

ROEBLING HALL

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From the exhibit "Puzzled/Game Show," 2001, curated by Laura Heon for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art

Christoph Draeger was primarily a conceptual artist before 1991, when he decided to put the image of a plane crash on a puzzle. This "small cynical idea" led him to the body of work he has continued for the last ten years, which has varied from photography and video to large installations. According to Draeger, implicit in disaster is the notion of order. If order exists before disaster, then there must be order after disaster. Rather than regarding disaster in a nihilistic, tragic, or moralistic light, as a symbolic sweep of God's hand scourging an earth that is, as Shakespeare would put it, "out of joint," Draeger perceives catastrophe to be part of nature's cycle of renewal. Catastrophe becomes a mediator of natural selection, a rite of passage. Rather than engaging in disaster via the vocabulary of tragedy, drama, and empathy, Draeger interjects a stark truism: "If you're not involved yourself, if you don't lose property, or worse, yourself, in the disaster you can see beauty in all this destruction." It is an acerbic statement that Draeger drops like an H-bomb during interviews.

The idea that a person might find beauty in destruction that has ruined, if not taken, lives, is not easy to accept. Still, it is exemplified daily in Discovery Channel-type footage that visually paraphrases, for example, the power of a volcano destroying an entire town, and in the slow-driving, morbid curiosity that accompanies highway pileups. Draeger recognizes the desentimentalizing distance that exists between a viewer in a secure space and an image of chaos. With this in mind, Draeger observes nature's upheaval and the passing of the old for the new. Without pretense of sympathy, Draeger presents cold hard facts.

This role of objective note-taker can be seen in *Voyages Apocalyptiques* (1994-99), a series of photographs depicting sites where a disaster once occurred. The photographs are notably lacking in aesthetic design: they exclude the recognizable signs of recovered scenic beauty. Comparing the date of Draeger's photograph of the site (which is included in the title of each picture) with the date of the catastrophe leaves the viewer with a sense of the artist's intent: he attempts to record the residual chaos of the catastrophe years after it occurred. His photographs become testimonies of change, whatever it may be; they do not delight, startle, exaggerate, or induce sympathy—they simply record. It is important to notice that for Draeger disaster has a long-term significance that can be appreciated years into the future. This is in stark contrast to the media's portrayals of disaster, which are temporal and deliberate reactionary responses to tragedy. In this way, Draeger applies "a perspective that is usually reserved for the media," but replaces the transient visual vocabulary of television coverage with a method of documentation that is more lasting and trustworthy.

The media's exploitation and ultimate perversion of the image of catastrophe is a key theme in Draeger's art. Draeger believes that the journalistic motto, "bad news is the only good news" - a philosophy that labels catastrophe as a media dream rather than a real-life tragedy - subverts our perception of the truth. Media coverage of disaster has, over time, become an easily repeatable counterfeit of itself, one manufactured out of set phrases and visual images that denote formulaically "the tragic" and "the dramatic." In place of reality is an archetype of disaster that we have been conditioned to expect: a predictable, somehow acceptable representation that does not surprise and is immediately

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comprehensible. Equally, it is something that we can readily choose to ignore, because we've seen it all before, or that we can watch attentively since it makes for "good television."

It is this idea of the disaster cliché that Draeger plays with in *Catastrophe #7* (1994). For this image, Draeger re-creates in miniature the archetype of devastation to which television has made us immune. In this 328-square-foot construction, we instantly recognize symbols of televisual tragedy and drama in the decapitated buildings, loose electric cables, and uprooted trees. Draeger's symbology insinuates frank equality between a plane crash, an earthquake, and bombing. Whereas normally, in the context of a news segment, such an image would impress us with the sheer expanse of destruction, here it becomes a parody of chaos. Toy car convertibles and evenly "cut green grass, combined with the comically resilient Coca-Cola sign, serve to poke fun at both the archetype we have come to take for granted and ourselves for believing it. Numbering the catastrophe in the title of the work adds to its sense of sardonic humor. As Draeger stands over the synthetic catastrophe as its proud designer, he mirrors the CNN editor, proud that his finished work is ready to go to air.

Draeger also uses the catastrophe type to explore the dynamics of the viewer's belief in the real image as opposed to the many iterations of the fictionalized image. In his installation at the Zeppelin Museum Friedrichshafen, Draeger showed two videos in tandem, *Statistics* (1999) and *Crash* (1999). *Statistics* nonchalantly documents the dates of the twentieth century's hundred largest aircraft catastrophes, while *Crash* gives the visual vernacular of film. Beginning with footage of the Hindenburg disaster of 1937 and documentary footage from World Wars I and II, the video progresses to the recorded test crashes of the 1960s. The video then moves into a series of sequences excerpted from fictitious Hollywood air-disaster movies. Draeger seamlessly connects reality, the constructed reality and the fictitious reality of film, in order to decipher our perceptions of real life. We stop wondering if any of it is real—we just want to see something blow up. Draeger covers the floor in front of the projections with nearly two tons of puzzle pieces. It is as if what we view on screen is just a shadow of the immeasurable and ever-increasing accumulation of images transmitted through the airwaves that informs our understanding of the world. Disaster becomes a metaphor for any event that changes the world in which we live. Draeger insinuates that for us to be aware of any change, the reality of the change has to be sensationalized for our easily bored minds.

The exploration of the real and the artificial is key to many works by Draeger. His video installation, *Feel lucky, punk??!* (1998), is not so much a discussion of the catastrophic as it is an investigation of the apocalyptic, "the moment of truth." Draeger montages robbery scenes from legendary movies such as *Dirty Harry* (1971), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), and *Magnum Force* (1973) in which, at this precise moment, life tumbles over the edge of tame reality into the uncharted territory of violence and drama. Into this twelve-minute tape consisting of five movie sequences, Draeger "cuts and pastes" (in the most deliberately amateurish style possible) reenactments of the robbery scenes, which he staged in his studio with friends. Furthering the complexity of this work is its presentation on archaic closed-circuit TV monitors—the kind most commonly used by shop owners to prevent robberies. In this overlaying of Hollywood "unreal" (the actual films), real-life mimicry of fiction (the amateur reenactments), and the physical allusion of "real-time" footage (the closed-circuit monitors), Draeger aims to have viewers question their understanding of visual authenticity. In this way, Draeger demonstrates the similarities between Hollywood and the media: both provide partially or entirely fictive summary types of "apocalyptic" change.

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To a certain extent, Draeger's puzzle prints and model disasters are cathartic. Through their mixture of hard content and soft gamelike form, the images ease us into the reality of catastrophe; they allow us to come to terms with disaster today through acclimatization rather than through shock. None of Draeger's oeuvre, however, provides solutions. The semi-documentary film entitled *Un Ga Nai-Bad Luck* (1995-98), a collaboration with artist Martin Frei, is perhaps the only exception. In this work, Draeger diagnoses the depth of our insecurity at the thought of catastrophe. *Un Ga Nai* is a journey through the Japan of 1995, the same year that an earthquake rocked the city of Kobe and that the Aum Shinrikyo religious cult killed dozens in the Tokyo subway. The year also marked the fiftieth anniversary of the U.S. bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The film looks at the manner in which Japanese culture deals with disaster—namely, by incorporating the psychology of catastrophe into the fundamental structure of society. Earthquakes are anticipated on a daily basis, their catastrophic potential simulated annually on September 1, The Day of Catastrophe, to commemorate the same date in 1923 when Japan was devastated by the worst earthquake ever recorded.

By showing survivalist training camps, safety drill parades, earthquake-simulation centers, and other unsettling scenarios, Draeger proposes the simulative escapades as not necessarily good answers but certainly better answers than passively trying to understand chaos from the comfort of a couch in the Western hemisphere. At the very least, the video shows us that it is possible for a society to accept disaster as apart of daily life and, hence, to create methods of coping.

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