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Souvenirs of Spectacle

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Artificially Reconstructed Habitats is composed of an array of over twenty video works, many of which might be described as urban vignettes, documenting fragments of human and animal behaviour. Some are silent, while others incorporate synchronised sound, or even sound effects added in post production. Very few could be said tell a story, and in place of any introduction or conclusion each begins and ends with a blank colour screen. At times, these eruptions of pure colour act as emotional cues, signalling a transition in the tone of the action from one sequence to the next. But for the most part they elude interpretation and hint instead at a mysterious process of classification, according to an unknown code.[1] While none of the video pieces are titled, each has borne a name at some point during the process of production. The sequence featuring four elderly women under a tree was known by the term 'Old Dears', while a looped shot of a man obsessively circling a small swimming pool was at one time referred to as 'Sandy'. These designations serve a purely pragmatic function, but in conversations with the artist they have sometimes sounded like pet names.

This term seems apt, not simply because of Jones' recurrent interest in animal behaviours and metaphors, but also because her assemblage of vignettes seems at times to resemble a collection of souvenirs. There is a certain contradiction at work here - between the souvenir as a kind of magical object that "displaces attention into the past" and the collection, which tends to "replace history with classification".[2] So although the memorial and curatorial impulses are intimately linked they are nonetheless temporally out of synch. The pull of the present is explored in her work through zoological mechanisms of display and classification, and through reference to the kind of pseudo-anthropological observation that serves to link television and art practice. Reality television (most notably *Big Brother*) borrows heavily from

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[1] *Code Unknown* is the title of a film by Michael Haneke, which offers interesting thematic parallels with Jones's work, in that it features disparate narratives staged across various urban centres.

[2] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993: 150.

anthropology and social science, regularly utilising experimental scenarios and panels of accredited experts to study and decode the behaviour of participants. Art practice has also borrowed certain modes of representation from sociological and anthropological discourse, and Hal Foster has theorised this "ethnographic turn" through reference to work by artists as diverse as Dan Graham, Martha Rosler, Jimmie Durham and Andrea Fraser. These artists have often employed ethnographic strategies (such as surveying and mapping) to critique systems of social and institutional authority.[3]

Within Jones' project, however, ethnographic observation is supplemented by a more affectionate gaze, oriented towards the past rather than the present. The image of the four 'Old Dears' seated companionably under a tree, for example, seems deeply nostalgic. Yet this scene is perhaps only familiar because it resembles the romantic representations of Mediterranean life that permeate advertising and art house film favourites such as *Cinema Paradiso.* Other urban images, such as the portrait of a costumed traffic policeman creating order and harmony out of chaos, also recall scenes from European cinema. This sequence would not be out of place in Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), or in more recent permutations of the genre, such as *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983). The graceful, deliberate movements of the policeman seem at first to articulate a deep pleasure in the careful orchestration of a complex system of flows. Within the context of a film such as *Koyaanisqatsi*, this sequence might function as confirmation that the world is structured by a natural, and unassailable, logic. But within Jones' installation this fragment of everyday urban life is not edited to music, or subordinated to a master narrative. Instead, it can be viewed repeatedly and at length, to the point at which the graceful gestures of the central figure begin to acquire an air of almost hysterical excess.

Hints of trauma also surface in the behaviour of several animal subjects. Many occupy small decrepit enclosures, which offer little room to hide from the gaze of the paying public and Jones' camera lingers on animals that are most obviously out of place in this kind of environment, such as zebras, giraffes and, particularly, elephants. The images of elephants are among the most affecting and the most painterly in the series.

[3] See Hal Foster, "The Artist as Ethnographer", *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996: 171-204.

Some are old and frail, fading from grey to pink because of age, while others are younger and more animated. The most active, a very young dark brown elephant, persists in trapping his legs in the car tyres suspended from a tree in his enclosure. As soon as he manages, with difficulty, to insert and remove his front leg he begins to repeat the action with his back leg. This behaviour initially incites concern, because it is so illogical that it suggests some kind of trauma or compulsion. But as the young elephant's (distinctly physical) pleasure in his activity becomes more apparent, such concerns begin to seem somewhat absurd.

Among the various details of zoo architecture that are documented here, two images stand out. One is a technicolour *trompe l'oeil* in the giraffe enclosure of the Bronx Zoo, while the other is a stereotypically scientific German diagram detailing the height and weight of elephants. Taken together these images capture the contradictory appeal of the zoo as a site of both education and entertainment. This dynamic is central to the formation of the public zoological garden in the nineteenth century. Like the collections assembled in the natural history museum, and the botanical garden, displays of exotic animals nourished a popular fascination with science and the natural world. But even though they traded on the appeal of the dangerous and exotic, zoological gardens also served to regulate the behaviours of their human visitors. They privileged a mode of attentive, informed spectatorship that was qualitatively different from that solicited by the circus or freak show.

Not all of the animals that occupy Jones' *Artificially Reconstructed Habitats* can be defined as exotic. In fact some of the more prominent characters have been domesticated to the point that they have almost lost their attributes of wildness. The small dog, for example, lying silently in the corner of a busy train station, seems oblivious to the world around him. At first glance it appears he might be dead or otherwise inanimate – perhaps even a stuffed toy. The natural colour of his coat seems to blend with the textures of the wall and floor, so that he becomes a blank screen across which the shadows and sounds of the station flicker and resonate. But every now and then, a shudder or a twitch alerts us to the fact that he is simply sleeping, and perhaps dreaming.

A fascination with animal characters, as repositories of human emotion and desire, recurs in Jones' work within the context of a broader exploration of the moving image.[4] The imaginary investment that structures this dynamic becomes particularly apparent in an aquarium sequence, among the most entertaining and visually complex pieces on display. The aquarium is populated by a penguin and a number of ducks, who seem to vie with each other for attention and territory. Visibility is obscured by reflections of human activity and swirls of dark green sediment so that the penguin seems to appear and disappear abruptly, speeding past the wall that separates him from his human observers, transformed into a fantastical creature.

If the aquarium functions as a kind of magical lens, or crystal ball, an altogether darker echo of fairytale imagery is evoked by one of Jones' human portraits. While the majority of her human subjects are viewed from a distance, in very public settings, this particular scene takes place in the more sheltered space of a crowded bus. A young girl, on the verge of adolescence, has fallen asleep and is oblivious to the world around her. Her pose is inadvertently sexual, and because her body is framed by the legs of two standing male passengers, the sexual connotations are heightened. Opening her eyes just as the sequence ends, she is one of the few subjects to stare back at the camera.

This is by no means the only sequence in which the activity of looking invokes a sense of discomfort. In general, however, Jones seeks out human subjects that are less vulnerable, and sometimes even in positions of ostensible authority. Elsewhere, her camera lingers on a soldier (a Horseguard in the British army) as he struggles to maintain an impassive public façade. His uniform, complete with plumed helmet, fits badly and his failure to maintain a 'stiff upper lip' is at first comical. But as his nervous twitches and ticks become more pronounced, our complicity in his ordeal becomes unbearable. In some respects, this sequence functions like one of Warhol's infamous *Screen Tests*, documenting the performance and eventual collapse of a coherent public persona. Yet while Warhol's subjects willingly participated in the ritual in the hope of achieving some kind of fame, the Horseguard is a far less knowing participant. His behaviour seems to be compulsive, calling to mind accounts

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[4] In 2003 Jones used the soundtrack from a classic *Tom and Jerry* cartoon as the source material for an art work, entitled *The Pleasure of Compulsive Self Destruction*, which took the form of a choral performance and recording.

of combat-induced trauma, a diagnosis that seems to be confirmed when, without warning, he abandons his post.

A further exploration of male machismo can be found in a sequence set under a canal bridge. It features a bare-chested young man engaged in a series of ritualised movement, possibly practicing Tai Chi. A young woman, accompanied by a dog, is seated nearby, but she shows little interest in his activities. The movements seem intended for public display, but the scene is framed by overhanging bushes and as such it is clearly the product of clandestine surveillance. When another couple pass by on the street above, the young man suddenly stops performing and affects a nonchalant air. In fact his gestures are little more than an imitation of martial arts moves. Instead of demonstrating physical prowess or spiritual enlightenment, they articulate his desire to impress his bored girlfriend.

Jones' work is fairly attuned to the complexities of voyeurism. The *Big Brother* phenomenon, for example, is explicitly invoked through two clips of the British version of the programme. One depicts a sleeping man (Dan, from series five), tightly swathed in white bed sheets, and it seems to confirm the Warholian precedent for reality television's fusion of celebrity and banality. The green glare of the night vision camera enhances the spectral quality of the sleeping figure, suspended (like the dog) somewhere between life and death. But *Big Brother*'s use of night vision technology also recalls other, more specifically televisual, forms of pseudo-scientific observation, extending from the banal nature documentary to more controversial images of military combat.

In another clip from *Big Brother*, the ex-army officer Sandy (the only successful escapee in the history of the British show) whistles the *Star Wars* theme tune as he practices his manoeuvres in the swimming pool. Sandy's adherence to routine, as a means of opposing his regime to that of the programme-makers, and his penchant for theme tunes are both 'real'. But this piece betrays the hand of the artist; Sandy moves through the water in slow motion, caught in a loop that has been accentuated by editing. His whistling has been re-enacted, offering a clarity of sound at odds with the muffled audio we have come to expect from reality TV. This oblique invocation of

Star Wars (a film that pioneered advancement in audio technology) highlights some important differences between cinematic and televisual spectacle.

Star Wars and *Big Brother* seem to exemplify the differences between film and television. Lucas' epic science fiction saga displays the big-budget production values and technological investment that have evolved to challenge television. In contrast, Endemol Productions (the makers of *Big Brother*) have pioneered a format that serves a growing demand for quantity over quality. *Big Brother* borrows a great deal from soap opera (everyday events, recurring characters) and an important precedent for its popularity with British audiences can be found in the success of imported daytime shows such as *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*. For international audiences, these shows offered a vision of the everyday that was more youthful, more glamorous and more ethnically diverse than that offered by domestic soap opera. *Big Brother* is characterised by a similar investment in youth, glamour and tokenist diversity, but it adds several new elements to the soap opera formula, variously borrowed from documentary, surveillance video, and game shows.

This complex genealogy finds expression in the typical structure of *Big Brother* segments produced for prime-time. Intimate exchanges between small groups of supposedly ordinary people, a staple of soap opera, have tended to provide the main ingredient of these segments. As is the case with soap, distinct 'stories' are isolated from the flow of mundane action and their significance is amplified through editing. These character-driven sequences are generally punctuated, however, by voiceover commentary and extreme wide angle shots, which call attention to the spectacle of ongoing surveillance – by now a privileged signifier of celebrity status. In the process, the occupants of *Big Brother*'s supremely artificial habitat are simultaneously constructed as exemplars of the ordinary and emblems of contemporary celebrity.

A certain duality is also a feature of popular cinema, particularly when it seeks to balance visual spectacle with psychological characterisation. This dynamic is perhaps most obvious in effects-driven blockbusters such as *Star Wars*, or *Lord of the Rings*, but it is by no means absent from classical Hollywood cinema, where it has served to complicate theorisations of spectatorship and narrative form. The idealised spectator of 1970s film theory was most often a passive figure, isolated in the space of the

cinema and vulnerable to classical Hollywood's story-telling mechanisms.[5] But this somewhat one-dimensional model fails to take account of the moments of visual and musical excess that may disrupt the flow of narrative identification. Nor does it address the factors that might structure particular contexts of reception.

Some of the complexities of cinematic spectatorship are explored in the sequence featuring clips from *The Greatest Show on Earth*. This technicolour extravaganza, made in 1952, parallels *Star Wars* in its use of visual spectacle to counter the appeal of television. In Jones' version, however, the performers are excluded in favour of scenes featuring the audience. This strategy raises the possibility that the live spectators may be the real stars. This multigenerational collection of boy scouts, teenagers, romantic couples and grandparents, demonstrating a shared participation in the spectacle complete with expressions of anxiety and wonder, seems in many ways to mirror the exoticism of the absent circus performers.

References to a different form of cinematic spectacle, the 'sword and sandal' epic, are also evoked by a sequence featuring two Roman centurions. This enterprising pair seem at first to be engaged in a theatrical promotion, and requests for souvenir photographs from passing tourists are happily indulged. But these brief encounters all have a market value and each photograph records a scam, as the tourists are required to pay for the pleasure of the experience. Towards the end of the sequence the camera pulls back to frame the centurions within a much larger tableau, dominated by tour groups. These small time crooks become just one fragment of a richly detailed composition, evoking yet another form of visual spectacle – the history painting.

Elsewhere, in a scene that also takes place in a public square, the reframing of the central subject produces a somewhat different effect. In this second piece a figure kneels, head bowed, in the middle of busy pedestrian thoroughfare, surrounded by strolling tourists and purposeful business people. At first glance this gesture seems highly incongruous, suggesting prayer, a political act or even an artistic performance. But as the camera lens zooms in, a passer-by bends to deposit something in front of the figure and she is revealed as a Roma woman. There appears to be a sign around

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[5] For an exploration of some of these issues see Paul Willemen, *Looks and Frictions: Essays in Cultural Studies and Film Theory*, London: BFI, 1994.

her neck, but as she is represented in profile it remains difficult to read even in a close up. In one sense, then, the combined actions of the artist (zooming in) and the passer-by render this gesture legible - the woman is begging and her attitude of supplication has secured at least one donation. In another sense, however, its meaning remains elusive.

The questions posed by this sequence are significant, not least because of the fact that video continues to function as a pragmatic means for artists to explore their increased mobility, and their responses to unfamiliar sites.[6] By comparison with some of the work generated in such contexts, Jones's exploration of the exotic and the mundane is a deliberate endeavour, grounded in an historical exploration of shifting modes of spectatorship. Her practice remains sensitive to conflicting impulses – a desire to attend to the specificity of individual actions and contexts, and a curiosity about the processes through which these actions become legible.

Artificially Reconstructed Habitats refuses to offer an organising narrative. Instead it proposes only a shared illegibility, so that human and animal gestures are both connected and differentiated by the opacity of blank colour screens. These screens signal the presence of the artist, a presence that is also inscribed at other levels – in the composition of many individual sequences and in the staging of the installation within the gallery. In the process, the central figure of the policeman directing traffic becomes the most apt surrogate for the artist; trapped in a sea of chaotic activity but imposing a semblance of order through the execution of graceful coded gestures.

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[6] For a discussion of some issues raised by contemporary site-specific practice see Miwon Kwon. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004.