are forcefully contemporised in the video medium, reading like a chilling documentary set in the future.



1



2



3



4

Another key reference cited by AES+F is 'America's Army', a computer simulation game-come-recruitment tool employed by the US military. Conceived, designed and distributed free to reach the 13-22 demographic, this game helps market an army career to potential recruits (some 80,000 of which are required annually by the US Army). Participants ambush and 'kill' terrorists with weapons that look and sound like the real thing. War scenes in *Last Riot* recall the seamless animated aesthetic of 'America's Army', where almost doll-like militia-men enter combat. Bloodless and brazenly violent, it's not clear where the selling of ideas ends and the game, or the battle, begins. *Last Riot* mimics this provocative conflation of real and surreal/virtual. The computer game aesthetic has a disarming aspect; *Last Riot* brings us to the very edge of an a-moral animated universe, compelling us to consider its proximity to our own world.

Many elements of the landscape strike a familiar chord, however the juxtaposition of diverse plant and animal species with fragments of natural and 'man-made' environments offers a more unsettling vista. This is a fantastic and improbable realm, at once tropical and icy, where a windmill sits in the lee of a 'nodding donkey' oil well, turrets and towers of a city cluster in the background, and a volcano spews lava and rocks off to one side. Domestic and military projectiles stream across the sky – passenger planes swoop, a space shuttle is launched as are a raft of pink missiles. Trains and tanks dot the landscape, while wind turbines thrum a regular beat. All of these objects are commonplace, yet montaged here in such close proximity they become manic, competing strategies for development and defence, out of whack and out of control.

Parallels with commercial advertising are also hard to overlook. Earlier AES+F projects such as *King of the Forest* (2001-3) presented children from modelling agencies in a style reminiscent of luxury brand advertising. A connection with *Last Riot* can be seen in the flawless 'types' of the children, as if each represents a young hero of a particular nationality, and universally, of consumerism. The trappings of a culture of affluence are evident in their branded shoes, golf clubs, and the stark white singlets of Calvin Klein underwear adverts²; capitalism is seen to galvanise dog-eat-dog aggression. Literally dressed to kill, their blue jeans, baseball bats and the camouflaged fabric of military-inspired fashion all suggest a contemporary generic Americanism, while other weapons – such as the medieval European silver swords – invoke another age entirely.

Contemporary art commentators have noted '[S]ociety gets the art it wants. We want staging and fictions and irony. We want sentimentality



5



6

and emoting, but at the same time flatness and emptiness and popularity...We want advertisingism.³ Arguably, at the centre of these desires is the marketing of difference—as a consumable commodity. In a post-communist era, where buying and selling informs every cultural exchange, AES+F create a conceptual location where the prohibited is played out for visual consumption. By setting aside the conventions governing the display of childhood, *Last Riot* offers the opportunity to contemplate our own definition of what should be forbidden. The difference of the child, as 'repressed "other", symbolic of that which the adult world represses from one generation to the next,⁴ is a key subject in the work. These child-men/women enact what their elders do not, exposing the vulnerability of our codes of civil conduct.

Last Riot's imagery could operate as promotional material for a cult of anarchic youth, where sadistic behaviour is the order of the day. Supposedly outside of sexuality, these 'children' exercise a dual propensity for innocence and violence. They join children of a cinematic tradition including popular films such as *Lolita*, *Poltergeist*, *Heavenly Creatures*, *The Exorcist*, *The Virgin Suicides* and *Rosemary's Baby*. A dilemma always emerges: 'Innocence invites corruption—the more pure and irreproachable, the greater will be the child's fall from grace.'⁵ Like small deities of consumerism, the youth in *Last Riot* present a sumptuous campaign for corruption's limitless potential, while looking faultless. Angelic yet malevolent, they resemble valkyrias ('choosers of the slain', whose purpose was to select the valiant dead) from ancient Norse mythology. At once infants and ageless, they are the native citizens of this dystopia, a world at the end of the world.

– ABBY CUNNANE

AES was formed in 1987, and comprises Tatiana Arzamasova, Lev Evzovich and Evgeny Svyatsky. With the addition of fashion photographer Vladimir Fridkes in 1995 the name changed to AES+F. AES+F work across media including photography, computer-based still and moving image, drawing and sculpture. The Russian collective have been displayed in galleries in across Europe, and included in numerous biennials and exhibitions worldwide, most recently the 2007 52nd Biennale in Venice.

¹ LAMENTATION OR MOURNING SCENE, WHERE THE DEAD CHRIST IS SHOWN SUPPORTED BY THE VIRGIN MARY.
² IN 1999 CALVIN KLEIN LAUNCHED A CONTROVERSIAL AD CAMPAIGN INVOLVING A BILLBOARD IMAGE OF CHILDREN PLAYING ON A SOFA, CLAD ONLY IN WHITE UNDERWEAR. THE ADS WERE PULLED AFTER 24HRS OF HOT PUBLIC DEBATE.
³ MATTHEW COLLINGS, ART NEWS NZ, SPRING 2007.
⁴ SEE BARBARA CREED, 'BABY BITCHES FROM HELL', MIXED-UP CHILDHOOD (EXHIBITION CATALOGUE), AUCKLAND ART GALLERY (2005), P.35. AES+F'S WORKS, FROM 'KING OF THE FOREST' WERE INCLUDED IN THE EXHIBITION.
⁵ CREED, P.34.