

The Inhospitable Frame

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This short paper presents some explorations around a screening of artist's video that I presented as part of the *Transmission: Hospitality* conference in June 2010. I was approached as a curator, as opposed to my usual academic role, to introduce and show selected works by two artists. Rose Butler (UK) and Lynne March (DE) had been introduced to each other through the Lobe Project; a residency series developed by Jasper Joseph-Lester and Olivia Reynolds that examines how exchanges between host and guest inform the production and circulation of art. From a curatorial perspective, this was an interesting opportunity to discuss works in relation to each other and in the critical dynamic of a conference. Key threads such as the unfamiliarity of the artists to each other and the thematic links in their individual practice raised a thought-provoking dialogue in relation to the overall conference themes of hospitality. This paper translates the contexts discussed in this presentation on the relationship between the two artists' work and my approach as a curator in positioning these at a point of critical perspective.

I begin by summarising the conference presentation and my curatorial motives, as I intend this paper to pick up points in this and elaborate them as opposed to being a transcript. I also choose not to insert still images from the works into this text, as I consider they should be viewed as moving image and not as static frames. I invite the reader to watch the works on the respective artists websites; please see the endnotes for URLs.

The conference presentation consisted of an introduction to the artists' work and the Lobe project, followed by short excerpts from six works, three from each artist, and in pairs. The pairing was composed in a way that allowed the works to support or host each other, and thus composed three evolving critical contexts. As a curator, it is obviously part of my role to contextualise works in relation to one another, more usually in association with particular spaces and audiences. My interest in presenting these works lay with the opportunity to introduce works in relation to the spaces and time-frames in which they were set. This approach invites the audience on a journey through the spaces of theme parks and lifts, freezing time at points, and allowing them vantage points (through filmic techniques) on spaces impossible to perceive otherwise. The audience is allowed a stillness and place in time to watch and observe without the imperative to move through and seek out vantage points in busy spaces of exhibition.

Although thematically different, the work of both artists draws on concepts of the cinematic (the cinema) and fictional (abstract narrative), with each work carefully choreographing time in order to control the viewer's experience of the narrative the artist is presenting. When positioned together all of the works induced the same sense of foreboding in the viewer, creating a discomfort similar to that felt when something is unknown, when meeting a stranger for the first time, or sensing a disconnection between oneself and a situation. The work of both artists plays on this physical articulation of discomfort, made manifest through narrative and editing techniques. The use of the camera contributes to this, playing the role of both performer and mediator, putting viewers in a position where they are continually at a point of suspense.

This quickly becomes a point of inhospitality; a place where viewers become very aware they are the watcher, and want to engage with what they are seeing yet also to remove themselves from it. This position of being held in the frame and pushed out at the same time creates a push-pull action, a space of emotional anxiety and uncertainty.

The first excerpt was from Marsh's *Stadium*, a work set in the Olympic stadium in Berlin, a location that was originally developed under Hitler's rule. The work suggests the loaded history of the site through dramatic aerial panning techniques, roaming over walkways and empty seats, revealing the scale and imposing nature of the site. Marsh was interested in the characterisation of the space through camera, using performative camera techniques where narrative is suggested or implied through filmic techniques such as focus and panning, or image manipulation. The time slippage

this technique creates is disorientating, and as the camera observes closely the rows of empty regimented seating, the viewer is left considering what time frame this seeks to exist in as it manages to amalgamate past, present, and future.

Paired with *Stadium*, I showed Butler's *One Lime Street*, also an architectural work, set in the iconic Lloyds building, designed by Richard Rogers, located on the edge of Hackney in East London. At the time of filming this was one of the most impoverished boroughs of Europe, but with the expansion of the city gentrification slowly relocated the poverty elsewhere. The demarcation and subsequent shift of the statistical poverty line through a building representing global trade reinforced the globalisation and homogenisation themes of the work. Set in the six glass lifts, the film shows office workers as they go about their daily travels through the building. Each journey filmed from inside the lift manipulates the viewer's perspective by locking onto the background view, and through the edit technique seems to make the lift travel past the viewer, an unexpected relation between the camera, the vertical journey, and the background. The lifts move up and down in a visual metaphor for share prices, often dropping drastically or inching upwards floor by floor, referring again to the divide between rich and poor.

Both works are politically underpinned, with Marsh's highlighting the fall of communism or the state, and Butler's the divide between global business and poverty or control by the state.

The second set of clips I showed were linked to cinematic technique. Both pivot on a point in time, slowing and manipulating the stillness of the present moment through camera and edit techniques. Butler's work *Trap* considers the moment between life and death, reminiscent of the nocturnal or the night-time and of dream spaces. The work is presented as a series of still images revealing mice captured in traps and set to a soundtrack combining the ticking of a grandfather clock with the final clack of a mousetrap as it is triggered. The viewer is unsure whether the mice are dead or alive in the still images; the staccato pace of the image sequence and its alternate black frames keep the viewer in suspense as to what will be revealed next.

Marsh's work *Camera Opera* is a choreographed dance around a television studio, freezing its activity, and through the use of sound allows the audience to navigate the complexity of a multiple screen view. Presenting the crucial point in time where a programme is about to go live, the sound check, positioning the cameras, the television studio becomes a hive of activity. Marsh choreographs the cameras as though they were dancers, commanding a usually still subject to move around its subjects. Using five cameras the work uses sound as a guide to lead the viewer through the multiple viewpoints, shifting from left to right audio channels as indicators as to which screen is taking the lead.

Both works suspend time for the viewer, rendering it elastic. Each holds an unresolved tension, leaving the audience waiting for a moment that may never arrive. The mice are held in their traps, the television presenter in the studio is surrounded by recording equipment that we never see activated; all we have is the continual presence of a moment.

Both final works I showed were recent and I felt shifted slightly from the previous four. Each drew upon the past in order to create a dislocation in the present. Each presented a context from a previous time, revisiting it in the present and with a clear avoidance of nostalgia or loss.

Butler's *Organgrinder* presents a common spectacle of the 1930s, the organ-grinder and his familiar dancing monkey. Linked to the travelling communities of the time, these rare spectacles represent loaded connotations in the present day, where travelling communities or gypsies are seen as outsiders to society. With a static camera shot the organ-grinder is captured in his performance but the presence of the camera attracts the public to join him as if posing for a snapshot. This continual activity at the sides of the frame makes strange the whole scenario, revealing the point in time where the historical and contemporary meet.

Marsh's *Planterwelt* presents the existence of a place that is no longer. Set in an abandoned amusement park outside Berlin, the slow tracking shots reveal an overgrown and broken spectacle. Focussing on rusted pinball machines, roller coaster tracks, and observation areas, the

only presence in the park is that of the security guards who patrol it. Guardians of the past, they move through it ensuring it is never allowed to connect to a present reality, guarding its status quo, policing it back to nature.

Each work presents a reality that exists in our contemporary world yet which does not quite fit there. The time of the organ-grinder has long gone, he has become a thing of fiction and the past, yet he still resides at the edges of our existence. The park under its guard is preserved to remind of a time in history, yet suggests absurdity through this process.

Through bringing these six works together and drawing parallels between the pairings, I hope I have presented a journey through a non-linear terrain. Thank you for being my travelling companions.

NOTES

The work of Rose Butler may be seen at the following URL: <http://www.rosebutler.com>

The work of Lynne Marsh may be seen at the following URL: <http://www.lynnemarsh.net>

The curatorial work of Karen Gaskill can be found at the following URL: <http://www.occasionallysomewhere.org>