



Carolyn Lambert. *No Matter What* (2024) 4K Video. 11min, 11sec

Carolyn Lambert

by Bill Abdale

Video artist Carolyn Lambert's work addresses the ways humanity's relationship to nature has been colored by its dissemination and consumption in popular culture. Through a combination of original and found footage, she references the visual language of docuseries, instructional videos, and social media while addressing heavier subjects of collectivity and loss.

The voiceover that runs the full 11 minute length of *No Matter What* (2024) invites comparisons to both podcasts and nature documentaries. Its narrative begins with the artist's discovery of a hawk's nest near her home and her attempts to identify the species by matching their calls to videos found on YouTube. It was not a red-tailed hawk outside her window after all, and she credits her expectation to the bird's outsized representation in countless films and TV shows, where its distinct screeching call has long been the representative of birds of prey in general. Substitution as a form of misdirection is a recurring theme in Lambert's work, though it is most explicitly unpacked in this piece: the red-tailed hawk's piercing cry stands in for the seagull-like unthreatening call of a bald eagle; a magician performs a series of sleight-of-hand illusions, and a montage of AI-generated Hollywood "leading man" archetypes scrolls past.

A few more sinister examples of misdirection are also provided by the narrator. Carbon offset transactions, intended to ease one's conscience about burning jet fuel or consuming disposable products, are a characteristic capitalist innovation: more consumption. Rather than reducing emissions or waste, they merely greenwash another purchase in performative conservationism. Likewise, in recent years it has become clear that the impact of recycling programs has never been a match for the ever-expanding production of plastic waste.

The gradual emergence of these associations from the artist's encounter with the hawk are echoed in the video's meandering, diaristic cinematography. From wandering through fields to domestic interiors where nature is viewed through screens, we arrive at a melancholy moment of reflection in the fading daylight. *No Matter What* concludes with a reassertion of the natural world's sonic presence in the form of nocturnal wildlife. As night falls, *No Matter What* becomes markedly more understated visually, with trees silhouetted against the darkening sky; the calls of nocturnal animals, some recognizable like cicadas and tree frogs, and others unknown, come to the forefront of our perception. Lambert describes the longing to live among these sounds despite being uncertain of their source; in the world of "humidity and odors." Being surrounded both physically and sonically is a reminder that the habitat and survival of these creatures is intertwined with ours, leading Lambert, and us, to consider the fragility of species not long for this world and those already gone.

Departing from a linear narrative structure, *Aerosol Parasol Jump* (2019-21) intercuts disparate video sources with a more atmospheric and circular feel, further emphasized by it being exhibited playing on loop. The majority of the video is a collection of found footage of humans artificially pollinating flowers set to a buzzing and swelling electronic soundtrack. There is a casual, shaky feel to the camerawork in these clips that feels searching and open-ended. After establishing the aesthetic language of amateur videos that might be posted on YouTube, Lambert widens the frame to show the same video on a phone screen, with hands swiping through, pausing and zooming in. The actions of both the video viewer and the viewed share a tactile engagement with objects manipulated by hand: opening the flower, scrolling on a phone, sifting through piles of pollen and cut paper.

In another scene, we witness a figure lying motionless on a bed, as if having passed out in the middle of watching a video. A laptop rests on the bed, playing a video of a bee writhing in discomfort. The scene evokes the exhausting repetition of scrolling through suggested videos on streaming services. “Are you still watching?”

The work follows a clever visual rhyme between artificial pollination and the cleaning of electronic components, in which the implicit sensuality of the former and the clinical tone of the latter are linked through their shared use of a distinctive tool: a cotton swab. Given the dates of the piece’s production, it is impossible to see this simple device in use without

thinking of the way that Covid-19 tests started off as jarring and invasive, then gradually lost their strangeness to eventually become routine, if still unpleasant. The scene of the figure on the bed is immediately followed by a quick take of a pair of hands in a darkened space applying hand sanitizer, another ritual that became ubiquitous in 2020.

Beyond cotton swabs and hand sanitizer, the Covid-19 pandemic haunts both of these works as an unspoken but clearly felt presence in the background. Lambert insightfully addresses the pandemic's impact on social relations through her invocation of Walter Benjamin, a surprising connection so subtle that it would be easy to miss at first.

During this montage in *No Matter What*, Lambert as narrator references Benjamin. Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" made a distinction between traditionally recognized mediums like painting and sculpture and then relatively new media forms like photography and films with sound, suggesting that even if the aura of an artwork's physical presence fell away in the process of reproduction, it would open new modes of mass collective experience. In his writing on film, Benjamin describes the film as an assembly of multiple disconnected fragmented performances that together become a cinematic whole.

During the early stages of the pandemic a new lexicon of fragmentation emerged: social distancing, remote work, zoom meetings, contact tracing. But if the pandemic was profoundly isolating, it also gave urgency to creation of new technologies

deployed for community solidarity. Without the ability to “be there,” social media prevented all contact from being lost. The performers in *Aerosol Parasol Jump* grasp at nature through screens, and in *No Matter What* the artist trawls Google and YouTube to research the unfamiliar hawk.

Online nature, like fashion, fitness, or cooking, is a genre that inevitably sets up shop on the feeds and screens of those whose clicks have signaled their interest to the algorithm. We tend to associate the great outdoors with “unplugging” and “getting away from it all” and internet commenters taunt each other with the suggestion to “touch grass.” But of course, only someone who spends far too much time online would think to use that line and the existence of so much material online suggests even people with the opportunity to get out there and disconnect still want to make sure they get the shot and others see it. By engaging with the visual language of social media and internet video, Lambert reminds us that the same devices we resent for the ease with which they isolate us are tools for discovery and illumination. Her sobering reflections on mass extinction and the effects of climate change are woven together with the possibility of connection to nature, even if through the screen.