LISA STANSBIE: THE WINGS
VYNER STREET GALLERY, LONDON
1ST – 14TH SEPTEMBER 2009
The Disorder of Things: The Work of Lisa Stanisbie
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“This book first arose out of a passage in Borges, out of the laughter that shuttered, as I read the passage, all the familiar landmarks of my thought – the thought, that thought that bears the stamp of our age and our age only. Beyond the horizon, always and everywhere, the horizon, and I must fight and strive and write to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old distinction between the Same and the Other. This passage quotes a certain Chinese encyclopedia in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the Empyrean, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) cures, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) the greatest, (j) cats, (k) or terriers, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like fire’. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the falsely, is detached by the simile. The things of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.”

The opening passage of Foucault’s The Order of Things describes the moment of comprehension of the classifying framework which underpins our knowledge; precisely at the point of its collapse in the face of an endless struggle. If, somewhere in the world, a group of people could legitimately create a taxonomic distinction among a particular group of objects that had just broken the water pitcher and those that belonged to the Empyrean, what claim can the distinction between vertebrates and invertebrates have to objectivity? The logic would be that the two lists are shown to be culturally conditional: constructed and learnt rather than transparent, natural or neutral. Classifying systems which group the world into things and things different are never accidental, random, or just available to a system, but are always the result of the self. It is just one of many possible systems. The absence of an accepted order of things, the loss of ability to accurately name, describe or categorise is unsettling: the world without order becomes a homogeneous and confusing mass.

Artist Lisa Stanisbie’s works invent schemes of rationalisation based on the mechanical logic of internet search engines. Digital data retrieved functions by matching search terms with words or phrases in the text regardless of context, and can often yield incongruous results. Stanisbie capitalises on this potential for absurdity: wading through the unedited glut of information that is the internet, she finds consistent threads that defy logic to create works which tease meaning out of meaninglessness. Appropriation (2007) takes as its title and starting point the name of a racehorse. The film’s spoken narrative recounts the delivery of a package, was constructed using a chronological list of the names of the horses in Appropriation’s breeding tree, while the film itself was edited from home movies, purchased through eBay, and cut by the artist. The result is a lyrical, dreamlike, and occasionally hilarious compilation of images and text as if they were all form part of a single archive. The archival dig, arch for researchers excavating boxes of papers, rummaging through store rooms and venturing into dusty quarry-like archives, has become redundant with the uniform access of internet-based systems. In Stanisbie’s Films, The Cloud Collector and The Emperor of the Moon, the reconstruction of the glorious genetic inheritance of the horse race - rubs shoulders with the sense of geographic and chronological distribution created by Odo. Stanisbie’s determined rejection of the inherited logic “that bears the stamp of our age and our geography” results in a collection of material which, through the failure to provide a coherent system of access or a single narrative line, functions as an alternative theory, policy, and model.

Stanisbie’s ongoing project is the construction of a digital archive of internet-sourced information. The internal logic of the archive is based on seemingly arbitrary connections between terms rather than the content of entries. The entries regarding the history of a contingency icon produced by Slate and Palmer Factory which included an image of a polar bear on its packaging is linked via the phrase ‘polar bear’ to an image of a polar bear costume at a political demonstration by the Canadian Youth Climate Control Coalition. The archive serves as a tool for information in the way a traditional database can be searched; users must wade through its labyrinthine structure, tracing the threads of its irrational connections.

Stamisbie uses the web of terms and connections in her archive as a starting point for the creation of ‘satellite’ works, which then become embedded within its structure and generate further connective branches. When revisiting the archive, the artist drifts through the slide show of images, initiatives, and ideas that have been generated as it exists like an ever growing object that is both the culmination of Norman Mailer’s 1975 bestseller The Fight: Stamisbie’s The Emperor of the Moon structures its story, a narrative of the beginning of a journey, around the titles of Mailer’s bestsellers. By parsing this jigsaw of text with film footage of a water国人 swimming the Meaningful Atlas, the work references both its own etymological origin and the motif of travel. The Cloud Collector similarly uses a bestseller list, itself a catalogue or index to information, as the framework for a story which opens with the delivery of a newspaper and concludes with a description of a carefully classified collection: the collection of photographed aeroplane cargo trails which constitute the visual component of the film. Odo was made in response to an actual journey as Stamisbie’s concern was the’amalgamation’ of the flight paths of cargo planes flying to Turkey from the United Kingdom to Mongolia through a series of barren internet-derived connecting images and facts. Odo uses this metaphor of the internet with the surreal absurdity of its content providing a concomitant contrast to the blandly intrusive tone of the narrator’s voice.

Works
Stamisbie’s exploitation of the internet’s capacity to make connections despite distance, while also highlighting the online conflation of time. A recurring sense of nostalgia pervades her films, and is perhaps most palpable in Appropriation. The post-apocalyptic score of the narrative and the melancholic music of its soundtrack locate the innocent, all-American home imagery in a memorably remembered but distant past. The boundary between past and present is hazy on the internet. Texts written in 1950, digitised and engulfed in a cloud, are not necessarily more accessible, or less accessible, than texts written in 1990. The archival dig, arch for researchers excavating boxes of papers, rummaging through store rooms and venturing into dusty quarry-like archives, has become redundant with the uniform access of internet-based systems. In Stanisbie’s Films, The Cloud Collector and The Emperor of the Moon, the reconstruction of the glorious genetic inheritance of the horse race - rubs shoulders with the sense of geographic and chronological distribution created by Odo.

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This enthusiasm, while remarkably far-sighted, to the contemporary reader seems slightly naive and subtly tinged with the fear of imperialism. Wales’ vision of the ‘real unification of our race’ takes place through the Heritage Foundation, and the tradition of legitimating the infinity of contradictory ideas humanity has produced to date. This mammoth intellectual task seems to ‘overkill’ rather than complete our little more than a trickle. However, any single ‘all-encompassing’ system can only exist to the exclusion of alternative possibilities, alternative mappings of conceptual space. Stamisbie’s work chart takes successive tracks which intersect with the information highways, proposing new hierarchies of information, improving order on the chaos of a vast mass of data. Digital search tools like Google are designed to cut through swathes of material by using, rather than a fixed and pre-defined vocabulary or classifying system, words of the researcher’s choice. Fishing her attention on the ‘false hits’ generated by this approach, Stamisbie creatively mis-uses digital search results to create a nonsense code which provides, instead of access to information, the data contextualised as a whole.

J. Borges’ nightmare inscription of the library in his 1962 short story The Library of Babel, where characters live and die in the endless library, searching in vain for a mythical code which will give meaning to the gibberish in the books, resonates with Stamisbie’s suggestion that the attempt to find meaning in a chaos is an intensively human trait. Repeated reference to written fiction, both as source material and narrative style, alludes to the notion that there is truth to be found within fiction and sense within nonsense. Readers of fiction and viewers of art approach texts with interpretive intent: prepared to decode, deduce, decipher and figure out, they anticipate the ambiguous meanings and underlying truths. Re-reading culture, connecting the baffling and semi-rational, the arbitrary and Magical, Stamisbie reveals the human capacity to make sense.

References

Websites
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