

mnemoscape

About Projects Magazine

Six Women - Art Vapours by JCKristensen and susan pui san lok

<< ISSUE N° 2 Contents

On Saturday 29th January 1972, after the broadcast of *Ways of Seeing* (episode two), (Mrs) SJ Arden sits down to write a letter to Mr J Berger. From her terraced house in East London, Bound (in parenthesis) to home and husband, she begins with an apology-as-demand, Both self-effacing and self-asserting:

“You will forgive an ordinary housewife writing to say I thank you for a most interesting talk Or rather talks. You have taught me to look and I thought I always did.”

(Mrs) SJ Arden writes that she “pick[s] up things here and there”, inexpensive “nice things” that she loves, “Just things that appeal to her”, including her “treasure” – And she describes a small ivory Buddha that her son “picked up” in New York (in actuality a Japanese netsuke).

Perhaps this treasure can be imagined not as a *memento mori* or *memento hominem* – A register of a (man’s) life – But rather as a *memento feminae* – a register of a (woman’s) life. Each object indicates a decisive moment or relationship in the history of the compositor; And while “the objects chosen are often commonplace; the reasons for their selection never are” (1)

“I love nice things but know nothing of pictures except when I see something beautiful I nearly always want to cry”

...

Episode two of *Ways of Seeing* opens with various shots of women Looking at themselves and other women, Intercut with John Berger talking, and images of paintings. Then, Berger’s voice-over introduces the second half:

“I showed the programme, as you have seen it, up till now, to five women. It began to seem absurd that the only images you were seeing were of women silent, mute. So I showed it to them and asked them to comment, to comment not so much on the programme But rather on the questions raised by it. Above all on the question of how men see women, Or have seen them in the past, and how this influences the way women see themselves today.”

...

On January 29th the following year, (Mrs) SJ Arden sends Mr J Berger a package. The delivery note resides in the archive of Michael Dibbs (producer and collaborator on *Ways of Seeing*), Yet the contents and whereabouts of the package are unknown.

...

Five women and Berger, a muted environment, an unspecified location. Sat casually on mismatched chairs around a small table set with glasses of wine, An ashtray, and a plate of sandwiches, The conversation is staged as an informal, functional gathering. One woman flicks through a book, her handbag at her feet. Dibb’s production notes, Berger’s first drafts, and the working and final scripts all indicate that The women’s conversation is the only unscripted part of the series.

...

Five women, unnamed, speaking to Berger and each other – before, but not to, the camera. We follow its gaze, we look, we listen; we look. Elsewhere, Berger speaks directly to camera, and about the camera. Here, its framings and movements are unexplained. The women do not acknowledge its presence, but for one flickering moment, When one of them looks straight down the lens. The women remain anonymous until the end credits. (2)

...

We transcribe the scene and empty out the con/textual, leaving ‘men’ and ‘women’ floating on the page. Scaffolds of gestures displace multiple gazes, and the rhythms of blanks hint at dynamics of exchange, And all that went unsaid, and all that remains to be said.

How might we re-imagine or re-cast these women, and re-stage such a conversation today?

...

We invite you to take these pages, as templates or touch papers – ways to see and listen again, Or re-write, and ignite, an incendiary script.



3

women

men

women

WOMAN 1

WOMAN 2







woman

Art Vapours

Art Vapours is an occasional collaboration, concerned with the spaces of feminism, art and the everyday. We might liken our project to ‘archiverish archivery’. ‘Vapour’ in the singular connotes diffusion, suspension, something neither (or no longer) solid nor liquid – inhabiting the air. In the plural, it suggests illness, nervousness, faintness or depression, as in ‘a fit of the vapours’. ‘To vapour’ can also mean to boast, pompously or vacuously. In this last sense, Art Vapours may be taken – or given – as a retort of sorts. We invoke archaic, gendered and pathologised histories, at turns hysterical, neurasthenic and mediumistic, to reclaim states of agitation, and vanished acts; to mediate the diffused, to re-animate the suspended, and re-ignite ghostly trails.

JCKristensen

Visual Culture ((Design Historian)) Material Culture // Goldsmiths University of London & Royal College of Art // Producer, Host: *Paperweight Radio: Explorations in Visual and Material Culture* // Publisher, Managing

Editor: *Paperweight: A Newspaper of Visual and Material Culture* // Founder, Managing Director: The Arts & Culture Unit // Commissioning Editor: *Modulations: Broadcasting Research in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Resonance 104.4fm // www.jckristensen.com // @jckristensen1.

susan pui san lok

Artist - / Writer // Middlesex University // Solo Shows: Centre for Chinese Contemporary Art (2016, 2006, 1996), Derby QUAD (2015), MAI, Montreal Arts Interculturels (2014), Winchester Discovery Centre (2012), BFI Southbank Gallery (2008), Beaconsfield (2006) // Group Shows: Hanmi Gallery (2013), De La Warr Pavilion (2012), SITE Sante Fe (2012), Hatton Gallery (2009), Cornerhouse (2007, 2008), Hong Kong Arts Centre (2006), Beijing 798 Space (2004), Shanghai Duolun MoMA (2004), Gallery 4A, Australia (2001), Hayward Gallery (1999) // Artist Books: *RoCH* (2015), *Faster, Higher* (2009), *Golden (Notes)* (2007), *NEWS* (2005) // www.susanpuisanlok.com

(1)

A Kurzweil, A Case of Curiosities, 1992: vii

(2)

The credits acknowledge the women as Anya Bostock, Eva Figes, Jane Kenrick, Barbara Niven, and Carola Moon.

CONTACTS

mnemoscape@gmail.com

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