

C.O. JOURNEYS

(C.O. = CAMERA OBSCURA)

A PROJECT BY JOANNA BAILIE & CHRISTOPH RAGG

C.O. Journeys invites you to take your seat in a cinema-sized camera obscura. A camera obscura is an optical device whose properties have been known for centuries: when a light source shines through a tiny hole into a dark interior, an inverted image of the outside world appears on the opposite wall. According to art historian Jonathan Crary, however, the camera obscura is more than just an optical instrument, it is as it were “a philosophical metaphor for the ambiguous relation between man as an observer and the world.”¹ Throughout history various qualities have been ascribed to the camera obscura. Because of the typically deep colours and the sharpness of the image, the projection was considered an adequate or even more authentic rendition of reality. Conversely, the inverted image also has an undeniably mysterious and mystical nature. The instrument was applied to both scientific and artistic practice (Vermeer’s interiors are said to have been painted with the aid of a camera obscura), as well as finding its way into popular culture as a fairground attraction.

With this project Joanna Bailie and Christophe Ragg join forces at the intersection of different disciplines. As a composer Joanna Bailie is searching for ways to involve the spectator in contemporary music, which is often branded difficult and elitist. She is fascinated by grid structures, which impose a restriction on the composition, but exactly in doing so they allow a large degree of freedom and intuition; as the French writer Georges Pérec once said “Formal constraint produces movement.” In his capacity as a scenographer Christoph Ragg possesses a strong visual power of imagination which he manages to translate into performative spaces. He has created several installations that take the “point of view of the spectator” as their point of departure.

Over the last few decades computer graphic techniques have had a large impact on the culturally established meaning of the terms *observer* and *representation*, according to Crary.² They produce visual ‘spaces’ that are radically different from the mimetic abilities of film, photography and television. With these analogue techniques the source of the image can always be traced back to a real space. By means of these new technologies, the act of looking is radically withdrawn from the human observer and virtual spaces come into existence. Christoph Ragg and Joanna Bailie have a shared interest in the simplicity of analogue techniques and the specific texture they produce.

In *CO Journeys* the spectator is placed *inside* the image while at the same time experiencing the odd realization that the performance is taking place outside the box and more specifically behind him or her. From this situation the creators

¹ CRARY, Jonathan, *Techniques of the Observer: On vision and modernity in the nineteenth century*, MIT Press, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1990.

² Idem

develop a series of stories the origins of which are difficult to trace. The whole is best described as a hybrid of fiction, falsified documentary and biography. It is not their intention to tell a story following a classical dramaturgy from point A to B; they are more concerned with implicit connections. The different 'chapters' of the performance refer to painting (*The Arnolfini portrait* –Jan Van Eyck), the rise of television and Technicolor (*The Wizard of Oz*) and photography. Joanna Bailie has developed a musical score that plays a very important role in the proceedings: surrounded by bombastic songs or noise the images unfolding before our eyes receive an extra layer of meaning. The texts are of an absurd nature: for instance a family appears that seizes each opportunity to dress up and assume a different identity.

Without any hierarchy these different elements are juxtaposed, cut up and restructured. In this way an ambiguous relation comes into existence with the images and the information that reach us in the darkened box. Their origins are difficult to localize, explicitly throwing us back on our own bodies and subjective points of view. In *CO Journeys* the spectator is anything but a passive viewer; he or she participates in the complexity of an image. Using simple means, Bailie and Ragg offer resistance to the superficial 'gaze of the consumer,' to the constant stream of images we have to digest on a daily basis.

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