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On the German collaborative Eteam's "1.1 acre flatscreen"

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### Trainstoppers, or, The Adorable Rope

What is more real, in America, than real estate? Land, houses, buildings, condos---in these uncertain times, for many, real estate has become the only place to park their money, if one has money to park. This has led to a frenzy of speculation, a new gold rush, and along with it the real possibility of a bubble, which would mean, once it pops (strange irony), that it was all a fantasy. Real estate has become the latest game of musical chairs, and when the music stops someone, or many someones, will be left without a chair. And even if one has no money to park, one can play games with the apartment they rent--at a party just last night a guy in plaid pants was recounting how he held onto a three hundred dollar apartment in New York for ten years, and how he rented the extra room out to a woman for six hundred. He was gleeful telling this story, when there was a time, not so long ago, that he might have been embarrassed. Implicit in his glee was how clever he was, and how naïve the woman was, for this has become a measure of genius for more and more of us, how much we can get over on someone else.

Into this gold rush enter f & h, two Brooklyn-based German artists known collectively as eteam. If you Google "eteam" you will be led to thousands of sites, for each corporation these days has one, a team to coordinate that corporation's virtual image. None, I imagine, is quite like this one.

Eteam has produced a 45 minute film documenting their forays into real estate. It is called 1.1 acre flat screen, and it begins with the artists detailing a visit to eBay in September 2002 to look at land for sale in the mythical American west. Nine hours later they were the owners of 1.1 acres of the Utah desert, for the price of 450\$. It seems no coincidence that they bought the land a year after the attacks on the world trade center, when many in New York were trying to imagine a way to flee, dreaming of another place to be. But eteam would flee only briefly---the real trip would be only in their minds, and in their computers.

The seller, identified on eBay only as “Land and Lights,” described the land as a very flat and buildable area, covered with sage brush and featuring a mountain view, which Mr. Land and Lights claimed would be visible in the distance. This description, like all description, is a fabrication. The actual land would more accurately be described as “in the middle of nowhere.” The subsequent project, as detailed by eteam, consisted of five steps:

1. Purchase
2. Finding
3. Temporary Use
4. Improvements
5. Auction

After documenting the purchase of the land they next led us through a minutely detailed description of how they found the actual land, using satellite images, maps, strings, compasses, and a rented SUV, driving from Las Vegas into the desert, through smaller and smaller towns until even the towns were ghosted. The detailed descriptions of how to locate the land became important for step 3, “temporary use,” because they decided to first to offer the land as an “international studio program,” an artists retreat, of sorts, though one without a studio to work in, or running water, or anyone around for hundreds of miles. Three groups of artist did get the fellowship, and one group did actually make the trek, and set up a studio (i.e. tent) for a few weeks. Not coincidentally, this too follows the traditional route set out by real estate developers—entice the artists in, and the bourgeoisie will soon follow. Eteam, in their minds, would let the artists develop the land, then they could gentrify it (step 4, the “improvements”).

It is difficult to convey the absurdity of this notion in words, without the benefit of actually seeing the land as it appears in the film. In person, I imagine the land to be even more desolate, remote, and forbidding. During the day the temperatures can reach to 120 Fahrenheit, without a drop of water to be had, and no electrical hookup to plug your air conditioner into. At first, the imagined improvements of the land consist of computer generated models of skyscrapers rising in a wasteland---which may have been the dream of a developer in, say, Phoenix, at one point not so long ago, and look at the paradise it has become, all from an idea not so far from eteam’s.

Many artists have gone to the desert. There is a great tradition of artists fleeing New York for cheaper living and big spaces. Robert Smithson. Donald Judd. Georgia O'Keefe. Bruce Nauman. Hell, even Jesus went to the desert. The impulse, perhaps, is to just go where there is nothing and make something. A very American concept, which, perhaps unwittingly, has led to our very American nightmare of development sprawl. Go check out "Spiral Jetty" or "The Lightning Fields" and some among us will automatically think, Not a bad spot for a vacation home, and then we're right back in our nightmare, where the vitality of the economy is measured by "new housing starts." Eteam made, on the surface, the quintessential immigrant move---gone west, staked out some land, dreamed of developing it, dreamed of making a killing. By their own admission, they "had grown up reading glorious German hardcover interpretations of how the west was won," and so they had about as much practical knowledge for frontier living as your average New Yorker. But what they lacked in practical knowledge they made up for in a sense of playful adventure, in the wonky desire to take an idea to its inevitable end, no matter how bizarre.

About midway through the film they strike upon the idea that in order to improve the land they have to get a train to stop nearby. A track runs about 2000 feet from their little acre of America, and freight trains whistle past five or six times a day, though, like everyone else, with no reason to even think of slowing down. Part of the film documents their ideas as to how one could stop a fast moving train. One, my personal favorite, involves flying two helicopters just in front of the train, an "adorable" rope connecting them, a rope so adorable that the engineer will be compelled to stop the train just to get a better look. This idea, sadly, remains in the virtual world. What they settle upon is a series of signs a mile or so down the track, a la Burma Shave, announcing that they are offering free drinks and snacks. A general store, of sorts (consisting of a cooler and a few bags of nuts hung from an old barbed wire fence)---the immigrants dream. And then, in the stifling heat, they wait, as train after train barrels past.

Eteam's stereotyped image of the American west and its cowboys (is there, was there, ever anything but stereotypical cowboys?), gets wonderfully played out throughout the film, in jumpsuited rhinestone cowboy ways. There is a wonderful sequence of them

acting out their western fantasies, complete with violence, death, retribution, hangings, and, of course, guns, usually a stick held like a gun, like children playing cowboys and Indians. It's hard to justify, to a European, the power those games held over American children, how no one wanted to be the Indian because that meant you'd die first. And how to justify the unspeakable fun we had, blowing each other away with toy guns, when even then Vietnam was raging. And now we have elected an ersatz cowboy president who has little compunction against using his own toys. Eteam has that ability of the foreigner to enter into American myths and turn them inside out. And we (if "we" are American) watch them act out their cowboy stereotypes and laugh with them, but in the end we are left with a deep unease, knowing that they can name something we are unable to even see---the consequences of our illusions.

Eventually, miraculously, a train does stop, and we all move to step 5, the auction of the land. Time to reap the profit. The auction was carried out at EYEBEAM, a gallery and new media center in New York. Along with the 1.1 acres of land they auctioned their jumpsuits, their cowboy hats, and their compass, all called out by a professional auctioneer, who was an expert in liquidation and bankruptcy. By the end of the night, the land had resold for 500\$, a 10 percent profit, they like to point out.

Eteam can be reached at <http://meineigenheim.org>