



Rosalind
Nashashibi,
Bachelor Machines
Part I (2007).
Courtesy of the
artist.

Observational film: Administration of social reality

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ABSTRACT

This article identifies a mode of observational film-making among female artists such as Megan Fraser, Beatrice Gibson, Anna Lucas, Rosalind Nashashibi, Elizabeth Price and Emily Wardill, and situates it both formally and historically, in relation to its mode of montaged construction and its relative downplaying of the importance of medium and installation. It argues that through this approach to the moving image, these artists are attempting to understand filming as an act within a social field, for which the act of filming is more important than the act of display. Secondly, it seeks to show that their work bears a consistent fascination with systems and with the materialization of administration, mirroring their understanding of identity and gender as relational rather than static constructs.

KEYWORDS

*feminism
observational film
duration
time portraits
administration
women's film-making
information*

Introduction

In films of the last ten years, artists have been creating contemplative, montaged portraits of different sites – a Medical Museum; an area of East London; a building in India; a cargo ship in the Mediterranean; a vegetable stall in a South London market – in which subjects move in discrete filmed blocks of time. The films' mosaic-like, non-narrative montage of elements is a familiar cinematic structure, occurring from early city symphonies to diary films. Yet the current prevalence of this type of film-making and the fact that many of the artists are women prompt closer attention

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1. The artists I am considering in this text are all UK based. I use this geographical facet to narrow down a grouping from a wide variety of artists making this type of work. Other examples might include the participatory film-events of the Swedish artist Johanna Billing or the early work of Israeli artist Yael Bartana (the title for an exhibition of her work, 'Amateur Anthropologist', at the Kunsthalle Fridericianum in 2006, could well apply to much of the work discussed here). Again, not all of the work made in this vein is created by women – an exception could be the US artist Pawel Wojtasik's film *Dark Sun Squeeze* (2003 HDTV) – but the majority of them are.

2. See for example, T. J. Demos's characterization of the films in Documenta XI as focused on documentary media such as photography and film and occupying an evidentiary paradigm: as Demos wrote, Documenta XI was filled with 'examples of photographic-based work that attempted to render proximate forgotten geographical areas and forsaken ways of life that normally fall below the radar of mass media' (Demos 1995: 63).

3. See for example, the work of Rabih Mroué, the Atlas Group, the Otolith Group or others who create fictitious documentations, or fictions in a documentary style, as well as artists creating fictional re-enactments of real historical events, such as Steve Rushton and Ian Charlesworth, Wendelien van Oldenborgh and Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann.

to the work and the context in which it is made. Harking back to contemplative experiences in public-sphere galleries, these works represent portraits of places that do away with film's traditional concerns with medium, phenomenological installation or the truth claims of indexicality. They are specific examinations of a site but remain remote in relation to their subjects, while at the same time reflecting a degree of intimacy with them in the act of filming. The current article will attempt to situate these films art historically, as indicative of the move from the cinema screen into the gallery space, and to suggest their shared interest in administrative systems as a reaction to a culture of bureaucracy and biopolitics.

The films in question include the work of Megan Fraser, Beatrice Gibson, Anna Lucas, Rosalind Nashashibi and Elizabeth Price and early films by Emily Wardill, among others. They have all been produced on the art/film circuit of the last ten years, that is, made by women who work predominantly in the moving image medium but who were trained in art school.¹ They comprise medium to long takes of various scenes, shot from a fixed camera point, and run from ten minutes to around an hour, showing one single viewpoint or a collection of views organized largely by locality. Contextualization and language (intertitles, voice-over) are kept to a minimum: one is, by and large, launched right in. The overall effect of these films is thus similar to that of a photo-book: a non-hierarchical syntax that asks the images to speak for themselves while also being part of a larger whole. Underscoring difference and distance, the films also suggest a new counterweight both to the uncertain legacy of documentary representation and the aestheticization of politics that has dominated discussion of documentary film produced in an art context since Documenta XI (2002),² as well as its reaction, the turn away from evidentiary documentary towards a fictive mode.³

Time-portraits

To typify these films simply I would suggest the term 'observational', referring to their markedly affectless style, and signalling a neutrality of engagement and a focus on visual over linguistic or narrative articulation. Rosalind Nashashibi's film *Bachelor Machines Part I* (2007), for example, is set within a cargo vessel sailing from Italy to Sweden. The ship, a 'she-vessel', is approached both as an entity in its own right and stage-set for a drama of (male) interaction – the bachelors of the film's title. Shots depict the setting sun through an open doorway; sailors eating and laughing; the vessel's computer board; and flashing lights as the men steer the cargo north. Conversation is overheard but never translated from the different languages spoken on the ship, including a Neapolitan dialect and Filipino. There is the sense of the film both being a representation and resisting representation: building up an image of the ship through myriad minor details, which themselves threaten to undermine the unity of the impression of the place. The static film shots do not create a narrative of the ship or mirror the forward momentum of its literal journey through the sea; they suggest, rather, cyclical events that comprise the everyday routine of life on board and of nature itself, as experienced perhaps more directly on a sea vessel. Nashashibi's presence, as film-maker, is largely invisible – a rule casually broken when a cook smiles and waves at her as he passes through the kitchen. Documentary codes are also contested via the film's ambivalent theatrical structure. Intertitles within the film designate 25 different scenes, each known only by its number, although neither the subject matter nor the style changes much from 'scene' to 'scene'. (When the work was first shown at the Chisenhale Gallery in London in 2007, it was accompanied by a white scaffolding-like structure, made by the artist Enrico David, which was intended to conjure up

the rigging behind a stage.) Theatricality and, perhaps conversely, reserve are the two main modes of the film's articulation.

The tension between a structural conceit and the documentary-esque contents persists throughout this grouping of films. Beatrice Gibson, for example, in making the film *A Necessary Music* (2008) about Roosevelt Island off Manhattan, wrote that the film was to be made from the perspective of the inhabitants' daily lives, and solicited feedback prior to the filming in a letter she published in the local newspaper. The letter revealed the focus of the film, which was about Roosevelt Island, but which Gibson also specified as being concerned with the island's 'music'. This notably high-cultural, almost deliberately enigmatic description echoes *Bachelor Machines*'s ambiguous use of theatricality. Its explanation, in the letter she published, does little to clarify how the island's music might be understood: 'Dear Roosevelt Islanders, Artist Beatrice Gibson and musician and composer Alex Waterman are working together on a film about your island. The film is about islands and their music or about island music.'⁴ Gibson's music, like Nashashibi's theatrical artifice, erects a platform around the everyday events depicted in the film from which they can be read as both ordinary and extraordinary.

The anti-populist note is typical of these films, contrasting with the populism of the yBas, and embracing a certain seriousness despite the apparent lightness of their technique. Their references draw not only from critical theory, as is common in contemporary artworks, but also from the western cultural canon: Megan Fraser's film *Arkhe* (2007) refers in its title to Jacques Derrida's tracing of 'archive' back to its Greek roots, in his *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), and her *Tour d'Ombres* (2007) refers to a building within Le Corbusier's Chandigarh project (1950–1965); Nashashibi's *Bachelor Machines* alludes to Duchamp's *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–23) while *Flash in the Metropolitan* (2006), made with Lucy Skaer, is set in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and Emily Wardill's film of East London, *Born Winged Gatherers and Honey Gatherers of the Soul* (2005), refers to Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morality* (1887). By invoking this range and type of intellectual achievement, the works position themselves not solely within an art-historical canon, but within the more holistic notion of the arts that provided the source of allusions and inspiration to the classically hung pre-Modernist works of art that they, in a certain sense, resemble.

Like Gibson's *A Necessary Music*, Wardill's *Born Winged Honey Gatherers* seeks to cross medial lines of sound, vision and linguistic description – something its non-visual art reference might facilitate. Wardill has explained, 'Nietzsche uses the image of 12 bells tolling at noon to symbolize Modern Man's separation from his own existence. This film is a visual and phonetic translation of an excerpt from Nietzsche's prologue.'⁵ It is a portrait of life taken over a month-long period, shot each day at noon when the bells of St Anne's church ring in Limehouse, East London. The film shows the area's inhabitants within locales specific to or evocative of the neighbourhood, emphasizing the place as much as its people. Sequences show a woman in a headscarf sitting by a canal; a man polishing his boat, aspirationally named *The Laird*, in a marina off the Thames; children playing with traffic cones in a churchyard, and other daily scenes of life within the area. However, this specificity of locale is in conflict throughout the film with the overdetermination of the film's structural logic. The logic of its organization is rhythmic, structured specifically by this routine of time-keeping, rather than syntactical: images appear on the screen for a set amount of time, with a black screen often appearing as punctuation or a pause between each short sequence. This visual rhythm is underlined musically: the film opens with a black screen and a steady, one-note peal of church bells, in a monotonous but still dramatic overture, and the same peal signals the close of the film. The staccato feel of the film reinforces the separation of scenes and its layers of sound and image, which give the film its structural conceit.

4. See Gibson's webpage for the film: http://www.anecessarymusic.org/new_letter.html. Accessed 26 August 2011.

5. See Wardill's research page at the University of the Arts London: <http://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/903/>. Accessed 26 August 2011. In *On the Genealogy of Morals* Nietzsche outlines his argument that the values 'good' and 'evil' have derived from slave and aristocratic mentalities, respectively, and that modern man has been bred into an acceptance of oppression (see Nietzsche [1887] 1989).

The 'alienation' of modern man that it seeks to communicate has the result of the film feeling curiously object-like – separated from a normal flow of time.⁶

These films reflect the continuing migration of artist's moving image work into the gallery, and invite a museological mode of contemplation and absorption. Instead of comprising a temporal narrative, these works are truly moving images – depictions of singular objects (a boat, a library, a neighbourhood) through a collection of visual moments.⁷ Following on Hal Foster's idea of 'time-readymades' (Foster 2004: 4), one might call them 'time-portraits', underlining the discrete, almost object-like quality that is given by the montage effect and an emphasis on the spatial parameters of the shot, as will be shown below. Foster in 'An archival impulse' used 'time-readymade' to refer to 'visual narratives that are sampled in image-projections', such as the appropriation of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) by the artist Douglas Gordon in his *24 Hour Psycho* (1993). Installed in a gallery space, *24 Hour Psycho* digitally stretches the original film into 24 hours, forcing attention onto each frame as an image to be beheld rather than a film to be watched. The films under discussion here similarly condense a movement through time into a spatial rendering, using the screen as a static pictorial space in which the subjects move around instead of the camera following a character at a central focal point of the image. The artists record and exhibit 'blocks of time' not for their narrative quality but as representations to be contemplated – an apparent temporal stasis that underlines the contemplative quality the works engender. They could also be considered collections of 'spectacles' in the sense given by Laura Mulvey in 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' ([1975] 2002), of stopped-time interruptions in the narrative when the female heroine's 'visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation' (Mulvey [1975] 2002: 48).⁸ Although erotic affect is absent in these films, the mode of contemplation prevails.

The shots' pictorial aspects are often emphasized both by the film itself and by its installation. Megan Fraser's *Tour d'Ombres*, for example, shows a man scraping two storeys of a structure that appears to be either in the process of being built or being taken down. (It is the Tower of Shadows, within a complex built by Le Corbusier in Chandigarh, the first planned city in India.) The film consists of a single static shot of a ten-minute length, in which the labourer chips away at two levels of the edifice, which itself occupies the entire space of the film frame. He moves across and up and down the storeys as he works, fully emphasizing the space encompassed by the shot. When the film was exhibited at International Project Space in Birmingham it was projected at the full scale of a gallery wall, giving an architectural dimension to the image – but it has also been shown in smaller formats in other gallery spaces and screened in cinemas. Rather than a real-time documentation of the labourer's act of scraping, *Tour d'Ombres* gives off the deliberate effect of being a performance, in the evidently scripted manner in which he goes about his task, never fully completing it and instead simply filling the time of the film and the space of the film frame. (Indeed, it is a performance, devised by Fraser in collaboration with the actor, in which the act of asking him to 'perform' labour critiques the ambiguous staging of work within documentary film – turning the focus of the film not onto the labourer himself but onto the film-maker/labourer relation.)⁹

In Nashashibi and Skaer's *Flash in the Metropolitan*, the flash of the camera illuminates objects from the New York museum's Near Eastern, African and Oceanic collections, creating a slideshow effect of still images within the moving image film. The work gives a view onto the objects as well as their institutionalization – the reflection of the flash on the glass vitrines at times obscures the artefacts themselves – echoing their complex museological history as once utile artefacts. Unlike Chris Marker and Alain Resnais's *Les Statues meurent aussi* (1953), which lambasted the interring of African objects in French museums as an enduring effect of colonialism, *Flash in the*

6. In this type of work, one may see the literacy of the film-makers vis-à-vis precedents in experimental film-making, such as the work of William Raban, Patrick Keiller, Guy Sherwin, John Smith and Nicky Hamlyn, who all made films along similar lines in the 1970s and 1980s. These later film-makers, however, do not show the same interest in the live performance of film, or expanded cinema, as some, notably Raban and Sherwin, still do.

7. In this regard, they can be seen as part of the lineage of artists who slow film into images and utilize the gallery as a space of absorption and critique, for example, Mark Lewis or Stan Douglas (see Company 2008: 124–29).

8. I wish to bring up Mulvey's characterization of the spectacle here, rather than her full argument about the role of spectatorship in narrative, Hollywood film, which does not apply to these films with their montage structure.

9. For more on the 'collaborative dynamic' see the short text distributed at the exhibition at International Project Space, Birmingham, November 2009–January 2010, written by Marina Vishmidt.

Metropolitan silently replicates and exaggerates the museum's installation.¹⁰ It uses cinematic paraphernalia to bring the artefacts into uncontextualized still images that the viewer may confront in a context – of museum and gallery screenings – quite similar to that of the Metropolitan galleries themselves, while forcing attention back onto the objects: the time and darkness elapsed between each 'flash' view of the objects highlight the temporal and geographical distances between each object's genesis – differences often flattened out in standard western museum displays.

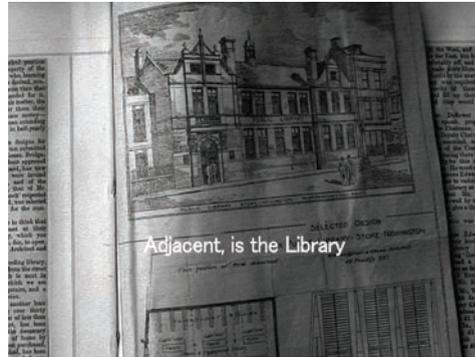
Shown as often in galleries as in cinemas, the 'screen' on which these films are projected in galleries – often simply a wall, a standing screen or a large-scale screen intended to occupy the full height of the space – is no longer the screen of desire and identification of the classic cinema, raised above the heads of spectators, who sit in rows of collective experience. Rather, their gallery installation imitates a pre-Modernist mode of contemplation, again underlining the films' allusions to various exemplars of the public sphere that are made through their high culture references (the museum gallery, the concert hall, the church, Le Corbusier's public housing complex). The images occupy the vertical plane of painting, in which the view onto the world represented in the picture frame corresponds to the erect human posture. The 'worldspace', as Leo Steinberg called it, contained within the painting and mirrored in this aesthetic arrangement proffers an analogy between the space of the viewer and that of the view onto which the painting opens. This representational pictorial plane, and its verticality, was degraded and attacked in various ways throughout the twentieth century, during which time the phenomenological, physical relationship of the viewer to the artwork was emphasized over its purely ocular nature. With the shift towards horizontality of Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955), Steinberg famously wrote, modern art moved from nature to culture, and more specifically from illusion to accumulated information: 'Any flat documentary surface that tabulates information is a relevant analogue of his picture plane – radically different from the transparent projection plane with its optical correspondence to man's visual field' (Steinberg 1975: 88). These films – despite an interest in information, as we shall see – reverse this dynamic, showing 'a picture of' a place or person that does not aim for physical instantiation, filmic interpellation or documentary truthfulness to the scene. Indeed, as I shall argue, the ontological documentary truths of celluloid film as an indexical medium are markedly in abeyance.

With the shift of moving image work into the gallery in the late 1960s and the 1970s, and the advent of video and its incorporations in installations, the jettisoning of verticality also became true for moving image work, despite the necessary two-dimensionality of the image. Work by moving image artists in the gallery – from Bruce Nauman to Joan Jonas to Nam June Paik to Steve McQueen – underscored the physical experience both of the work's making and of its installation, and this has persisted as a main feature in much contemporary practice. In a text on McQueen's work shown in Documenta XI (2002), for example, T. J. Demos reads McQueen's critique of the construction of racial identity as predicated on the indexicality and the physical locality evident in his works. Demos finds these two qualities both in the making of the films (as in *Catch* [1997], a video made of McQueen and his sibling throwing and catching a recording camera) and in their installations, which often force engagement on the part of the spectator by virtue of their immersive environments. For Demos, McQueen uses both the technological self-reflexivity of the medium and its installation to contest traditional readings of identity politics:

The important advance in McQueen's work – beyond Paik's phenomenological-cinematic experiment [*Zen for Film*, 1964] – is that it relates the visual signifiers of identity – of race and gender – to the structural conditions of the projection,

10. According to exhibition material provided by the National Galleries of Scotland, Nashashibi and Skaer say one of their intentions in making the film was to 'subvert the notion of contemplation that is so closely associated with a museum'. I am arguing that the film has the opposite effect in its replication, in another medium, of the museum display. See <http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/subjects/Interior/502928/artistName/Lucy%20Skaer,Rosalind%20Nashashibi/recordId/94580>. Accessed 3 June 2012).

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Elizabeth Price,
A Public Lecture & Exhumation (2006),
SD video/
installation, 25 min.
Courtesy of the
artist.

Emily Wardill, *Born Winged Animals and Honey Gatherers of The Soul* (2005), 16 mm
colour film, 10 min.
Editions: 5 + 2AP.
Courtesy of the
artist and Jonathan
Viner/Fortescue
Avenue, London
and STANDARD
(OSLO), Oslo.

Megan Fraser,
Arkhe (2008), super
16mm, long cut.
Courtesy of the
artist.

which enact a perpetual play between presence and absence, and oscillate between belief in the filmic illusion and recognition of the space of exhibition. (Demos 2005: 70)

This evocation of identity became even more pronounced, even more theatrical, in the installation of the later video projections *Carib's Leap* and *Western Deep* (both 2002) at the Lumiere Cinema in London. There the spectator descended into a cinema in disrepair – echoing, in some small part, the environment of the miners in the Western Caribbean on the screen.¹¹ The spectator was engaged as a facet of the installation him- or herself, while also being confronted with the spectral absence/presence of characters onscreen. In this way McQueen uses the legacy of Structuralist film, expanded cinema and video art – the idea that both the medium and the installation are articulate about the work's content – and brings it to bear on notions of identity. The 'observational' works in question here, by contrast, do not make identity (or identity politics) integral to the films' and videos' articulation – although I would argue the question of identity is by no means tangential to their work.

Perhaps more importantly, the medium is not as significant as it has been for the tradition of moving image work that came before. While working on celluloid remains important to some of these artists, their work suggests a displacement of the indexical authority of celluloid film or the phenomenology of projection, which have been so key to the debates and concerns of moving image practice from documentary to Structuralism to video art. The works I have been discussing are now made on many different formats, from 16mm and 35mm film to video and digital: Fraser's *Arkhē* was filmed in Super 16, and printed in 16mm and 35mm, and *Tour d'Ombres* was made on 16mm; Gibson's *A Necessary Music* was made on HDTV; Anna Lucas's *Atlantic Botanic* (2007) is a double-channel video while *Kaff Mariam* (2007) was recorded on HD. Nashashibi makes all her work, including *Bachelor Machines Part I*, *Jack Straw's Castle* (2009) and *Flash in the Metropolitan*, on 16mm; Elizabeth Price's *A Public Lecture and Exhumation* (2006) is a video and video installation; and Wardill's *Born Winged Gatherers and Honey Gatherers of the Soul* was shot on 16mm. Viewed technologically, their promiscuity in terms of medium could be a reaction to the mode of recording allowed by digital video cameras, whose ubiquity and cheapness have turned the world into a ready film subject, encouraging a flattening out between modes of perception and modes of capturing what we see on film, but also a degradation of the status of such direct recordings, deflecting attention onto their manipulation or conceit.

However, if these films turn away from the use of the projected image as a physical experience, they also locate the encounter they stage with the other in the process of filming itself: the salient confrontation is not between the film and the viewer but the film-maker and her subjects, rendering the act itself of filming performative or significant as a social act. The majority of the figures represented in this text's corpus of films differ in typological ways (by ethnicity, gender, class) to the film-maker herself: Fraser and the labourer in *Tour d'Ombres*; Nashashibi and the male sailors in *Bachelor Machines* or the men in *Jack Straw's Castle*, a portrait of a Hampstead Heath cruising pond; and Wardill and her typology of inhabitants living in Limehouse, in which she does not include herself. Identity, then, is given not positively but as something relationally posited or experienced within a social field. This difference appears important, again, at the point of making the film and less so, as it did for McQueen or an earlier generation of women film-makers such as Mulvey and Chantal Akerman, who also sought to record the everyday, at the point of audience reception. In describing *Jack Straw's Castle* Nashashibi said:

I was interested in being somewhere where I shouldn't, and what it might mean to be looking at something that is not meant for me to look at. There is

11. For an account of the experience see Searle (2002).

a voyeuristic element to this. Bringing my mother [who appeared in the film] into this situation felt empowering because it seemed to be a more extreme version of who shouldn't be there. (Nashashibi 2009: 89)

Nashashibi, as in *Bachelor Machines*, when she was similarly one of only two women on board the ship (along with her cinematographer), inscribes a real trespass into this public space that has been coded 'male', although this trespass is not visible or featured in the final film. The social character of this trespass is key to underline: the artists all show a certain degree of intimacy, already established or acquired, with the places they film, suggesting the site not just as a backdrop but as a place they are embedded within. Wardill, for example, made *Born Winged Honey Gatherers* in the neighbourhood in which her studio was then located. Nashashibi lived on the *Bachelor Machines* boat for two weeks; Elizabeth Price shot *A Public Lecture*, which as we will see entailed the participation of friends and associates, in the neighbourhood in which she lived; Gibson preceded the making of her film on Roosevelt Island with a letter soliciting help from its inhabitants; and Lucas located *Atlantic Botanic* in South London, where she was living. The intimacy between the film-makers and the subjects, whether in terms of locale and participation, adds a dimension of social immanence to the film-making that underscores the key importance of what precedes the exhibited film.

Feminist film-makers of the 1970s and the so-called *Screen* generation proposed identifications between the film-makers and the subjects they recorded, which were notably articulated or made available in the encounter between spectator and film. To choose some well-known examples: Laura Mulvey in *Riddles of the Sphinx* (with Peter Wollen 1977) cast herself in the film; Chantal Akerman filmed *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975) at a low angle – corresponding to her own height (Margulies 1996: 45) – and starred in her first feature, *Je Tu Il Elle* (1975), as a listless although searching young woman. These earlier women film-makers sought to undercut the naturalism of the illusion represented on the screen – using sequences of long duration so that spectator and woman on screen would share the same time-space; breaking up the narrative with discursive commentary; using abstract or repeated sequences to underline the artifice of the film. These later films shy away from any such Brechtian strategies of distancing or Modernist devices, returning to a mode of depiction that might even seem retroactive – a retreat into contemplation or allusions to the western cultural canon or erstwhile public sphere. This is not to say that the reflection of reality and its socio-political context is absent from these films, rather, the film-makers, in their emphasis on how their identity is positioned in relation to the subjects they film, at the site of film-making, and more importantly with their fixation on systems and administration, respond to the regulation of bodies and identities, especially female ones, today.¹²

12. It is perhaps significant that Megan Fraser is a member of Cinenova, an agency that preserves and distributes experimental women's films – thus participating socially (and administratively) with feminism, rather than making it so explicit in her films (see <http://www.cinenova.org/>). Accessed 20 February 2012.

Information as material

In addition to the formal parameters that unite these works as a group, they also evince a common concern with the materialization of information on the level of subject. This extends from the museological or educational (Nashashibi and Skaer's portrait of vitrines in the Metropolitan Museum; Fraser's *Arkhē*, a work that records the packing up of a Victorian-era museum; and Anna Lucas's *Atlantic Botanic*, which juxtaposes a portrait of a market seller in Brixton with the classifying and research activities of the South London Botanical Institute) to the administrative and navigational (Elizabeth Price's *A Public Lecture and Exhumation*, which looks

at a bequest to a public library in North London; Nashashibi's flashing consoles in *Bachelor Machines*). As previously mentioned, *Arkhe* takes its name from Derrida's *Archive Fever*, offering a literal incarnation of that text's discussion of the death drive in relation to the archive. The film records the dismantling of the Medical Museum at the Royal London Hospital, which housed preserved infants and other human and animal specimens. Its opening is exemplarily visual: an eight-minute montage of close-ups of the pickled skin of the bodies – abstracted images of blues and flesh tones, floating specks and wrinkled textures. The only contextualization outside of this reverie comes from the audio – a siren, voices, a door swinging – sounds that are all off-screen. It is not until midway through the film that we see an establishing shot of the museum and its blue packing crates, and then the eerie, revelatory image of a baby preserved in formaldehyde. The film lurches the death drive and the facts of mortality into the present tense, pitting aesthetic immediacy against a systematic organization of information that appears not only comically ill-equipped to deal with death but whose museological brief of preserving specimens for posterity is shown to be expiring – being literally packed up and put away. The visible regulation of bodies as exhibitory specimens is seen here in a light of extreme irony, but also, driven by the beauty of the film, elegiacally.

Elizabeth Price's *A Public Lecture and Examination* concerns a bequest made by Alexander Chalmers, a nineteenth-century merchant who donated his art collection and papers to the Stoke Newington Library in North London. The gift had been stalled and its funds frozen since 1969, and Price used the scope afforded to her by her role as an artist to fulfil it, nominating curators and associates to join the Stoke Newington Library committee and ultimately donating the extant material from the Chalmers bequest as well as the effects garnered in her process of making the work. The “expanded” archive, Price says, ‘was used to create the film’ (e-mail to the author, 23 January 2012).¹³ Standing as a document of its own process of making, the film creates an identity between the organization of information and the information itself, suggesting the film as an administration of reality. Shots taken of Chalmers's house are doubled with the image of its place on a nineteenth-century map, and shots of the gallery in the Stoke Newington Library are shown alongside the gallery's place on the building's blueprints. Moving this identity between information and reality closer, *A Public Lecture* further suggests that Chalmers now remains only as a product of the ephemera of administration – he resides in ‘papers, files, documents, records, accounts and memoranda’, as the film's subtitles put it.

Attempts to represent systems visually are traditionally associated with the Anglo-American Conceptualists of the 1960s and 1970s – artists such as Dan Graham, Robert Barry, Sol LeWitt and Mel Bochner – whose ‘aesthetics of administration’ supplied a method as much as a subject, and which has remained enormously influential in western visual art (see Buchloh 1990: 105–43). Indeed, I would argue that the depiction of systems in these films takes part in a recurring fascination in the twentieth and twenty first centuries with administration as a limit of depiction, a subject whose reach and constitution defy the ability to be mapped or represented adequately. Various metaphors have been proffered to represent ‘systems’. Frederic Jameson, for example, reads a filmic fascination with systems as a response to the flow of global capital (see Jameson 1990: 78–82),¹⁴ and film scholar Vivian Sobchack sees them, via QuickTime ‘movies’, as memory. Memory and capital as organizational metaphors underscore an uncanny (both familiar and hidden) character that suggests an emotive and affective dimension to the artists' enquiry. This is evoked particularly in Sobchack's discussion. She terms the QuickTime ‘movie’ (by which she means any kind of film opened as a QuickTime file) a certain type of ‘memory-box’, combining the associative logic of Joseph Cornell's boxes with the sense of being a representation of memory atop the

13. Also see Elizabeth Price's former staff page at Kingston University: http://staffnet.kingston.ac.uk/~ku19205/fada/staff/elizabeth_price/ep_lectures.php. Accessed 3 October 2011. The film contains more authorial intrusions, subtitles and graphics than the other examples of observational film I have cited, but its treatment of visible organization is consonant with this style.

14. Jameson's *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* is perhaps the most famous analysis of systems in film theory. He argues that the paranoia thriller, a dominant genre in the 1970s and 1980s mainstream film such as *The Parallax View* (Alan Pakula 1974) and *All the President's Men* (Alan Pakula 1976), reflected a reaction to the immaterialization of information and the idea of vast stores of data, hidden within computer networks of large corporate and governmental organizations, which ‘controlled’ and ‘knew’ everything. Jameson discussed this as an attempt to respond fundamentally to the global flow of capital, which crossed borders, controlled governments and individuals, and yet was invisible.

'effluvial database' of the computer's hard drive (Sobchack 1999: 7). (The computer desktop, on the other hand, resembles for her the Victorian database, the hard wood and solid fittings of offices and museums that are celebrated in the films I have been discussing.)

These films' interest in administration diverges from the Jamesonian model in the way that the films expressly forego any forward, plot-driven momentum that typifies the race to reach information in thriller films. Rather, administration is repeatedly depicted in ways that are often old-fashioned – from the slightly outdated flashing consoles of Nashashibi's *Bachelor Machines* to the earnest bookkeeping in the South London Botanical Institute –¹⁵ and often associated with hemming in or cloistering the body. Architectural features – doors, walls, ceilings – figure heavily in these films, suggesting a body that is kept within fixed parameters, or, as with *Flash in the Metropolitan* and *Arkhe*, the films quite literally show the enclosure of figural statuary or bodies. This notion of the containment of the body – as is performatively repeated vis-à-vis the filmed snippets of unfolding time held in the fixed formal parameters of each shot – is tied both to a general atmosphere of organization as a dominant metaphor and to an attempt to make administration visible as a part of daily life. In the last sequence of Wardill's *Born Winged Honey Gatherers* – the most extended sequence in the film – a group of girls is seen through a window (whose proportions we do not see), engaged in an unspecified meeting but one recognizably belonging to the operations of the welfare state – they sit in a circle on plastic chairs and appear to take turns in a led discussion. Of working-class origin, these young women are shown participating in a kind of social scheme that they, because of their class and consequent opportunities, are encouraged to join.¹⁶ Like Price's Alexander Chalmers, they are subject to a system of organizing information that is intimately related to, and even constituent of, their very identities.

With this recurrent fascination with systems and different forms of administration, these films aim to reflect an everyday reality but they also attempt to come to terms with the way this reality is given and navigated. Identity, and the filmmakers' own gender, comes to be part of a relational code – in which the feminine, for example, is given, in the case of Nashashibi, as not-male – and in which identity is repeatedly associated with different forms of museological or legal classification. This understanding of identity as something imposed from without and negotiated within a social field suggests a shift in the power relations inherent in the camera – and one not wholly resolved. Working in a time of increased accessibility to moving image devices, these time-portraits attempt to understand the act of filming as an everyday one in its social dimension. On the one hand, they go out of their way to signal the work's status as art, as if to bracket off the final product from other easily made recordings, while on the other, they present a portrait of a place in which they themselves are implicated – a social, public sphere that is inclusive of both film-maker and subjects as participants in the film, rather than the film-maker separated by the camera and the film-making brief from his or her recorded subjects. The act of filming becomes more and more performative, as the 'start' of the work extends, before the initial film frame, back towards the scouting of location and the switching on of whatever type of camera.

15. Jameson also shows how the difficulty of representing information onscreen resulted in slightly outdated film sets of offices (typewriters instead of computers, etc.) even in the 1970s (Jameson 1990).

16. I wrote about the relationship between the body and administration in regard to Emily Wardill's later films in Gronlund (2011).

Acknowledgements

Afterall (Research, Central Saint Martins College of Art & Design) is acknowledged. Thanks also to those at LUX for providing me with viewing copies of many of the films.

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