ELIZABETH PRICE

HERE

3 February – 27 May 2012

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Elizabeth Price creates immersive video installations incorporating digital moving image, text and music. They draw upon existing archives of film, photography and physical collections of art to invent new, apocalyptic narratives. Human action is rarely directly featured; instead, the drama is mainly expressed using objects. These stand in for humans and are used to present institutional contexts and social histories, as well as aspirations and desires.

Commodity culture is a recurring concern and integral to the story in every work. The consumer objects that are featured are usually redundant or damaged, but they are also acknowledged as complex and determining expressions of our lives, social relationships and collective ideas. Information and layers of text on screen give Price's works almost the feel of lectures or infomercials. Episodic and carefully sequenced, all her videos combine language and image with a distinctive and unique use of sound, melody and rhythm.

***WEST HINDER*, 2012 (25 mins)**
In December 2002, a ship called the MV *Tricolor* sank in dense fog along with its cargo of 2897 luxury cars. It went down in an area of the English Channel called West Hinder. The events provide the basis for an imaginary visit to the seabed to survey the spectral image of the ruined cargo. During the course of the film the luxury cars gain a kind of consciousness. Their on-board intelligent vehicle control systems (which deliver digital navigation, entertainment, environment and safety functions) are corrupted by their immersion in the water. Here they develop memory and desire – and the language to express these feelings. Most particularly they acquire a collective will and the ability to exert their will collectively.

The script for *West Hinder* draws on the language of car advertising – often an eroticised language of control – to narrate the plight of abandonment, lethargy and decay. In the later stages of the video, the narration slips into a more lyric form; the cars 'play' a song from their hard drives and perform a synchronised underwater dance.

***CHOIR*, 2012 (15 mins)**
Choir brings together archives of photography, digital video and film to construct a drama. Throughout the video, Price plays with the dual meaning of the title, which can refer to either an ensemble of singers or an area of a church. This word play evolves as the film moves between the space of the choir and the assembly of the chorus.

The work is composed in three parts. Part 1 draws on an archive of twentieth-century photography of church architecture to establish an auditorium. Part 2 uses internet archives of musical performance. The edit brings together many similar hand gestures, drawn from diverse performances, to configure the dancers as a coherent expressive chorus. Part 3 narrates the events of a notorious fire, drawing on public archives of film made in response to it, including a series of filmed reconstructions of the conflagration.

***USER GROUP DISCO*, 2009 (15 mins)**
This video is part of a series in which each episode constructs a section of a ruined museum. This work opens in the 'Hall of Sculptures' and is a fantasy narrative played out through objects, neglected items of kitsch and consumer goods and artefacts that swirl in the darkness like floating debris. These various utensils and ornaments drift through categories of definition and, in so doing, gradually generate other spaces and narratives.
A distinctive rhythmic soundtrack completes the work.

Elizabeth Price, *Choir* (Parts 1 & 2), 2012, courtesy of the artist and **MOT**International

The following text is an edited interview between **Elizabeth Price** and **Alessandro Vincentelli**, BALTIC Curator of Exhibitions and Research.

AV: Each of the three works in the exhibition is constructed around a different spatial concept or place: the auditorium, the Hall of Sculptures (from an institution or museum), and, in the newest work, the bottom of the sea. How did you intend the viewer to experience these?

EP: I want the viewing space to exist as a parallel or mirroring space to the place constructed within the video, the fictional location proposed or established through the narrative. The title of the show, *HERE*, refers to this. Each of the video's narrators repeatedly calls the fictional place they are describing 'here'. They insist upon the real presence of the fantasy location – but in doing so, I think they actually disrupt that fantasy, because they remind the viewer of the empirical 'here and now' of the viewing space, and of their own embodied reality. I called the show *HERE* to co-name the two contingent but distinct 'heres' of the work.

AV: The video *West Hinder* is drawn from the real event of a particular vessel, the *Tricolor*, going down in the North Sea with 2897 luxury cars on board. In your work, these cars are involved in a kind of supernatural tale in which they gain a kind of consciousness. Why would these neglected vehicles gain this consciousness?

EP: Ever since I heard about the event, these ruined cars have remained in my imagination as an absurd, energetic force, radically transformed by the apocalyptic event of the sinking – just as they remained on the seabed. The conceit of their gaining consciousness is a way to express this.

AV: In nearly all your work, music and sound play a significant part in creating mood and atmosphere. What music did you use for the making of *West Hinder*?

EP: I wanted the music to establish the seabed location – not literally, but to create the sense of being deep, at the bottom of something; being immersed in a dirty medium with forces and motions you can't predict or fully identify. To achieve this, the soundtrack is built up from layers of distortion and feedback.

AV: It also uses the Genesis song 'Follow You, Follow Me' (1978). Are the lyrics pertinent to the predicament of the cars?

Elizabeth Price, *West Hinder* production still, 2012, courtesy of the artist and **MOT**International

EP: I wanted to use a ubiquitous, macho, 'drive' song. A song for driving. And although I don't really like this genre of music, I think this is a poweful, memorable track. The reprising melody is really strong, suggestive of returning currents and motion, so I thought it might work. I never use songs because of their words – but I do try to use songs with an effective, generic pop sentiment, or a certain ersatz emotion, and to connect that strange, strong attachment or feeling to another narrative.

AV: In the video it is the cars' automotive systems that narrate the story; their artificial voices intone the cars' attributes. To me, listening to it recalled the voice of HAL, the computer in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

EP: Yes: HAL 9000 or Proteus in *Demon Seed* (1977). I'm interested in how those voices are the voice of a place: they are the voice of a spaceship and of a house, respectively. I've drawn on this idea for all my videos, because in each instance the narrator is synonymous with an environment and/or an institution. In *User Group Disco* they are the workforce, in *Choir* they are the choir. *West Hinder* is the first time I've used an audio narrator – and I wanted to do this particularly to express the idea of multiple voices in chorus. This is how I imagine the narration in every work – as delivered by a chorus – but in *West Hinder* this happens in fact for the first time.

AV: In your videos you don't use people, you use objects. Are you more at home working with archives or museums, and with the meanings that objects have?

EP: I usually appropriate objects that do not belong to me personally, which I think are powerful or important. I take possession of them through art, and adapt them to tell other stories, although I usually draw upon their own existing, archived histories to do this. My work is about people and histories, but not individuals – it's about people as collective forces or voices and how we emerge as such through material culture. This is why I use objects (in which category I would include melodies and writings).

AV: With several of your films you are creating a very particular kind of space in the work, one that seems to be informed by film genres. Are science fiction films or horror films an influence for you?

EP: I'm interested in the kinds of complex imaginary spaces constructed in science fiction. Each of my videos is constructed around a spatial principle, which is the 'here' the narrators refer to. In fact the narrative often comprises little more than establishing imaginary places and moving through them.

AV: The third section of the film *Choir* continues the research from the first two. With this you have drawn on a powerful real event, a fire in a Woolworths department store in Manchester in May 1979. What was it that drew you to this?

EP: The image that links the three films is one of an expressive hand gesture. The image from the Woolworths fire of women waving from windows for help was the first image I came across of the three. I remember it from the time; I saw it in a newspaper when I was a child. When I was looking at the image of the Shangri Las doing their sombre, enigmatic dance, and wondering why I was so fascinated by it, I remembered this newspaper image. At the same time I was reading about ecclesiastical architecture – for no good reason, other than being interested in the arcane terminology – and I came across a similar image in that context. To some extent, it was a coincidence.

AV: Your use of text draws from a whole range of sources, from artistic manifestos to advertising scripts.

EP: I really enjoy finding and reading arcane texts. I like technical vocabularies and take pleasure in the formal qualities of strange or new words, how they sound or look on the page. The script for *West Hinder* drew from car manuals and press releases, and that for *Choir* (Part 1) drew on essays on ecclesiastical architecture. In each of these sources, a different kind of language has been used very precisely to name things, to build complex ideological worlds.

AV: What were the sources for the range of objects and artefacts in *User Group Disco*?

EP: I collected all the objects over several years, because they seemed redundant in some way: damaged, outmoded, useless or excessive. I didn't initially collect them in order to make the video – and many objects in the 'collection' do not appear in the video.

AV: The motif of the spiral or the turntable recurs in *User Group Disco*. Why is that?

EP: The 'pivotal' object in the video is the turntable and this is used to animate the other objects, which rotate and swirl in the darkness. Hence the reference to 'disco' in the title. In 'The Form of the Phonograph Record' (1934) Theodor Adorno describes the phonographic record as a strange and terrible science fiction object, in words which seem to evoke a whirlpool. This text, with its prophetic tone and paternal attitude, was the key for all the others.

CREDITS AND FUNDERS

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IN CONVERSATION: ELIZABETH PRICE

Thursday 26 April 2012 / 18.30 / FREE
Elizabeth Price will discuss *HERE* with Alessandro Vincentelli BALTIC Curator of Exhibitions and Research.
Pre-booking is essential. Please call 0191 478 1810 or e-mail events@balticmill.com to reserve a place.

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