



Rodney Graham. *Rheinmetall/Victoria-8*, 2003. Production still. Silent film projection, 35 mm film, projector and looper; 10:50 minutes, continuous loop.

Rodney Graham: 303 Gallery

by Johanna Burton

In his three-act play *La machine à écrire* (*The Typewriter*, 1941), Jean Cocteau presents a female protagonist indistinguishable from the eponymous tool of her modern trade. This mysterious character's deep-seated aggressiveness is borne out in typewritten letters signed "The Typewriter" whose alarming anonymity propels an entire community into a state of sustained anxiety. Recognizing the metaphoric implications of the perpetrator's activities, the detective bent on cracking "the typewriter's" case likens her use of the mechanical writing tool to that of a machine gun (unsurprising, perhaps, given that companies such as Remington produced both machines designed for speed, precision, and repetition). The culprit, too, eventually defines her actions as a literal (and literary) attack for which she "chose the filthiest, most despicable of human weapons to beat them with—a typewriter!"

Practically obsolete, the typewriter now rarely inspires awe or fear. Yet it retains some of the fascination it first evinced as one of the earliest technological prostheses—simultaneously extending and alienating the body while mechanizing and homogenizing the inherently personal act of writing. In his film installation *Rheinmetall/Victoria-8*, 2003, Rodney Graham, who has initiated evocative contextual recastings for some twenty-five years, takes the typewriter as distinct cultural repository and thus as a site not merely of production (however outdated) but also of mnemonic accumulation and time's passage. Graham's ten-minute-forty-seven-second 35 mm film projection painstakingly, in a style at once loving and clinical, details the contours of a mid-'30s German Rheinmetall model typewriter, the likes of which could easily have figured into Cocteau's paranoid schema, written as it was at a moment when a thinly veiled symbolic slide from typewriter to tank was obvious.

The narrative sparseness and ponderous tempo of Graham's film, however, remove the Rheinmetall from any such worldly associations: A series of lingering close-ups make it initially seem that the artist's sole aim was to pore fetishistically over every one of the machine's precisely tooled components. Completely dislodged from utilitarian purpose and observed through a veil of imposed slowness, the magnified, mass-produced tool becomes sculptural—monumental even—at the precise moment when a fluffy white powder begins to fall and collect in tiny piles on every key. While the film itself is silent, the installation became a rickety-clackety affair as the footage passed through the attractively cumbersome body of yet another outmoded device: a 1950s Italian-made Cinemeccanica projector taking up a good portion of the front gallery. The ventriloquized sound track at once reemphasized the distancing obsolescence of both machines and made felt their effusively physical presence.

Undeniably beautiful, the progressive accumulation on the old typewriter's pristine though antiquated surfaces employs the best effects of well-metered cliché—invoking nostalgia only to lay bare its very mechanisms with Brechtian panache. Employing an old special-effects medium—sifted flour—to simulate snow or dust, the film sustains a taciturn balance between staid earnestness and tongue-in-cheek pastiche. As in much of his work, here too Graham employed emphatic repetition. The typewriter, once fully immersed in the white stuff (and thus transformed into both burial mound and winter wonderland), was, time and again, resurrected as the film looped back to its start. Graham, a longtime Freud aficionado, here rendered the typewriter into an updated—if already outmoded—mystic writing pad, without once stroking its keys.