

Published on the occasion of
Single, Plural, Multiple
at Occasionals on 11th December 2009
a screening of five short films, each selected
by a different person, accompanied by
twenty-five short texts about the films.

The contributors and their chosen films are:

Richard Birkett
Disgrace by Kate Davis

Vanessa Desclaux
The hand is quicker than the eye
by Yael Davids

Mike Sperlinger
Necrology by Standish Lawder

Cally Spooner
Not I by Samuel Beckett

Marina Vishmidt
Sonnet by Lili Dujourie

Each person was invited to select a film up
to 15 minutes long and to write reflections
on all five films; these texts were printed
out and presented in the space alongside
the screening, and are reproduced here in
the booklet, in the running order of the
screening.

The short texts, twenty-five in total (five
from each participant) are not intended
to be comprehensive accounts, but rather
indicators of ways of looking at and thinking
about the same films, reflecting the writers'
shared or differing interpretations and
points of reference.

Not I

Samuel Beckett

1973, 13 minutes, BBC television version

performed by Billie Whitelaw

Selected by Cally Spooner

“...the tongue in the mouth.....all those contortions without which.....no speech possible....”

Concavity of the upper lip
Tongue forced behind the front teeth
Spit collecting on the chin
Upper jaw static
Lower jaw rising and falling
Lips pursed together
Saliva between teeth, lips and tongue
Tongue rising to the upper palate
Depression of the chin
Shaping of the body of the tongue
Enlarging and constricting of the open area of the mouth
Swelling and shrivelling of the lips
Upper and lower teeth meeting
Appearance of vertical undulations in the lips
Spit moving down the chin

Richard Birkett

–
“Maybe that’s where the urge comes from – to touch the physical limits of the image and to embody it in the zone of the word. My stage is a declaration of war on language. The actors are acting and talking in a state of suffocation (dark, hermetic space). If I think of a form of speech that comes closer to the human roar, to the primal human sound, it would be stuttering. Stuttering is almost as symmetrical a rhythm as breathing. How can I make theatre stutter?”
(Yael Davids, *End on Mouth, a Reader*, 2007)

“We are told that language is a code, and therefore, if we follow its binary logic this clear message will be received and there will be no misunderstanding because the perfect machine does not stutter, stumble, or search in desperation for the best word. You will say something and I will understand it. Actually, language, particularly an unfamiliar language, doesn’t work like a well-oiled coding machine. When we struggle with a

new language we struggle with our lungs, our tongues, our teeth and our lips. Our hands make shapes in space, we rock backwards and forwards and we become aware that the words we say are part of our body.”

(Steve Rushton)

Vanessa Desclaux

–
Occasionals takes its name (or does not) from the doctrine of Occasionalism, that stunted tributary of Cartesian philosophy to which Samuel Beckett always subscribed (albeit with a certain lugubrious, donnish irony). His favourite of the Occasionalist school appeared to be Arnold Geulincx (1624-1669; a recent edition of *Geulincx’s Ethics* includes Beckett’s own marginalia).

The Occasionalists had one extraordinary, ludicrous, but more-or-less irrefutable insight. As Geulincx himself put it: “Nothing justifies the claim that my mind is united to my body; though it is often said by the vulgar; and even Descartes sometimes indulged himself a little too freely in this way of thinking.” Because there was no proven or proveable connection between mind and matter, any volition which appeared to cause an action was not the real, ‘efficient’ cause but only an ‘occasional’ one – a kind of miraculous coincidence, underwritten by Providence. As Theodore, a character in Nicholas Malebranche’s *Dialogue on Metaphysics and on Religion* (1688), memorably summarises it:

You cannot, then, Aristes, of yourself move your arm or alter your position, situation, posture, do to other men good or evil, or effect the least change in the world. You find yourself in the world, without any power, immovable as a rock, stupid, so to speak, as a log of wood... What would you do in order merely to move the tip of your finger, or to utter

even a monosyllable? Alas! unless God came to your aid, your efforts would be vain, the desires which you formed impotent; for just think, do you know what is necessary for the pronunciation of your best friend's name, or for bending or holding up that particular finger which you use most?

It is no more possible for us to move a muscle without the help of God than it is for us to know which was Aristes' favourite finger. And as Beckett's later writing suggested, once that Creator was not to be assumed – or assumed to be dead, or otherwise unable to vouchsafe the whole of meaningful causality – the human subject was forever condemned to discordance in its “duet with the perpendicular pronoun,” as Tallulah Bankhead once put it in another context.

For some no-doubt highly subjective reason, that is not entirely reducible to the blackface, I can't quite take Billie Whitelaw in *Not I* as seriously as I should. Perhaps it is that she had to split her role as muse between Beckett and Morrissey (cf. the execrable video for *Everyday is Like Sunday*). Or maybe it's that turn as the demonic nurse in *The Omen*.

Mike Sperlinger

—

“Ok let's talk about Beckett”.
No, let's talk about Billie Whitelaw.

“And Beckett”
That's fine, but I want to avoid the literary questions and diversions please. I want to talk about Billie Whitelaw and Beckett. Specifically I want to talk about Beckett's writing for *Not I*, which turned from text to form through a collaboration actualised through Billie Whitelaw's live delivery in a theatre.

“You're just talking about scripts and plays. Scripts are pieces of writing that are

performed and then actualised live. You don't really have much of a point here... Scripts. Get. Dramatised.”
Fine, in that case I want to talk about why Beckett produced plays, or indeed, why any writer chooses to produce plays rather than just write texts that will never be plays. What is the usefulness of dramatisation?

“Because...”

Because, sometimes, you can communicate better if you don't just write. After all, text isn't terribly social and good communication is entirely social.

“That's a literary question”.

No, it's not. It's not literary, and it's not a question. This is about delivery and reception, and realising why there's a limit to communicating your position through printed words on a page.

“Everyone knows text as text is a limitation, particularly at the moment and that's why everyone started speaking... Besides, I don't think Beckett ever found text a limitation. His texts are never limited, or simply a piece of dense writing. What's your point?”

My point is that, in this particular instance, Beckett's vessel was not his writing. His vessel was Billie Whitelaw, performing his writing. He needed someone he could speak through.

“So you're talking about collaboration”

Yes, I suppose I'm talking about collaboration because I'm not talking about any other version of *Not I*, I'm talking about this version, which is directed by Beckett and delivered by Whitelaw after a period of intensive and lengthy conversation. I say: Beckett spoke, because Billie Whitelaw gave her voice to him.

“You're romanticising this. And you're exaggerating.”

Or perhaps I'm just trying to talk about ventriloquism, which is a diversion I can't claim credit for, but I really do want to explore.

“Ventriloquism?”

Yes. The act of finding another person, character or device to give a voice to your own position, which at best is fragmented and, at least, is two very different things all at once. This becomes rather confusing, if you just write texts.

Cally Spooner

—

This film of Billie Whitelaw's performance of Samuel Beckett's *Not I* does not lend itself to capsule description, inasmuch as any of Beckett's performed plays do. The datum of the mouth, the modes of accounting typical of Beckett, place a caesura between the experience of this speech and speech about this speech, a speech that could traverse this datum and the mediations of it to say anything meaningful, and a caesura too vast to cover in a small space. Without the scholarship at my disposal, it is hard to point to any meaningful allusions elsewhere either. This interdiction should be read as lacking any truck with the notion of a 'viscerality' that exceeds speech, if this is still the play that we are talking about.

Marina Vishmidt

Sonnet

Lili Dujourie

1974, 7:20 minutes

Selected by Marina Vishmidt

Lili Dujourie's *Sonnet* defines a sense of the temporal sublime; an experience of time passing infused with emptiness neither threatening nor redundant. Its beauty lies in a compositional poise that is deeply poetic and romantic, yet banal – there is no inference of a consequential narrative, no pressing reason to invest in the subjectivity of the woman in her occupation of the camera frame.

As she moves within and outside the static gaze of the lens, it is small phenomena of gesture, light and gait that catch one's eye; the slow motion vortex of smoke caught by the sun's rays as it rises to the top of the room; the woman's tracing of the moulding on the window frame with her finger; her appearance as a ghostly reflection in the window as she leaves the camera's frame. The protagonist's soft focus elegance – in casual, floaty dress – fulfils something of a cliché of 70s glamour, as if she is cast in a perfume advert. Yet her movement and actions do not suggest the occupation of a role or the embodiment of any insouciant ideal, and neither does the liminal state she seems to inhabit implicate the act of waiting or wandering thought; rather her mannerism is one seemingly unaffected by external or internal directive, attentive only to the semi-automatic action of smoking.

The presence of the camera provides the record of this passing of time; time experienced through the objective system of the analogue recording, yet equally felt as a subjective structure in a state of fluidity and elongation. Yet at the moment at which the woman moves out of the camera frame, there is neither an accompanying sense of conclusion or disruption; while the format of the three large windows apparently defines the structural composition of the camera's gaze, and the woman's time passed moving within this vignette seems potentially linked to its limits, her movement into another space proves unconscious of this logic. Her presence

does not dissolve it is merely transferred to a reflection in the centre window.

As the woman seems unhindered by motivation or intent, so the stillness of the camera, its lack of desire to pursue or be dictated to by her movement, implies an absence of mediated perspective and control. Yet equal to this non-structure is a serendipitous complicity between the figure and the gaze – through her reflection in the window, the woman never fully exits the frame of the camera, her image remaining wilfully contained by the single unmoving shot. The silent and hermetic observation in *Sonnet* conveys a coming together of the subject and object of the gaze; it is a quiet reflection on undefined personal identity, of being simultaneously visible and hidden.

Richard Birkett

—

Sonnet is a short and poetic abstraction of everyday life in which the human figure, the artist herself, appears as transient and in disappearance, her body giving for a brief moment of time the measure of the space before vanishing out of the frame of the camera. The space is the frame of the window, mirroring the cinematic frame of the camera, as well as the canvas of the painting. Marguerite Duras has often used the window to create these simultaneously painterly and cinematic experiences in her novels and films. Dujourie's short piece brought to my mind Duras' unique scenarios such as the first scene of *Moderato Cantabile* when Anne and her son are at the piano lesson and she is looking out the window while a boat is passing. In Duras' text the boat passing marks the passage of time in the same way as the burning of the cigarette does in Dujourie's *Sonnet*. But the ghostly presence of this woman looking out the window, anxiously or boringly waiting, recalls even more the way Elizabeth drowns her gaze through the

large window of the hotel dining room into the park and the forest beyond, in *Destroy, She Said*. And in a similar way, the silent scream dear to Duras echoes the mute *Sonnet* of Dujourie...

“Cloudy weather.

The windows are closed.

On one side of the dining room where he is, he cannot see the park.

She, yes, she sees, she looks. Her table touches the edge of the windows.

Because of the blinding light, her eyes are half-closed. Her gaze moves from one direction to the other. Other customers watch these tennis matches that he does not see.

He has not asked to move to another table.

She ignores that she is being looked at.

It rained this morning around five.

Today it is in a weak and heavy weather that the balls hit the ground.”

(Marguerite Duras, *Destroy, She Said*)

Vanessa Desclaux

—

It would be nice to establish the proper ratio of work to commentary: so-and-so many original words, notes, strokes, frames or minutes to be answered by so-and-so many words of praise, interpretation, digression. (It could be calculated by the letter rather than the word, German-style, if preferred.) It might be useful to consult precedent; I think, for example, of the poet JH Prynne’s book-length study of one sonnet by Shakespeare, *They That Haue Powre to Hurt*, which, conservatively or otherwise, allots three pages to the poem’s first word (‘they’).

Once we had the correct formula we could work out the proportions of our response to Lili Dujourie’s *Sonnet*, which might take in some of the following over the course of its discussion: *vanitas*, and *Vanitas* (a contemporary video by the late

British artist Tamara Krikorian); monitors, windows and mirrors as props in early video art; comparative standards of living in London and Gent; Rosalind Krauss on video art and narcissism; the living room in structuralist-informed film and video in the 1970s; languor; Chantal Akerman; the sonnet form and conceits, with reference to John Donne (digression); Helen Molesworth on feminist art of the 1970s; Marianne Wex on body language; and, perhaps above all, that aphorism of Pascal, taken up by Raul Ruiz in defence of the idea of enlightened boredom – “All the evil in men comes from one thing and one thing alone: their inability to remain at rest in a room.”

Mike Sperlinger

—

I love watching beautiful women smoke. He agrees.

“yes, it’s nice”.

We consider this and I say: historically, isn’t women smoking with aptitude very integral.

“To cinema”.

I wouldn’t know for sure, I’m no expert but undoubtedly it’s very sexual, which is something that, incredibly, I’d not considered. Not before you pointed this out. Did you notice because you’re a man?

“Well it’s obvious. And that’s why directors ask women to do it”

I think about Tippi Hedren smoking in *The Birds*, wearing a two-piece pastel green suit, perfectly. But, besides, I point out: This is different.

“why?”

Because, this film is made by a woman.

“oh”.

And I guess we should talk about this. Can we talk about this.

“It’s a total no no isn’t it now. Contemporary rules and regs. Essentially, it’s a dying art”.

Female filmmaking?

“no, smoking in films made by any

gender whatsoever”.

Oh.

I want to talk about directors making actresses smoke and choreographing them precisely so they reflect nicely, at least twice at any one time, in three different bay windows.

“So she really just smokes?”

No, she also moves to a number of different points in a room that looks like a stage. She moves to stage left, stage right, she slips out of focus, she’s always reflected in the window. The positions she occupies are limited, and her movements, like the space, are compressed. She seems to arrive at specific times. She is choreographed. Undoubtedly specifically choreographed like clockwork to a clock the length of her cigarette ash.

“so it’s a formal experiment”

No, I say. It’s not.

“Why not”

Because. I say. This woman is not alright. She needs much more. A bigger role. A speaking part. A plot.

“sounds kind of wanting. Does it leave you wanting?”

As a viewer?

“as a viewer”

I’m just a bit worried about her.

“about her well-being?”

I just feel she could do a bit more with her life.

Cally Spooner

—

Lili Dujourie in *Sonnet* (1974). A dream of unobserved solitude staged for camera. Passing in and out of frame, the woman leaves reflections to guard her place in the image. Reflections which put her simultaneously into two worlds, the room and the garden she watches through the windows. The locked-off camera pins down time as space grows ever more ductile, the

passage between frames easier and easier. But in a way, this is not a performance for camera. The camera itself when working normally peoples space with phantoms on this sunny afternoon. Sui generis as Dujourie’s video work is, she echoes the use of the video camera by many of her contemporaries in testing the patience of the new technology with variations on dead time, a chance for a new uneventful plenitude that could just run and run. While not forgetting to echo the specifically feminist move of exposing a woman’s dead time to the public gaze e.g. *Jeanne Dielman* or Akerman’s earlier *Je, Tu, Il, Elle*, a really new gesture of materializing alienation that owed much to precursors such as Warhol, but rid of the prejudice of celebrity. We live every day now with the consequences of the chronicling of personal nothing, aggressively so. But...without going further with that, or an analysis of the film for now. Also, this is the dream I hold before me of moving to Belgium someday.

Marina Vishmidt

Disgrace

Kate Davis
2008, 9:20 minutes

Selected by Richard Birkett

To a certain degree *Disgrace* could be read as revolving around a conceptually familiar feminist gesture. By entering into a procedural act of mapping her own body onto the image of a female nude by Modigliani, Kate Davis seems to attempt to assert herself over a modernist and classical history of the male articulation of the female form. The action has echoes of Robert Rauschenberg's erasing of a Willem de Kooning drawing, Davis' accumulative pencil line forming a positive obfuscation of the Modigliani.

There are elements of slippage within this reading that occur in the artist's choice to articulate her gesture through the moving image. Specifically, the presentation of the action within stages operates at the edge of the 'moving' image. It is not a fluid documentation of the process Davis underwent to trace the outline of parts of her body onto the page of the book; it is instead a removal of the extended elements of this performance and of the physical presence of the body, and a reduction to still frames as an index of the happening. It consciously foregrounds drawing through its reified presence, as opposed to allowing the temporality of video to portray performative process.

There is a resulting friction between the pictorial and the real; the Modigliani nude exists as a poor reproduction within a mass-produced student picture book on 'the masters', whereas Davis' drawn marks form a tangible presence both through their staged appearance, and their apparent objectivity in the face of the stylised subjectivity of the Modigliani. It is as if the aura of 'the master' is from the beginning brought low through the kitsch ghostliness of the reproduction, so many degrees away from its original manifestation.

Between each stage of the time-lapse drawing a black screen marks the off-screen physical tracing of body parts – accompanying each of these blackouts is a repetitive human chorus of disingenuous

'boo-hoos'. These vocal retorts are soaked in sarcasm – perhaps a barbed response to an unspecified expression of self-pity, or a display of mock concern. Who or what is the cause of these repetitive, theatrical exclamations? Is it the sight of the 'desecration' of the Modigliani nude by Davis' graffiti? Or an oblique insinuation of bodily shame and 'disgrace'?

Ultimately the ground between the modernist, male portrayal of the female form and the traced overlay of Davis' own body does not become one of polarised contestation. Rather the very idea of representation – of the formal and political value systems at play in the act of image making – is rendered through varying states of the real and the phoney. The act of imposing her own physical trace on the grainy reproduction of the nude can be seen as one of closeness; of conversational affinity also marked by undercurrents of shame and wavering respect. As the grating insincerity of the multiple 'boo-hoos' is progressively reduced to pathos ridden singular voice, so the notion of 'disgrace' becomes an active vector that complicates both our historical and contemporary relationship to art and the subjectivities it attempts to contain.

Richard Birkett

—

I remembered this word that I like in French, 'gribouillage', which is I guess a combination of scribbling and scrawling.

Until the 1920s, it is an activity that was badly perceived. It was accepted only with very small children, to be replaced by a more traditional teaching of drawing. Surrealism, through its influence of psychoanalysis, helped to free 'gribouillage' and gave it back all its values of expression and creation. 'Gribouillage' is now acknowledged in the world of art.

But somehow there was something

else to this word *gribouillage*; there was 'Gribouille', a fictional character from my childhood that I could not recall very well... So I looked it up to refresh my memory, and here is what I found:

La Sœur de Gribouille (The Sister of Gribouille) is a novel for children written by la Comtesse de Segur in 1862. The plot takes place in Normandy in the region of Verneuil. After the death of their mother, Caroline and Gribouille have no other financial resources than the income provided by the sewing work of the eldest, Caroline. But the clumsiness of Gribouille will cause her a lot of worry.

Gribouille (his real name is Babylas) is 16 years old and he is (according to the common perception) considered as quite stupid. For example he hides in the river to protect himself from the rain... His idiocy leads to confusing and difficult situations despite his willingness and his loyalty.

Vanessa Desclaux

It was hard to have an opinion worth holding about the Chapmans' vandalised Goyas. Their blue-chip philistinism trumped parochial art criticism and more or less demanded that it be discussed in the letters pages of broadsheets, the broadbrush world of celebrity-on-celebrity action. It was, in other words, a very iconic form of iconoclasm.

Kate Davis' *Disgrace* offers iconoclasm in a different register. It is modest, bathetic, primly punky (its chopped-out title in the style of the Sex Pistols logo). Its chanted BOO-HOOS seem to own up winningly to a certain childishness, at the same time as they suggest the puerility of all those choruses of disapproval.

The first overdrawing suggests a censorious hand, defending the object of the nude study, but that notion is rather effaced by the subsequent ones, which extend and

transform the lines of Modigliani's drawing more ambivalently and abstractly. The subtitle ("2008 or 1918?"), on the other hand, perhaps foists on us the question of where the disgrace lies a little more polemically.

An unimation?

Mike Sperlinger

"So". He says. "This is going to be hard for you to write about?" I affirm that, yes, it is. Unless I write about legacy, and I don't want to write about legacy. "So". He says. "What can you do? Talk about the problems of writing about legacy and why you don't find these problems interesting?". I really don't want to do this because I really don't want to write about legacy.

"Yes, let's talk about this".

I am not happy about this. Frankly I'm never happy about anything that veers even remotely close to becoming an art historical comment or exercise. So I say: I'm not interested in art historical exercises.

"what are you interested in?"

Original thought.

"ah"

What?

"well, fine. Talk about that then".

I can't I don't know what to say.

"what you just said"

But it's impossible! Of course, and obviously impossible and it's so obvious.

"Is there anything wrong with mentioning the obvious?"

Yes. It's irresponsible. If enough people ignored the obvious it wouldn't be so obvious anymore, so there's definitely good reason to ignore talking about art history and legacy. I'd be amending the balance, so to speak. I'd be giving it a fighting chance to find it's relevance, by reducing its likelihood of becoming a topic for discussion.

Essentially, I have a duty to discourse to

NOT talk about art history or legacy and ignore it altogether, so it becomes an interesting thing to talk about and make work about. I'm saving it for the future. I have immense cultural foresight. An act of historical responsibility in advance. Good old me.

"Everything comes from somewhere".

This is boring. I'm so bored. Look, I know this. Of course, we're all trying to find our own voice.

"well let's talk about this then,...

I won't, because I don't want to talk about the difficulty of speaking in the wake of someone else. It's fine. Just arrive. There's no boo hoos about it. So, that's it, I choose to say nothing. Nothing.

...you do this all the time. It's what your work's about".

I do not make work about historical responsibility.

"Is this even what she's saying?"

Yes.

Cally Spooner

A video exercise done within a drawing exercise-book. *Disgrace*, the first moving-image work by artist Kate Davis, takes a drawing as its point of departure, which makes sense since drawing is the mainstay of Davis' usual practice. The closest this video gets to motion is a flicker book; an odor of the proto-cinematic hangs about it. As though to signify a foray into a new form without really abandoning the previous one, the film is composed of interspersed still and silent shots framed by black screen with audio. The audio is that of jeering onlookers. Their chorus of 'boo-hoo' reproaches the defacement a 1918 Modigliani sketch. This lovely nude is defaced with lines that get more and more tangled with each shot as they register the artist's successive attempts to trace parts of her body onto the odalisque. First she traces her hand, a self-

reflexive gesture – 'showing her hand' – but also as if to show her weapon. The drawing is finally erased by accretion; the artist has blocked it with her body. Not literally her body – no trace of the agency producing the drawing-over is ever seen in the video – but a drawn body, crazily cut up, while the lithe Modi nude is a study in composure. Yet the work as a whole is fanatically literal, pristine in its terms. Such a lesson in feminism couldn't be blunter: women must inscribe themselves into history (of art), but it isn't always going to be pretty.

Marina Vishmidt

The Hand is Quicker Than The Eye

Yael Davids

2009, 11 minutes

Selected by Vanessa Desclaux

Yael Davids' film – that documents a series of workshops given to prison inmates on circus and magic skills – reflects on basic forms of learning within a context that potentially troubles and undermines the assumed ethical thrust of pedagogy. A provocation occurs, both on a simplistic and somewhat humorous level (should prisoners really be taught escapology and illusionist's skills?), and also within a more complex discourse around criminality and the physical experience of incarceration.

Yet Davids' overall production of this scenario – the presumed negotiations with the prison authorities, the collaboration with both the circus instructors and the prisoners, and the individual social and cultural relations encountered in the particular context of Mechelen City Prison – is pointedly reduced in its filmic representation. Partially motivated by a bureaucratic restriction (the artist not being allowed to film the faces of the prisoners), the document focuses on bodily gesture, the minutiae of motor function required to execute acrobatic and conjuring tricks. In the near silence of the film's soundtrack and the uniformity of the prisoner's grey clothing, individual identities remain undefined, the implication being of a state of minimised subjectivity. The act of learning is contained within visual demonstration and repetition; a collective choreography of limbs absorbed in a process of trial and error, never seeming to progress to the seamless completion of a trick.

The film's address of focused and physical collective learning seems to articulate a productive communal experience, a kind of enriching social theatre. Gesture, both trained and involuntary, overwhelms the notion of 'sleight of hand' as innate individual skill, privileging mechanical action instead. Yet the existing framework of the prison as an enforced community counters this notion of wilful collectivity. Instead of the enactment of escape from worldly bounds that magic and the circus symbolise, there

is an ever-present sense of containment. The fragmentary nature of the film's edit exaggerates this restriction – as viewers we are denied a complete sense of both the performances and the individuality of the prisoners. Within Davids' own experience of the restrictions laid down by the prison authorities, she creates a distancing effect that conveys both the collectively articulated limitations of the prison, and the unease that accompanies that which is pushed to the edge of society.

Richard Birkett

—

The individual search for the secret of life and death. That is the inspiration and the key.
The reality of impressions and the impression of reality.
The ordinary event leads to the beauty and understanding of the world.
Start out and go in.
Each work is singular, unique and resists any stylistic or linear analysis. Each work is one of a kind.
Personal, eccentric, peculiar, quirky, idiosyncratic, queer.
The presentation of a real thing.
The great mystery and the great banality of all things.
The ordinary and the rare, their interconnectedness and interchangeability.
There is a quotidian sense of loss and tragedy.
Collect, accumulate, gather, preserve, examine, catalog, read, look, study, research, change, organize, file, cross-reference, number, assemble, categorize, classify, and conserve the ephemeral.
Art should make use of common methods and materials so there is little difference between the talk and the talked about.
The historical and the scholarly can be ends in themselves.
Art should be familiar and enigmatic, as are

human beings.

Each work is an essay on a different subject with interchangeable methods and means. There is a keen interest in appalling behaviour.

A sort of journalist reporting on the common, observable world. Suicide is often the subject because it is a representative example of the ultimate moment of mystery. The last private thought. Look for narrative of any kind. Anti-narrative, non-narrative, para-narrative, semi-narrative, quasi-narrative, post-narrative, bad narrative.

Use everything.

The artist is a mysterious entertainer.
(Allen Ruppersberg)

Vanessa Desclaux

Prison movies tend to be quite manual. The first shot of *A Man Escaped* (1956) is a close-up of hands; some of the most memorable moments of *Le Trou* (1960) are the warders forensically dissecting a cake for contraband, or the dextrous prisoner (Jean Keraudy, playing himself) making a periscope out of a toothbrush and a sliver of mirror. In prison, or at least in films set in prisons, hands do synecdochical service; they become anthropomorphic and creaturely. They often achieve a kind of autonomy from their furtive owners, creeping, passing or crafting with expressive exigency while the face remains impassive. We don't need Jeremy Bentham to tell us that transparency can be as much of a constraint as fetters.

In Yael David's video the hands aren't really quicker than the eye just yet. Rather, like the other anonymous limbs, they are tentative and patient. A few eggs are going to have to get broken before the finger exercises pay off. Good prison films are synecdochical in another way, because they are about real time: certain shots have to stand in for the *longue durée* of a

hard stretch. Watched repeatedly, though, David's video seems to rely less on the escapological frisson, or the associations of a faceless human pyramid, than on sensitivity to a certain fraternal trust and care.

The closest I've been to prison was a screening I was involved in of Anthony McCall and Andrew Tyndall's structural/semiotic endurance classic *Argument* (1978) in the Pentonville Prison Officers' Social Club. Funnily enough, that also involved a community of trust and a lot of patience.

Mike Sperlinger

After some time, I ask: You know that old cliché, where prisoners wear jailbird boiler suits and will the hours away sewing internal prison postal bags or chipping rocks from boulders that serve no purpose beyond the act of labouring.

"Yes".

How accurate is that cliché?

He thinks and says: "it's half accurate. It's not true that the postal sacks are only used internally and it's not necessarily true that the rocks don't get used elsewhere. What is true is that a lot of really general stuff which we might use everyday, does get made in prisons, by prisoners". Really? "Really, you should know that. In a prison there are micro-economies where prisoners perform work and receive something in exchange for their labour. This means that productive labour becomes valuable, perhaps opposed to non-productive activities which might fall outside of this economy like... private study, or ummm... knitting".

In that case, I say, this is a film about work.

"You mean labour?"

Yes. And productiveness and value, but I might be approaching this point from entirely the wrong direction, so I need ask a question. Can I ask you a question?

"Yes"

What is the point in teaching prisoners

(who may have a life sentence) circus skills and magic?

"Self help?"

I'll try again: What, I say, is the difference between learning to knit and learning to do magic?

"Well obviously..."

No, stop it, it was a rhetorical question. The difference is that magic and circus skills find their value, when they find an audience. As activities they are futile and useless unless they have an audience, specifically an ignorant audience, who can be tricked and wowed. These prisoners have no audience.

"They have each other."

They're a useless audience to each other because they're doing exactly the same thing as the performer. Doesn't that rather debunk one's performance? You need your audience passive and ignorant, and your magician virtuosic, no?

"ummmm"

These men are being trained in a useless, gratuitous activity, which will always be in-affective and unproductive, so long as they remain within the confines of this particular 'magic circle', and the institution itself. Obviously this is impossible, given the prison sentences... so they'll never perform productively and find value within the microcosm they operate in. It's very cruel. But apparently I'm jumping the gun here, and he raises three points.

"Firstly no one said that prison activities had to be valuable. Secondly, isn't there a luxury in futility? Thirdly, what about fun?" There's a luxury in being enabled to perform productively, and fun is overrated.

"Are you sure?"

No... Maybe. But I do know that any creative activity which necessitates an audience and can't harness one outside of an immediate and like-minded group, is fairly valueless.

"Well maybe this is true. But leave the labour bit out."

Cally Spooner

To some intents and purposes a documentation of a circus skills/magic workshop in a prison in Mechelen, *The Hand is Quicker Than the Eye* focuses on the dexterity of hands, feet and bodies in different combinations. Deflecting empathy by almost never venturing above the necks of its subjects, the camera imparts rather a lively curiosity about the clever mechanics it follows as prisoners learn to conceal objects in palms or use brightly colored fabric to emulate a burning bush. The film also builds on the patent linkage between magic and crime, recalling Pickpocket's chains of pilfering hands as automatic poetry. Shots are tight, grabbing anonymous movements that fill the frame without any give at the edges, trapping the viewer in the space of the jail and the space of the ritual. Prison is a place where people become anonymous items in an institutional calculus, but here they are re-personalized as they pick up new tricks, subjectivation in a cramped space – Acephale, freed from the head, freed from the face, at least – the secret knowledge that can only be accessed by losing your head. The associations of the human pyramid scene are hard to conjure away, a guignol too burned into the retinas of agog spectators by now. Yet we wonder if the prisoners might not be acquiring new skill sets that would serve them well not just in the underworld but in the working world. The Financial Times reported last Friday that a new prison industry might be coming online: UK private prison service Serco wants its inmates to start working as digital video editors, logging and transcribing hours of footage for clients such as the BBC. An army of middle-class interns suddenly redundant: will they turn to crime?

Marina Vishmidt

Necrology

Standish Lawder

1969-70, 11 minutes

Selected by Mike Sperlinger

When doing some internet research on Standish Lawder's *Necrology* I very quickly came upon this quote, attributed to Edgar Daniels from the *New Cinema Review*, and presumably published not long after the film's initial screening:

"Several short films [at the Ann Arbor Film Festival] seemed notably successful in the creation of special effects. Among these was *Necrology*, by Standish Lawder, an eleven-minute panning of the camera down what seemed an endless stairway, upon which people stood motionless and glum. These circumstances, plus the constant idea of the title, gave a haunting suggestion of people on their eventless way to hell. I was told later that the film was made with a stationary camera trained on a down escalator, and then the film was run backwards. A long, humorous 'cast of characters' at the end ... seemed to me to destroy a desirable mood, but it certainly pleased the crowd...."

For all its flippancy, it struck me that, as a summation of a cultural experience, there is something very apt and prescient about Daniels' description of the first section of *Necrology* as creating a 'desirable mood', and the latter half as a crowd pleaser. In considering the affect of the film on its audience, he identifies within it an abrupt movement between these two experiential poles; a dichotomy that (extrapolating from the tone of the article) he would characterise as high and low – a desirable, existential sensation played off against a base, momentary hit.

Despite the fact that Daniels sees the two halves of the film as functioning separately and antagonistically, rather than as mutually dependent, his judgement articulates a shift in affect that seems central to how we experience *Necrology* now. Lawder's film is structurally built around a simple, but effective and satisfying payoff; a moment of about face that is cleverly played to achieve maximum revelatory effect for its audience. It displays sublime comic timing, toying

with its audience's expectations around the elongated temporality and portentousness of avant-garde film. This tightly constructed apparatus allows for a sudden jolt of self-awareness from the viewer – the deflation of a carefully moulded 'haunting' mood through a reminder of the delusory structural fabric of the filmic medium.

Our contemporary mass media has become extremely adept at the manipulation of this moment of audience self-consciousness. Within Daniels' articulation of the evocation of existential mood and its subsequent disruption as leading to mass pleasure, there lies the basis for a structural device that forms an intrinsic part of our media landscape. It is rooted in a sense of inclusion; while we can almost mechanically tune in emotionally to visual representation, it is on a second tier of structural revelation that we experience the pleasure of collective knowing, the shared punchline.

This sophistication on such a mass, often commercial, scale perhaps leaves *Necrology* as something of a hollow gesture. It also poses a much more expansive question about the collective experience of contemporary art, and particularly the moving image, relative to this framework of control over affect. After viewing *Necrology* I was immediately reminded of a video by Mark Wallinger, entitled *Threshold to the Kingdom* (2000), that in the light of the former film casts a curious shadow on the intervening thirty years of cultural articulation of social mood. In this work slow motion footage from a static camera shows people walking through automatic double doors at an airport's international arrivals hall, accompanied by an elegiac choral score by Gregorio Allegri. It is a work that no doubt would have greatly pleased Edgar Daniels, devoid as it is of any additional revelation that could undermine its finely tuned mood of millennial angst.

Richard Birkett

“I am writing for myself and strangers. This is the only way that I can do it. Everybody is a real one to me, everybody is like some one else to me. No one of them that I know can want to know it and so I write for myself and strangers.

Every one is always busy with it, no one of them then ever want to know it that every one looks like some one else and they see it. Mostly every one dislikes to hear it. It is very important to me to always know it, to always see it which one looks like others and to tell it. I write for myself and strangers. I do this for my own sake and for the sake of those who know I know it that they look like other ones, that they are separate and yet always repeated. There are some who like it that I know they are like many others and repeat it, there are many who never can really like it.”

(Gertrude Stein, *The Making of the Americans*)

Vanessa Desclaux

I first saw *Necrology* in a screening which Mark Webber had curated at Tate Modern. He showed it with Hollis Frampton’s *Zorns Lemma*, from the same year, and I think, for one reason or another, it was one of the enjoyable screenings I’ve ever been to.

I love *Necrology* for at least two reasons. One is that it is both funny and formal at the same time (see also: Wojciech Bruszewski’s *YYAA*, or Sharon Hayes’ *Symbionese Liberation Army Screeds*). The other is that it reminds me of the stairway to heaven in Powell and Pressberger’s *A Matter of Life and Death*.

It probably does not need remarking that the film, like all films, becomes more of a necrology with each passing year. You should watch out for Standish, who is alive and well, as he appears as himself.

I should apologise to Standish, Mark and

everyone else for showing the film from DVD on this occasion, rather than in its original 16mm form, as – apart from the inevitably pixellating dark tones – in this case the unspooling of a roll of film does seem to relate to its subject matter.

Mike Sperlinger

The cast seem very depressed. But then, he says; “they don’t realise they’re cast”. This is true, but they are also the performers, the actors, so to speak.

“They’re not”. He says. “They’re commuters”. I know, and should really move on. But.

They’re extras.

“extra what?”

Like film extras; a non speaking human prop to furnish the action. Extras make the main action convincing. They’re paid props which enable a narrative to unfold.

“But there is no action. There’s just them, and they’re not action. So there’s no action”.

The action is the extras, extras being human props.

“But they’re not extras, so they’re not props, and furthermore, they’re definitely not paid properly. They’re not even performing.”

I disagree. They are performing, they’re performing passively and in exactly the right direction (down). This makes them very good extras, or workers, because they’re cheap and doing exactly what the director wants.

“So he’s appropriated the public as his unpaid props”

I say: Yes. He’s exploiting their daily performance as the material to enable his performance and his production. I’m not sure this sounds convincing. I wish it did, I’m trying to say something political.

“Ummm. I guess. So, beyond the back to front decent to ascent trick, which we’ve

cracked with a few Google searches and the insert sleeve notes, what’s the plot?” Oh you know, some comment on the demise of the daily worker, the depressing reality of a passive and regular 5pm daily commute down an elevator, where you obliviously and contentedly pick your nose while an avant garde filmmaker in a roll-neck sweater renames you, classifies you, critiques your daily existence, appropriates your performance, immortalises your journey, then plays you back, in reverse, for eternity.

“ok.” He says.

Cally Spooner

Eschewing the craze for unprepared life native to the ‘direct cinemas’ of the late 60s, Standish Lawder pondered how best to turn cinema into an allegory of death. He settled on an escalator. A moving stairway to heaven that pointed to a life beyond death too, like life preserved beyond its natural limits on celluloid. In that sense, all photographic images depict death, as so many have observed, preeminently Roland Barthes. But in this Assumption, consisting of a random congeries of NYC mass-transit users, death is created, and subverted, by camera trickery and the filmmaker’s wit, evident in the soundtrack choices and the mordant whimsy of the credit sequence, which lasts as long as the preceding film footage itself. Commuters heading down are reversed and pulled up, each face reacting or not reacting to the camera in some singular way, a mass ornament headed for the void. Yet they are rescued at the last minute by the credits, where fanciful identities and names likely to have been picked out of a telephone book are assigned to some of the most arresting figures or features we have just seen. While mournful Hollywood film music accompanied the procession, jaunty parade music plays over

the credits, evoking mid-century Hollywood musicals, and their hordes of extras. This film has consisted entirely of extras, though. That at least is something *Necrology*’s cine-morte shares with all cinéma vérité.

Marina Vishmidt

Contributors' Biographies:

Richard Birkett is a curator at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. He curated the *Nought to Sixty* programme of exhibitions and events in 2008, and in 2009 co-curated *Talk Show* with Will Holder and Jennifer Thatcher, and *Calling Out Of Context* with Jamie Eastman.

Vanessa Desclaux is an independent curator based in London. She is currently curator at Bloomberg SPACE, London, and is a practice-based researcher at Goldsmiths College in London on the MPhil/PhD programme in Art. Between 2006 and 2009, she was assistant curator at Tate Modern, working on the programme of performances and contemporary art. She also contributes regularly to different magazines and publications.

Mike Sperlinger is assistant director of LUX, and a freelance writer and curator. He recently curated the show *Let's Take Back Our Space* at Focal Point Gallery, Southend.

Cally Spooner's practice uses theatrical, performance and academic conventions as social structures. She works collaboratively with actors and artists from a number of disciplines, to turn her own texts and other people's performance structures into live, social activity. She has recently exhibited, performed or directed work at Basso, Berlin; the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London; Neue Alte Bruuke gallery, Frankfurt; Chelsea Space and Am Nuden Da, London.

Marina Vishmidt is a London-based writer who works on questions related to art, labour, and value. She is currently doing a PhD at the School of Business and Management at Queen Mary, University of London on 'Speculation as a Mode of Production'.

Occasionals is an artist run project space in London where artists, writers and curators can present their work in a one day or evening event. This might be an exhibition, screening, reading or performance, a work-in-progress or not exhibited before, and a chance to discuss it with other people.

Organised by Philomene Pirecki.

Special thanks to all the contributors:

Richard Birkett
Vanessa Desclaux
Mike Sperlinger
Cally Spooner
Marina Vishmidt

Thanks also to:

Sarah Allen
Argos Centre for Art and Media
Tom Benson
Sorcha Dallas Gallery
Yael Davids
Kate Davis
Standish Lawder
Gemma LLoyd
Ian Whittlesea

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