

CHISENHALE INTERVIEWS: CORIN SWORN

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Katie Guggenheim: The centrepiece of your exhibition at Chisenhale is a new film, The Rag Papers (2013) that you've been working on for the last six months or so. The film focuses on a female character searching through the contents of a room. I wanted to ask you about how you've used the language of film, particularly editing techniques such as point of view shots and cut away sequences to describe the character's thought process and drifting attention.

Corin Sworn: In my most recent works I've been interested in attention and how it's managed. I'm particularly interested in how, when a viewer enters a gallery space, their attention can be, to some extent, managed by the artwork, and, how to some extent this attention wanders around at its own speed and engages with what is presented on its own terms.

Narrative is often used as a way to organise attention. Novels or feature films are very orchestrated in terms of the way they engage the viewer's attention, but I've been trying to play with alternate modes of dealing with attention, also partly mirroring the fact that their attention might not be engaged or might go elsewhere. In a feature film or a novel – that is a novel from a particular period – you move through the fictive space by identifying with a character and that character's attention tends to drive the narrative: what they see you see, and by extension, what clues they read or find important you tend to include in the 'map' of what's happening and what might happen. In life our attention is far more wandering or can be misplaced but in fact those misplacements are actually very useful and interesting.

What I wanted to do with this work was to use tropes of film that are usually useful in guiding the narrative to suggest the possibility of alternate moments. For example a cutaway shot would normally show you what the character was looking at or thinking about as a device to give you more information. Here it could function instead as if the character's previous life has interrupted that moment in the film. To the narrative this is sort of useless but in terms of the atmosphere it may give you a sense of an elsewhere to where you happen to be. Different spaces and different times interrupt one's attention more in life than they do in a film. But of course

you can't ever really approach the experience of life in making a film so instead creating this formal distraction is as much a critique of, or an engagement with, narrative practices or filmic ones.

KG: You just talked about mirroring the audience's own experience of the work within the work itself: their attention, or lack of attention, and the process of looking or searching for meaning. Could you say a little bit more about this, particularly in relation to the way you have installed the film? I'm thinking about the sound, which is 5.1 surround sound but it's not a usual surround sound mix, it's separated with isolated channels of different sound coming from different directions. And you have lighting that is synchronised with the film, so the film appears to be coming out from the screen into the room and the space of the viewer.

CS: There's an enormous amount of resources and capital put into organising our attention. Part of that is a guiding of our attention and our readings of what is around us, so for example, you go into a department store and you know exactly that these are vacuum cleaners say and these are blenders, but what I find interesting about art galleries is that you go in and the question is 'what is this?' Sometimes there may be pointers that help you through that experience, and sometimes that experience can be quite unnerving. There is a drive for places to give maps but I think that the experience of being left to your own devices and being left with the question of 'what is this' is very interesting.

I suppose in some of the work I've been making of late I've been trying to mirror the experience of what it is to look for and think through and try to understand something. I suppose my own experience of going into art galleries is that sometimes I spend quite a lot of time imagining what I think the work is about and then later discover, through picking up the press release, that my reading of the work was quite different to the specific narrative chosen by the artist. Sometimes I become quite excited about that moment – the experience I go through in interpreting the work or understanding it. I've found the experience of thinking through something even if it doesn't match up perfectly to be a very interesting cultural point. So I guess it's something that, without wanting to make it the point of the work itself, I wanted to bring up for discussion some how. The way you discuss something in an art gallery is by reflecting it or depicting it, or pointing to it so someone else might come to think about the same thing. The discussion that goes on between the artist and the

viewer and the work is not a verbal one, it's a cognitive or pensive one, but I think it is a kind of interaction.

KG: What role do the sound and light elements of the installation have in that interaction?

CS: Having this disembodied character who doesn't ever reside in the screen but resides in the space itself, and having the lights appear behind the viewer, these are attempts to open up the experience of watching and reading from a singular perspective to a more haptic or sensory negotiation. Although I'm not trying to make a 3D movie or anything! It's still quite low grade in terms of the spectacle it involves the viewer in.

KG: The majority of the activity in the The Rag Papers takes place in a room that is a very carefully put together set. It almost looks like a still life, with the flowers, fruit and cigarettes, and there are objects loaded with lots of information, like a mise-en-scene where the objects carry the scene. How much do you agree that the objects are become characters and have a kind of agency in the film?

CS: This is such a complicated question! Originally what drew me to making the film was that I was reading Susan Sontag's introduction to the Roland Barthes Reader and I became interested in how I was conflating Barthes and Sontag. I didn't know which I was enjoying more, Sontag's reading of Barthes or Barthes' ideas expressed through Sontag. I was interested in this because a previous film I made, *The Lens Prism* (2010), deals with the integration of multiple characters or subject positions in one figure, but I was also drawn to the Roland Barthes Reader because I was interested in ideas of signification, and in finding this slippery relationship within the signification of Barthes, which was Sontag, and the clues that I was using to understand that.

So in a way the film set is like many film sets in that there are objects that are meant to create a feeling or an atmosphere, or in some cases perform as clues in a narrative. They might lead you to believe one thing or another or give you some sense of the person who inhabits the space or what might have happened there. In a way the objects are performing in the same way that the actors are performing but the other aspect is that if you shine a camera on anything for long enough you identify it as important or as

signifying and what it signifies can be nothing in the end, or sometimes it's very loose, but we use these framing devices in order to denote signification. One of these objects is the last text that was left by Barthes when he passed away. It's one that has accrued an enormous amount of speculation about what it might mean or what Barthes was doing.

KG: Is it 'The Preparation of the Novel'?

CS: Yes. I was interested in how this particular object can hold so much mystery and pose so many questions. And the flurry of answers, none of them particularly secure or final, seemed to play into the ideas that I was involved in, in terms of slippages of signification or the muddiness of denotations systems.

KG: Many of the physical objects that make up the set are obviously not new, they're second hand, and you spoke previously about this in terms of the idea of a kind of 'dirty historicisation' and how the past infects the present via objects.

CS: I was interested in building a set that was dirty historically. Often when we look at films or programmes that are set in the past, every object is organised to signify that particular point in time, so they are new and appear to us now as old. For example the TV series, *Mad Men* functions in that way. But we live with objects from various different times and they come from the past and bleed into the present. Often they are conduits – they produce links between us and the past. Unlike something like *Mad Men* or a narrative feature where everything that happens on screen is organised in order to tell you something very specific, in this work I was interested in the layering or refraction of different time periods in the same space, and the complexities of reading that this triggers. It can become a closed signification system but in actual fact the way that we negotiate our readings of the world around us are far more slippery than that. What I find interesting about these historical films and programmes is that often they appear to be of another world and yet they encompass a lot of our social ideologies today. This makes it look like many of the ideologies that we hold, which are specific to our present time period, have been true across history. While the scene looks like it's closed off from today in fact it's used to attribute a timelessness to the situation that we are in. I find that quite bizarre and sometimes unnerving.

KG: Many of your recent works explore appropriation in different ways. For

example, Endless Renovation (2010), which was presented at Tate Britain, in which you voiced a new narrative over a set of salvaged slides, or The Lens Prism, which you mentioned previously; a monologue constructed from pre-existing texts including from films and literature. Could you talk a bit about the way reuse and appropriation feature in The Rag Papers?

CS: With *Endless Renovation*, which I made before *The Lens Prism*, I was interested in the experience of the viewer and the acts of attention that go on in an art gallery, and so I found a collection of images and I tried to project a reading onto them. So it's a bit of a conceit but I was playing with the role of the viewer and what they might do. Within that reading I built in tangents where the narrator's or reader's in this case attention wanders off and thinks about something else, but often that is sparked by the images themselves. Then in *The Lens Prism* I built a character that encompasses many different figures from different points in history. So he's a figure whose experience as a subject is built through his reading of the world around him.

I guess that basically one of the things I'm interested in, in terms of appropriation, is how that as subjects, as people moving through the world, we manipulate or alter, or fashion the things that we read as we are reading them. I'm interested in these instances as appropriative acts. It could be an interpretation of a song you've listened to too many times, sometimes it's buying an object and finding out that it doesn't actually do what you want it to and using it in an entirely different way. I'm interested in the potential for agency in that situation, and then more and more frequently, as cultural capital becomes more and more powerful, there is also the question of when it is allowed to alter cultural objects and when is it inadmissible. That terrain is part of the discussion.

KG: And the agency of the reader comes back to Barthes...

CS: The readings of Barthes that I engaged with as a student left the social subject as a figure that has culture impinged upon them without very much agency, in terms of misreading purposefully, for example, or not attending to as a way of producing what you want to produce. I don't want to give the subject limitless agency in that department but I also think that there is a certain amount of agency we have in the way that we manipulate and produce culture around us as much as it produces us.

More complicated readings of Barthes include the fact that he was very

troubled and intrigued by that relationship himself. I think he was really fascinated in the way that when you give a finite reading to something you render it into an object and you still its movement and slippages. That disavows it of power and as his writing continues that plays out more and more and it is something that is difficult for people to negotiate.

KG: Would you consider your approach to making The Rag Papers in terms of appropriation? I'm thinking about the very particular ways you went about casting and directing the actors and the fact that the footage was shot by two documentary filmmakers.

CS: I very much enjoyed working with an object that I didn't produce myself, but that I produced through editing, as a reading of that object. I wanted to think about production mechanisms that would allow me that but also give me a different perspective. So in this situation I built a script that was largely a collection of actions, some dialogue, and events that happened in a room, and I worked with actors to flesh out that script and then I hired a team – two people that make documentaries together – and I said to them 'a collection of events will happen in this room and I'd like you to film them as if you were making a documentary.' So that meant that what I got at the end of it... I mean I had an idea of what it would be but the actual shots and how they were framed, and how it was decided what was important or what wasn't important in the room, was at a remove from me. It makes editing a whole lot harder to do this way!

KG: In the cutaway sequences in the film we see footage of rag yards with huge heaps of used clothes and household goods and there are a series of photographs taken in a flea market. What interests you about these sites?

CS: I guess I'm looking at ideas of how objects signify and the ways that objects might build meaning. I was interested in second hand goods, partly because a second hand shop, depending on which second hand shop it is, can have this quality of 'what is this' which I've mentioned is what interests me in an art gallery. I was interested in the way people might move through certain thrift stores and look for objects that might be repurposed. In doing research into that, and in wondering what happens to second hand goods as I was making the film, I became more and more interested in the global circulation of these objects. I'd taken it for granted that the objects that I picked over at a market came from some place that wasn't so far away, but then I was left with

the question of what happens to the copious amount of things that we produce. It seems so odd that if everything originated locally then why do you never stumble across multiples of the same thing? So while making the film, I was very interested to discover the way that objects circulate, that these second hand goods move globally, and to realise the sheer quantity of objects that are being disposed and re-used. I didn't want to make the film about that but I wanted to include references to those events so that the viewer may realise that the film opens onto an incredible vastness.

KG: This resonates with a couple of your recent works like the performance lecture Roaming Charges (2011) or HDHB (2011), which you made with Charlotte Prodger. In both those works you've talked about the global circulation of objects and images using the example of the thousands of pictures of the sea that circulate the Internet. In the The Rag Papers, at one point the voice says 'a wave lasting eight years or the slow liquidity of glass.' These are really striking images.

CS: In Roaming Charges I tried to parallel, in a playful way, the circulation of images on the Internet and ocean currents across the world. I didn't know, but there are waves that last eight years, and I thought that it was a beautiful idea, but it's one that is ungraspable. I suppose an example of that in terms of time rather than space is that glass is a liquid, but that it's moving so slowly that we can't experience it. In Romantic painting often the ocean has been used to signify endlessness or vastness. At the time that I wrote that text I downloaded a film from the Internet that had been shot in the cinema. I had no idea where that cinema was, and I was doing a residency at the edge of the ocean and I really had no idea where the water that I looked at went to. I was interested in this mirroring between the ocean's currents and the movement of images through the internet and I think that one of the things that made this idea pleasurable is that historically it's not dissimilar to tropes of the sublime or Romantic vastness.

Corin Sworn interviewed by Katie Guggenheim, Exhibitions and Events, Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, February 2013. Chisenale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.