

# Installation of the Exotic

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## INSTALLATION OF THE EXOTIC

Film and audiovisual installations have increasingly taken place in the art world in recent years extending and renewing the range of activities in the fine art domain. Tracing its origins to expanded cinema and video art in the 1970s, moving image installation is now ubiquitous in public museums and private galleries. This is at a time when access to experimental work via public service versions of television has now all but disappeared.<sup>(1)</sup> In the two decades since, as television channels have proliferated, choice has actually narrowed. Moving image installations are visible in a diversity of art environments from gallery spaces to site-specific work in urban or industrial pop-ups. Multi-screen configurations are not easily arranged in cinemas or easily watched on television sets, let alone computers. The small portable digital screens may issue a blizzard of information and imagery everyday, but their size and scale is not a viable format for most multi-screen films.

The combination of images cuts across linear montage and introduces a synchronized horizontal dynamic that changes the linear and vertical succession of a standard film or video screen. At its best the configuration of simultaneous imagery on multiple screens offers an opportunity to glimpse a dimension of the world anew. The wider interaction of sounds and images in some recent examples has unexpected implications in their naïve invocation of politics.

### **Pretty in Pink**

Richard Mosse's multi screen work *The Enclave* was Ireland's entry to the Venice Biennale in 2013 and most recently won the £30,000 Deutsche Börse photography prize. It uses discarded infrared film to re-colour the Democratic Republic of the Congo and its relentless civil war. The colour of the scenes on several screens pattern the country, its villages, landscapes and inhabitants in a way which startles, but also aestheticises and exoticises our sense of the distant world it depicts.

It is a detached representation of disturbing content without context, representing a pitiless human conflict without depth of political or historical analysis or understanding. Consonant with most mainstream media coverage of the 'dark continent' this installation offers a visually spectacular rendition - in which 'the Africans are killing one another again'. The absence of articulation is marked, there is no space for direct speech, explanation or understanding from those who inhabit that reality. Mosse's piece raises questions about the basis of involvement and degree of participation by the protagonists in their own representation.

This is in contrast to a recent short film by Dearbhla Glynn, *The Value of Women in the Congo*, that inhabits a different place outside the art world: it is used for advocacy and shown in the context of human rights and the operations of NGOs. It is an uncompromising, clear-headed and disturbing examination of the effects of the sexual violence perpetrated with impunity against women and girls in war-torn Eastern Congo. The film explores the experience of the victims as well as the perspective of the perpetrators who have been involved in a consistent series of cruel and appalling crimes - foot soldiers, warlords and high-ranking commandants. Like Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (which recreates the atrocities of CIA-supported 1960s death squads in Indonesia) and Eyal Silvan's *The Specialist* (which uses footage of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem) the banality of evil is exposed and, unlike those documentary films, they are drawn from the present day. Glynn's short film assembles an arresting and brutal version of how war ravages the land and its people, leaving few victors - least of all women, whose value is often annihilated. Through interviews that talk of their experiences, the film puts together the beginning of an account of the continuing calamity with and through those involved.

Richard Mosse's work brings a forgotten and distant carnage into white walled galleries in a continent which can be said to already be at risk of 'compassion fatigue'. Understanding its context and effects is not a question of the artist's intentions, rather the implicit way that the work is received and interpreted by the particular audiences that encounter it in the gallery. *The Value of Women in the Congo* films the same

civil war with all the differences of a presentation within the documentary genre. The meaning and effects generated for those that come across the installation are inevitably influenced by its art context.

There was an earlier debate connecting some of these same issues with a set of paintings which parachuted politics into the gallery several decades ago. Gerhard Richter's 1988 15 painting series, collectively entitled *October 18, 1977*, depicted four members of the Red Army Faction created from black-and-white newspaper and police photos. Contrasting readings of the paintings and attitudes towards the RAF from the hagiographic to the condemnatory fought it out in the art space. Richter refused to be drawn towards resolving the contrary interpretations. The implications of these strategies are clear: while Richter and Mosse both introduce overtly political issues into an art context there is no discourse, visual or verbal, to contest the assumptions perpetuated by the dominant media that surround these images outside the white walls of a gallery. The doxa of common sense has already established that an urban guerrilla group is run by psychopathic terrorists and that in darkest Africa gruesome carnage comes as no surprise. There is a lack of argumentation that could intercept unconscious assumptions and engage the images productively. Such contention would set specific defined meanings in motion to bring contradiction to the fore.



Figure 1: Richard Mosse's multi screen work "The Enclave"

A distant antecedent in literature would be Joseph Conrad's classic *Heart of Darkness* (written in 1898 and based on Conrad's own journey to the Congo in 1890). It is an extraordinary and resonant short novel, and was redeployed in 1979 as the underlying narrative reference for Francis Ford Coppola's Vietnam film *Apocalypse Now*. In 1975 the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe launched an unrestrained attack on the book arguing that it was the work of a "bloody racist" and epitomizes an "imperialist aesthetic" carrying a colonial perspective. After furious debate in the circles of English literature, Palestinian writer Edward Said offered a nuanced critique of the novella in his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993); he examined the way in which Conrad implicitly contrasts Belgian colonial atrocities in the Congo with British colonial attitudes, but could only imagine the world carved into one or another Western sphere of domination. In *Orientalism* (1978) Said had outlined the systematic distinction between Orient and Occident that functions as a mode of colonialist control. As Marx suggested, the peasantry cannot represent themselves and therefore they must be represented by others. The natives are excluded from discourse, from agency, they just enter the *Heart of Darkness* to utter the dénouement: "Mistah Kurtz - he dead."

### Classroom Lessons

The "Cuban School" is a two screen projection by John Gerrard which was first exhibited in Madrid in 2011 and has been reprised in several spaces since, including the Galway Arts Festival in 2013.

To make the original piece, a group of European digital technicians were transported to Cuba at considerable



Figure 2: Gerhard Richter: "October 18, 1977"

cost to capture and reconstitute tracking shots around the run-down school buildings using gaming software. The mesmerising movement of the moving camera circling the buildings creates a striking sense of surface and space, but stops short of any insight into the implications of its history. The information from the artists' statement displayed on an adjacent gallery wall indicates that Gerrard feels that his deployment of state of the art technology leads to an installation which "marks the melancholic demise of a political vision".

But what would be the alternatives to the politics of this pessimistic representation be? Could the "melancholic demise" be intercepted or even arrested with work on the refurbishment of the school? Could digital technology play a role in contemporary Cuban education? Would a bucket of paint help? Would it be impossible to bring some resources to bear on the possibilities of the school, to offer to teach there or contribute to culture? In the Cuban Film School in Havana there is a plaque in the entrance inscribed with Argentinean film-maker Fernando Birri's graceful formulation: "So that the place of utopia, which by definition has no place, has a place..." Whatever the vicissitudes of Cuban history this aspiration is not dismissible with premature and cynical melancholy suggesting an irreversible failure that is alleged to have already occurred. Ex-CIA agent Philip Agee, planning a visit to Galway, emailed me from Havana about what he saw as a large scale and deep set transformation at work on the continent: "It's a wave of change unthinkable only ten years ago, and I see no way the United States can stop it."

Gerrard's school asserts the defeat of Cuban political ambitions at a time when in specific and diverse ways many countries in Latin America are challenging neo-liberalism and moving towards versions of more independent egalitarian societies. They are leading the questioning of the Western economic system which has failed. The social motor of transformation pressing for change is not the calcified tradition of received socialist dogma, but the continuing perceived disparities of material conditions. Emancipatory forces persist and metamorphose in a landscape of change.

### **Dialogue leading to Enlightenment?**

John Akomfrah's three screen piece "The Unfinished Conversation" was exhibited in the Tate Britain in early 2014. It takes its complex route through the life and thought of Stuart Hall; exquisite fragments of Miles Davis's trumpet and various interviews sketch the provenance of his thought and work in movement during several epochs of political change in Britain. Recordings of race riots runs alongside his childhood in St Lucia and the English countryside, home movie footage of his family, marriage, beach holidays with his children places a public intellectual in relation to the unseen dimension of his personal life.

The screens cascade patterns of adjacent meanings across the white walls, a reflection in progress. The piece



Figure 3: Cuban Film School in Havana

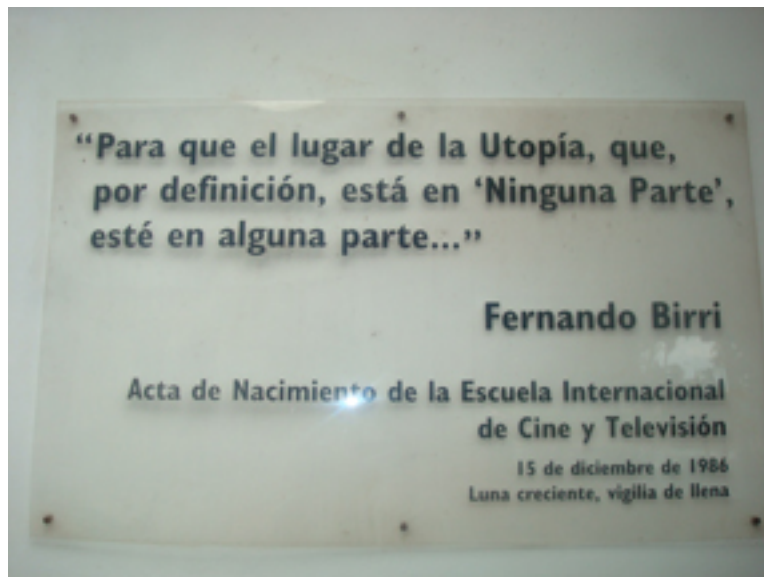


Figure 4: Plaque in the Cuban Film School

uses the shifts and movement of meaning between multiple images and sounds to generate new perception deployed in the interplay of the biography and ideas of that original thinker who died in 2013 - it is indeed an unfinished conversation. Its play with the very material of a life questions the extent to which reality resists been understood or appropriated by conceptual thought. The gallery piece is an interesting contrast with *The Stuart Hall Project*, a 95 minute single-screen film that Akomfrah made on the same subject, which has a much greater sense of linear temporality and progression through historical moments and periods. Unlike the Mosse and Gerrard installations the use of verbal discourse in "The Unfinished Conversation" enables sets of visual imagery to work through broader themes and explore the coming of multiculturalism to Britain and the fortunes of the New Left.

### Finite spaces

Emerging from Malcolm Le Grice's expanded cinema work as a leading experimental filmmaker from the 1960s at the London Film-makers' Co-op, "FINITI" (2011) uses six screens to fill a very wide space with unaccompanied visual imagery. It was shown at the Tate Modern in London and in Derry and Galway in September 2013. "FINITI" operates on a wide scope of reference. It is an ambitious piece which moves between imagery of the domestic to the media depictions deploying personal, poetic and political registers. Although some sections seem to touch on food, sex and war including fragmentary glimpses of pictures from a non-specific contemporary war, it is more abstract and detached than concrete, recalling that potential for the "saturation of magnificent signs bathing in their absence of explanation" that film can offer, according to the late Portuguese filmmaker Manoel de Oliveira.



Figure 5: "The Unfinished Conversation"

Le Grice's six-screen piece is performed with a specific starting and end point rather than a loop which the gallery viewer encounters at an arbitrary stage and watches until that same passage reoccurs. The effects of linear narrative are weakened through a viewing process that has no definite start or end when moving images are shown as an installation in a gallery setting. I remember the period in Italy which continued in the 1980s where newspapers did not publish the start times of feature films - spectators would arrive at cinemas in Rome when it suited them and leave when they recognised the point in the film where they had commenced their viewing.

Malcolm Le Grice's work has its provenance in 16mm expanded cinema projections and performances in the 1960s but has moved seamlessly to the digital domain. As a more abstract film it does not raise the same contentious questions as representational work which depends on specific references and subject matter. His signifiers float in a looser way around and above the problems inherent in representing specific human conflicts because they are open and universalising, they explore meaning within an insistently materialist

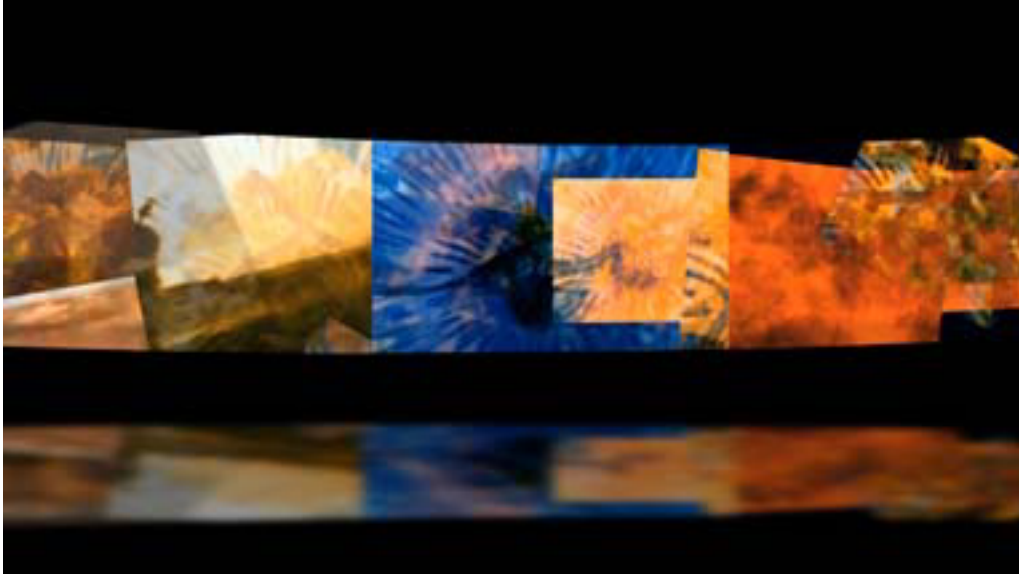


Figure 6: Malcolm Le Grice's "FINITI" 1

framework.

### **The Art Gallery as a One-way Street**

A challenge to photographic verisimilitude is articulated in the oft-quoted Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin question "What use is an exterior view of the factory if I cannot see what is going on inside the building in terms of relationships, wages, labour, international investments - a photograph says nothing about the factory itself."<sup>(2)</sup> This is not to suggest that the photograph distorts or lies in a simple way, but that its verisimilitude is selective and insufficient.

If one is to offer a cultural and therefore a political connection to the global South within the refined space of the contemporary European gallery it must be more than a gesture or alibi; it is an actual engagement with another reality that brings ethical responsibilities and engages with the politics of representation. In this epoch contact with the places euphemistically labelled the 'developing world' should lead to self-examination in 'the overdeveloped world', and the perilous situation to which Western societies have brought the Earth as a whole. In the long term an economic system predicated on growth and accumulation cannot continue on a planet of limited resources. Some aspects of the 'underdeveloped' may in fact be relevant to societies that are 'overdeveloped' and which will need to retract from the economy of perpetual growth. For these clear historical and political reasons it is not surprising that some of the most dynamic new film and image production comes from the cultures of the South - where the very act of making cinema is both more difficult and more urgent. The difficulty of distribution and exhibition is that the globalized image flows move in one direction and the opportunities to view visual meaning making from Africa, Asia or Latin America are extremely rare on this part of the planet.

Multi-screen formats can be used in many different ways including the play of abstraction, but those that touch on the political and the urgent will inevitably open contention and contradiction. This may take place as decoration and distraction or in a more or less productive ways using the specific form to open understanding as well as aesthetic pleasure in refined spaces unused to direct politics. Julian Stallabrass writes in *Memories of Fire* (2013) of the dominant view in which art works are "themselves delicate and particular emanations of a unique sensibility, best set down tenderly and at a distance from contamination by other works or interference by extraneous thoughts [in contrast with...] exhibitions which set out to be about something, and to have something definite to say."

Autonomous art circulates in the sophisticated space of the gallery but the re-introduction of politics in the context of a general lack of ethical terms in contemporary art is overdue. This may be part of a process

of self-critical reasoning whereby culture seeks to reinvent itself. It can suggest a semiotic richness which connects a political focus with new and pleasurable demands for viewers: the potential of multiple screen work is to explore new forms of pictorial thinking - ways of seeing the world anew.

[This article is also available online at *The Column* - <http://thecolumn.net/2014/09/09/installation-of-the-exotic/>]

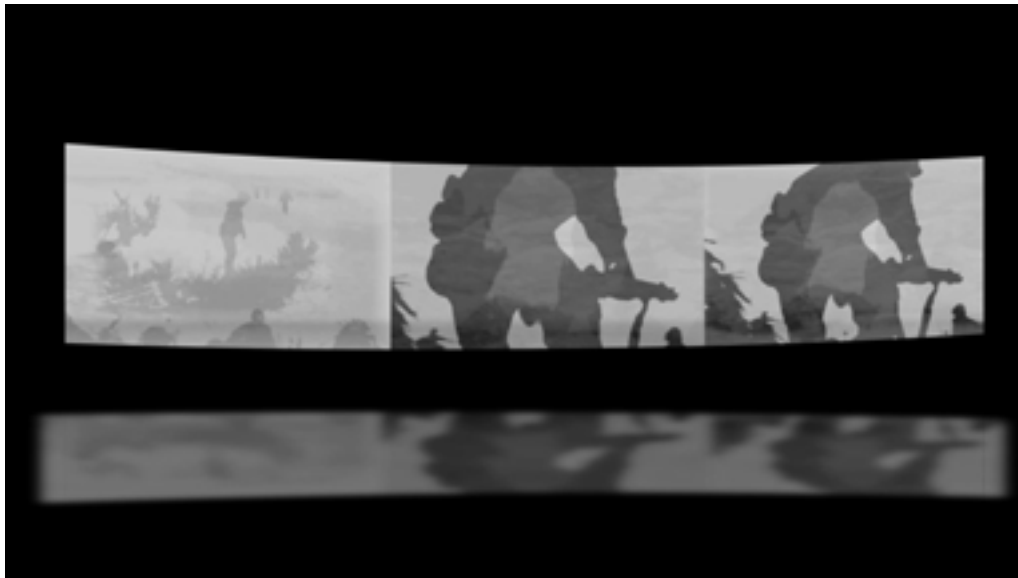


Figure 7: Malcolm Le Grice's "FINITI" 2

## Notes

1. For example Channel 4 in the 1980s and 1990s showcased a range of visually-based work in series like *Dazzling Image*, *Midnight Underground*, *Ghost in the Machine*.
2. "On Film and the Public Sphere", *New German Critique*, n24-25, Fall-Winter 1981-82, p.218. The actual passage reads as follows: "The situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does a simple 'reproduction of reality' tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp factory or of the AEG yields practically nothing about these institutions. The genuine reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations; the factory say, no longer gives out these relations. Hence it is in fact 'something to construct', something 'artificial', 'posited', Hence in fact art is necessary." Bertolt Brecht, *Der Dreigroschenprozess (The Three Penny Trial)*, translation Ben Brewster. "From Shklovsky to Brecht: A Reply", *Screen*, v15 n7, Summer 1974, p93.

## Reports

Photo credits: "The Enclave": Richard Mosse; "Oct 18, 1977": Gerhard Richter; "Cuban Film School": John Gerrard; "Unfinished Conversation": John Akomfrah; "Finiti" 1 and 2: Malcolm Le Grice.

## Author Information

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