ROLL

Roll is a four channel video installation from 2003 by the artist Tad Beck. The projections screen on a continuous, twenty-minute loop. *Roll* has been exhibited at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California, and was included in the 2005 biennial at the Portland Museum of Art in Maine.

A consistent strategy in Beck's work is the deployment of eroticism as an entry point or primary device. There's a lot of male flesh in this piece, and a certain male body ideal is employed. Nudity serves two functions in *Roll*. On the one hand, the erotic pull of the bodies on display brings out a certain degree of sympathy in the viewer, meant to temper its more humorous and sadistic aspects. On the other hand, the absence of clothing serves a dehistoricizing, delocalizing function. It's as if Greco-Roman statuary has been animated and transferred to video; the luminescence of marble transmuted into the luminescence of the video screen.

Roll depicts four of the artist's friends repeatedly engaging in, and failing at, the task of log rolling in a local swimming hole on the island of Vinalhaven, Maine. Beck has lived and worked in Vinalhaven in the summers for over twenty years, and the work has an intimacy and sense of place about it in spite of the tabula rasa of the models' nudity. The combination of nudity, homoeroticism, and a pastoral athleticism betrays the influence of Thomas Eakins.

Eakins' 1884 painting, *The Swimming Hole*, in the collection of the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, is one of his more famous examinations of the male nude. A group of nude bathers arranged in a pyramidal structure swim in surroundings strikingly similar to the quarry we see in *Roll*. *The Swimming Hole* includes the figure of the artist, treading water and gazing at the scene, and *Roll* mimics this structure, filmed by Beck whilst treading water. Eakins also commonly employed axial motifs as a way of organizing pictures. In *Roll*, Beck treats the logs the models stand on as a point of compositional focus in a similar fashion.

The logs also function as a sort of phallic stand, as a reminder of not only the eroticism of the scene but also of the performative nature of masculinity, which is also a theme. A queer equivocation between variously gendered bodies is what has made gender a topic of interest in recent writings on Eakins. In *Roll*, the use of traditionally beautiful – and notably all white – models, engaged in pseudo heroic physical activity, deploys certain stereotypes of maleness, but they seem to be subverted through the repeated failure of the models to keep their phallic stands in motion. Sometimes this failure to perform ends painfully, abusing the bodies of the models, calling into question their supremacy or their naturalness.

There is not only similarity of subject matter and aesthetic strategy, but also of process. Eakins' habit of forcing his students and close associates to model nude for both him

and one another was one of the things that led to his departure under a cloud of scandal from the Philadelphia Academy. Jennifer Doyle, in particular, has written intelligently about the complicated sexual politics of this arrangement. A rhetoric of prostitution has always surrounded the artist/model dynamic, brought out explicitly by the persistent use of the prostitute as subject matter in late 19th and early 20th century painting. Nudity is intimate, but not when it takes place as an arm's length financial transaction, it seems. Having close associates perform in the nude brings out the inherent complications of the artist/model relationship. Activity that would otherwise be unself-conscious, as the swimming hole on Vinalhaven is a nude bathing location already, gains an air of the performative and brings out questions of power dynamics and exploitation through the sheer fact of the introduction of the camera. There's something inherently uncomfortable about it, a sense of being almost too intimate, an air of the perverse. Beck has pursued this aspect in a recent series of still works entitled *Palimpsest*, in which he has digitally inserted some of his own model/friends into photographic images produced by the circle of Thomas Eakins, and then rephotographed them in gnarled, Victorian *repousse* frames against fields of solid black. The almost cancerous structure of the frames mixes with their fetishistic sheen to suggest an atmosphere of creepy voyeurism and possessive erotic obsession.

This perversity is amplified by the cruelty of watching these model/friends engage in attempts ending with repeated failure, which brings up another influence Beck cites in relation to his work, the recent television and film series *Jackass*. *Jackass* featured the antics and stunts of a coterie of professional skateboarders and their friends. Sadomasochistic acts, performed in various stages of undress, were the series' stock and trade, which brought to the fore the latent homoeroticism and cruelty of the majority of adolescent male behavior. *Roll* does have an adolescent humor about it: cocks flopping, skulls cracking, you chuckle when you first see it, and this is only fair, as humor is a device Beck employs to catch a viewer's attention. The *Jackass*-style humor present in *Roll* further emphasizes the performative nature of sexuality. All of us who've experienced the joy and terror of being an adolescent male can remember the stupid stunts pulled to certify our maleness for our peers, the cruelty we laughed off to perform our masculinity. *Roll* renders this aspect of *Jackass* explicit, and it is of course funny in the way that all revelations of performance are. Comedy has always been about unmasking the contingency of the social, whether it's the gender confusion and mistaken identity of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* or the pseudo-linguistic examinations of George Carlin's *Seven Dirty Words*.

Bergson, in particular, in his essay on laughter, noted that the source of humor was "the mechanical encrusted on the living." The incongruity between human intelligence, which I would recharacterize as the realm of the symbolic, including our notions of gender, health, and propriety, with habitual or mechanical behaviors, which I would recharacterize as the realm of the real, is what makes us laugh. In *Roll*, ideas of the male and male beauty reveal their incongruity with human limitation through repeated failure, and we laugh.

Laughter of course, is inevitably connected with the absurd. In a way, Beck's models in *Roll* perform for us the role of Sisyphus, assuming over and over again a task at which they know they are doomed to fail. Most of us can only ever think of the myth of Sisyphus in conjunction with Camus' essay, in which Sisyphus realizes the tragedy of his existence, that he is doomed to fail, and makes peace with it. However, *Roll* more explicitly calls to my mind not Camus but Bataille, who talked at length about the role of failure, particularly in *On Nietzsche*, in which he discusses all authentic human attempts to reach any symbolic summit as doomed to fail, and as inducing a state of nothingness that represents what religion, poetry, and the erotic are all aiming at, and yet always fail to reach. The visual and auditory rhythms of *Roll* illustrate this poetic strategy, the repeated observation of failure hoping to induce in patient viewers a state of contemplation. Looking, for Beck, is a meditative activity, and we're keyed into this by the rhythmic sound of the artist's breath, breath being, of course, the literal translation for the Greek *pneuma*, rendered "spirit" in the Scriptures. Ultimately, *Roll* leaves one turning over the idea of failure over and over again, a mental repetition echoing the repetition of the work itself.

-Grant Wahlquist

STROKE

Stroke is a 2005-6 two-channel video work by the artist Tad Beck. It was shown at Apex Art in New York City in 2008, and was recently included in the exhibition *I Like Winners: Subjectivity and Sport* at the Sheppard Gallery, University of Nevada, Reno, in 2009.

A number of visual and linguistic puns are readily apparent in the work. The title is a jokey riff on masturbation, which, coupled with the nudity of the performers in the piece, lures the viewer in with a campy homoeroticism. Again, we see Beck deploying humor as an entry point for the viewer, usually as a stepping off point for consideration of other themes. There is also the humor of the activity being performed. Two of the artist's friends have been set adrift in fishing dories, although instead of oars, they row an indoor training device. They engage in the repetitive task of rowing, obviously not getting anywhere, and the first response is laughter.

Obviously there's a stunt like aspect of the work that invokes *Jackass*, one of Beck's consistent sources of reference, but there are important differences. In *Jackass*-style stunts, the camera always takes care to document the traumatized reactions of passerby, but here, the static focus of the camera, trained on the performers with a ferocious persistency, admits that the action taking place is only for us. Again, the presence of the camera motivates a performative action on the part of the artist's models/friends, rendering explicit the relationship between photography and performance that permeates the artist/model dynamic in Beck's work and brings it in line with the work of such diverse influences as Thomas Eakins and Dan Graham.

Eakins, in particular, painted a number of scenes of rowers between 1870 and 1875, in particular, paintings of the famous Biglin brothers which were executed between 1873-74. Critics and historians have noted that rowers presented an opportunity for Eakins to paint the seminude male form without drawing the social opprobrium that so much of his other painting engendered. In his *The Champion Single Sculls*, 1871, the man made elements of the environment follow a strict geometry, while the natural elements of the environment are much more freely painted. In *Stroke*, the arrangement of the figures in the frame focuses narrowly on the action at hand, deploying a similarly geometric strategy in depicting the artificial activity going on while completely excising the more naturalistic content.

In a way, *Stroke* functions as a contest between the natural and the artificial that evinces Beck's persistent interest in performativity. Recreational rowing is artificial in and of itself, as it's generally an activity of the moneyed middle classes, but the use of the rowing machines in *Stroke* magnifies it. The subject matter of stroke takes place *in* nature, but it's not *of* nature. The degree to which its action is contrived is magnified by the simplicity of the fishing dories and the water beneath them. The image of the rowers side by side is itself a fake, as they were filmed on separate occasions and the

subsequent video was composited digitally. Beck has painstakingly rotoscoped the watery space between the two boats in the final image. However, this digital sleight of hand is also called attention to when the boats intrude over the center of the frame and disappear entirely. Beck calls attention to the artificiality of his digital production techniques in a way reminiscent of the alienating devices of Brechtian theater. For Brecht, the alienating device calls the spectator's attention to the fact that he is observing a play, which was essential, in that it assured the spectator was not lost in spectacle or *pathos* but paid attention to the political message of the work. In *Stroke*, Beck calls attention to the digital mediation of the subject matter as a way of meditating on the role of the camera in the artist/model relationship. One can't help but be conscious of the presence of the camera, making it seems as if it, and not the artist, that is driving the activity at hand.

The activity at hand is, of course, repetitious and absurd, and this calls to mind the work of Bruce Nauman, whose practice has been a key influence on Beck's video *ouvre*. In *Stamping in the Studio*, 1968, Nauman placed a camera high above the floor of his studio in an inverted position and repeatedly stamped his way back and forth across the studio in a rhythmic fashion. The inverted bird's eye view of the camera in *Stamping in the Studio* is a precursor to Beck's use of aftereffects in *Stroke*, as it calls attention to role of the camera in animating Nauman's performance, which, being in the studio, was actually solely for the audience of the camera, another similarity to Beck's work in video. The rhythm of Nauman as he stamps, and the endlessness of his moving back and forth, journeying nowhere, becomes in Beck's work the rhythm of the models as they slide back and forth on the phallus-like rowing machine, always working, but getting nowhere, except to exhaustion.

Nauman's early video works consistently involve rhythmic repetition, as in *Walking in an Exagerrated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square*, 1967-68, and usually under artificial conditions, as in *Bouncing in the Corner No. 1*, 1968, and both are equally true of *Stroke*. As in a later Nauman work, *Clown Torture*, 1987, Beck's models perform a nominally humorous task but in such a way that it becomes unnerving and acquires overtones of sadomasochism. However, although Beck and Nauman are alike in deploying rhythmic acts of failure, Beck's work feels less cruel, and a little less insulated, probably owing to the natural environment in which it was filmed, which helps to balance what would otherwise seem sadistic and isolated.

I think the significance of *Stroke* ultimately lies in its exploration of failure, the theme it borrows overtly from Nauman. What starts as a sexual joke takes on absurdist/existentialist overtones in the same way Beck's *Roll* does. The protaganists of the action row for the duration of the film, but of course never get anywhere. The erotic pull of their bodies coupled with the repetitive action at hand ultimately leads to a meditative viewing experience that leads the viewer into consideration of that fact. There's a profound sadness in this realization, as it obviously functions as symbolic shorthand for the helplessness, futility, and artificiality of all human efforts. The title of

the work, which at first reads as an adolescent masturbation crack, magnifies this sense of pathos. In particular, it calls to mind Lacan's famous pronouncement that "There is no such thing as a sexual relationship." While for Lacan this had primarily to do with the asymmetry of the male and female positions relative to the symbolic, it ultimately was a symptom of the impossibility of love or intimacy, a reminder of the always inaccessible other. This is why, for Lacan, sexual intercourse could properly be thought of as a form of masturbation through or with the other. The protaganists of Beck's *Stroke* are both figuratively and literally in the same boat – alone, backs turned to us, working and getting nowhere. The sentimentalist's response to failure or futility is often a cliche declamation that "at least we're all in this together." The men in *Stroke* are always separate, a fact highlighted by the works' Brechtian deployment of aftereffects. They masturbate, but they never make love.

-Grant Wahlquist