Morgan Quaintance, ‘Morgan Quaintance on Thomson & Craighead’, LUX, August 2012

Blog / Morgan Quaintance on Thomson & Craighead

Morgan Quaintance on the internet as ‘medium and material’ in the work of Thomson & Craighead

Below Morgan Quaintance writes about the work of Thomson & Craighead, aka Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead. The pair have been making work together since the early 1990s, ranging from single-screen videos to sound and internet-based pieces. Their upcoming projects include More Songs of Innocence and of Experience, a series of videos taking “a fresh look at unsolicited spam emails and their affinities with notions of romanticism and realism”, as part of Film & Video Umbrella exhibition Our Mutual Friends; and an installation about the international Occupy movement at this autumn's Brighton Photo Biennial.

You can watch the whole of Thomson & Craighead's recent work Belief on the Animate Projects site (which also features an interview Morgan conducted with them) and elsewhere on the LUX site you can also view Several Interruptions.

In the Internet’s early days slow dial up connections, meagre bandwidth, and non-existent streaming, meant the line between on and offline experience was emphatically marked by machine limitations. For users stuck in frozen screen limbo's stuttering computers only reinforced the failings of a physical reality whose trappings they sought to transcend. Today, thanks to the irresistible march of technological progress, being online has become an integral part of our social, psychological, and emotional lives. But what does ‘being online’ actually entail? Searching Google, bidding for goods, watching pirated videos? In contrast to this use of the Internet as a tool, being online is about those behavioural modes and attitudes born on, displayed and facilitated by the web. In other words, being online is existing online; it's another way of projecting and actualising the self. To see it in action all we have to do is read the blogger; watch the fast food critic, the person opening a box, or the amateur stripper.
London-based, artist duo Jon Thomson and Alison Craighead have been using the Internet as medium and material since the mid 1990s. Working with the World Wide Web and other ‘new media’, their various projects and installations never fall into the trap of foregrounding technological capabilities of whatever apparatus is used. Instead, the human subject, its socio-cultural life, language and environment remains at the core of each endeavour. Their interest in investigating being online, that is the evidence of people living their lives on and through the web, can be traced back to the Flat Earth Trilogy: a series of short films including Flat Earth (2007), A Short Film About War (2009), and Belief (2012). In each instalment material taken from blogs, and the online photo and video sharing communities Flickr and YouTube, is pulled together around images taken from Google earth, and digital animations of our rotating globe. Viewers are shown a portrait of the world at three levels: the anonymous orbit of space, the conferred collectivism of cities from a birds eye view, and the lives of individuals at ground level via the Internet. The trilogy marks a shift away from their early deconstructions of how information, commerce and the media operate online – seen in works like Attributed Text (1998) or Dot Store (2002) – by focussing primarily on the existential projections of actual web users. As a result Thomson and Craighead’s engagement with the Internet moves from a process of data manipulation to a process of filtration; allowing the duo to compound subversion and criticality, with the identification of emergent categories of shared human behaviour.

“I’m thirteen almost fourteen and I cannot wait to grow up. I’m sick and tired of the whole backstabbers thing”

This earnest confession from a desperate to be accepted tween opens Flat Earth. What follows are a series of spoken fragments read from the texts of bloggers around the world. Across this international community of one-way conversationalists looms the spectre of alienation, or, to push it out of the domain of Marxism, loneliness. Even in
banal descriptions of geographical locations, the will to significantly exist, to be someone necessarily amongst others, seeps between the lines. As excerpts of speech fade into each other they coalesce into a monologue that reveals the essential homogeneity of being online. This in turn points towards the Internet’s reductive and normalising effect on the behaviour of individuals. Like twenty-first century versions of Casper David Friedrich’s figure on the mountaintop, today’s computer user can easily become paralyzed by the sublimity of its infinite possibilities, staring deskbound and arrested into the infinite void of an empty Google search field. The only way to stop the anxiety caused by this expressive deadlock is to follow others, to express how others express, to do what others do. That is why being online isn’t typified by a random set of highly idiosyncratic behaviours. There are instead modes and categories of expression, behavioural norms that exist in a framework of existential possibilities – to strip, to review, to open boxes – online.

A Short Film About War (2009)

In A Short Film About War everyday concerns are exchanged for the conflict narratives of military and civilian bloggers. Photographs from the various war zones described have been taken from Flickr and interspersed with the series’ trademark global rotations. What the film provides is both a survey of the shared experiences of war – death, fear, loss, hope – and a subtle critique of how information is mediated online. As a gallery installation A Short Film About War is played on two synced screens, the left side shows media footage taken from the web, while the right side shows data pertaining to each fragment. In contrast to Flat Earth and Belief (in which YouTube broadcasts on beliefs are collected together), A Short Film About War offers the viewer a more overtly critical engagement with its subject matter. In this instance the display of a category of self-expression – the first hand war dispatch – is combined with information designed to reveal how the meaning of this material can be shaped and distorted by the Internet. This is the second operative level of the trilogy. If Flat Earth and Belief show us how being online is reducible to categories of behaviour, then A Short Film About War shows us the Internet, as a medium, can alter the reality of material it supports. This altering is of course an activity that Thomson and Craighead perform themselves. By making
artworks out of material taken from the web, they are invariably appropriating it for a use contrary to its originators intentions. What separates this procedure from what happens to material embedded in various corporately aligned platforms online, is that Thomson and Craighead can imbue their appropriations, via the systems they fit them into, with an affecting combination of humour and metaphysical depth.

Several Interruptions (2009)

A perfect example of this tendency can be found in Several Interruptions (2009) and The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order (2010). Both films rearrange footage according to systems of filtration and sequential ordering devised by the artists. In Several Interruptions videos of people holding their breath underwater, taken from YouTube, are reconstituted into a kind of mini triptych to be watched online. Its lo-fi aesthetic ostensibly plays with the historic grandiosity of the triptych format, and the baroque, oceanic mysticisms of Bill Viola’s big budget installations. But beyond this surface of satire are deeper resonances. What, after all, is the attraction in submerging yourself underwater for sustained periods? Is it in surrendering to an urge to return to the womb, to amniotic stasis, or something more perverse? As these amateur free- divers reach their durational limits, physiological sensations – light-headedness, pins and needles, the involuntary convulsions of a body bucking for air – will signpost the inevitable approach of death. What we are seeing then could be thought of as voluntary, simulated drowning, or a collective flirtation with suicide. If not compelled by masochism, then the practice of holding ones breath underwater is stimulated by each subjects’ communal instincts, from their compulsion to be someone, necessarily amongst others, online. Whatever the case this mode of being has, through the hands of Thomson and Craighead, been made to open up to a world of possible readings.
A similar process of infusion takes place in The Time Machine in Alphabetical Order, a film and single channel installation, in which Thomson and Craighead re-edit George Pal’s 1960 movie adaptation of H.G Wells’ Time Machine so that the dialogue is spoken in alphabetical order. This simple but labour intensive strategy sees each repeated word put through its paces as a unit of possible meaning. It is a linguistic strategy that pulls the work into the same orbit as Bruce Nauman’s Good Boy, Bad Boy (1985). Both pieces investigate how inflection, intonation and physical expression carry meaning; opening up the possibility that language is an abstract symbolic system, that meaning is contingent, and that intercorporeality, the human ability to empathise physiologically, is an integral part of communication.

The artists cite Oulipo, the literary movement in which authors submit themselves to constrained writing techniques (adhered to by Italo Calvino and Marcel Duchamp among others), as the inspiration behind the Time Machine in Alphabetical Order. But the creation of new structures, patterns and strategies to generate work – all Oulipoan tendencies – can be seen in both the Flat Earth Trilogy and Several Interruptions, and in other works across their ouvre. Alongside a shared kinship of generative formulae, what unites these works is the duo’s ability to mine appropriated material for all its metaphysical worth. And whether it’s the exploration of being online, or the rearrangement of Hollywood’s syntax, Thomson and Craighead are seasoned excavators.

- Morgan Quaintance, 2012