UNIVERSITY OF FORWARD THINKING WESTMINSTER⌗

Near Real Time

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This is a PhD thesis awarded by the University of Westminster.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Westminster for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

June 2024

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Abstract

This commentary provides a critical reflection on a body of audio-visual artworks submitted for PhD by Published Work. The practice-based research begins with the transmissions of an early 1970s French community television project, *Vidéogazette*, and the community that purportedly distanced itself from its televisual representation. It considers the unique contexts within which the *Vidéogazette* evolved and discusses the discovery of the only surviving video recordings of its live transmissions. Through a sustained engagement with these *material remains*, the research explores modes of disidentification and ambivalence as forms of reflexive agency that problematise the documentary image. Despite the apparent disavowal of the recordings by the community they depict, the images stubbornly persist, and in their persistence, they are found to acquire a material and performative subjectivity of their own.

This exploration is developed through three time-based art installations: *Karaoke* (2014), a two-channel video and sound installation, investigates an archaeology of the media repository in its resistance to the archival impulse, problematising the found moving image by raising critical questions about its provenance, decay and contingent materiality as a complex interplay of withdrawal and transformation seen in its visual subject, the recorded transmission of the unwrapping of an anonymous mummified cadaver. *Near Real Time* (2014-2018), a three-channel video and sound installation, explores the community's estrangement from their own representation as a generative process bringing forth a 'people of

images' within the recordings. Developing observed *intimacies* with actors and performers into embodied gestures that both trace a source and assert their own reflexive autonomy, the work further problematises historical distance in the staging of the viewer's encounter with the installation. *She Was a Visitor* (2014-2018), a large-scale immersive installation and performance, investigates the tenacity of context into an all-encompassing image that resists framing. The discussion addresses how the work performatively implicates the viewer in the unresolved and open-ended questions surrounding the political inheritance of the *Vidéogazette* and related *cinéma militant.* What these three works share is an approach to scripting a voice whose polyphony embodies the multiple subjectivities and perspectives emanating from the material as much as it is situated in the conditions of the production of the work.

If community television and *cinéma militant* are drawn on for their enduring potential, then the body of work challenges this sense of linear history by proposing that their productions may be recuperated in ways that extend beyond a singular trajectory toward collective self-representation. Instead, the production of images, intended to represent and activate the community, may individuate into a community of their own in parallel temporalities alongside the 'official' histories they emerged from. Far from being passive representations relegated to archival logics, the research suggests that *image bodies*, such as the remains of *Vidéogazette*, can be approached on *their* terms, as forms of individuated subjectivities seeking agency in dialogue with the present.

List of works

Karaoke (2014)

Two-channel video installation, incorporating two large-scale curved sound-dampening sculptural walls and diffused daylight, with two Sony Trinitron 29" television monitors displaying black-and-white standard definition analogue video with synchronised sound. Continuous loop. Dimensions variable.

Near Real Time (2014-2018)

Three-channel digital video installation.16.9 high-definition video of 4K and standard definition originals, colour and black-and-white, synchronised video projection onto three rear projection 7m x 4m screens, synchronised surround sound on speakers. Continuous loop. Dimensions variable.

She Was a Visitor (2014)

Architectural installation incorporating a 24-meter curved cyclorama wall, concealed door, red lights, printed red text on white paper pamphlet.

She Was a Visitor [performance] (2015, 2016, 2018)

Spoken word performance event, printed red text on white paper pamphlet (not distributed), variable duration.

List of illustrations

Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to my Dad and Brother, rest in love and peace.

Author's declaration

I declare that all material contained in this thesis is my own work.

Gail Pickering

Introduction

This practice-based research began in a cold storage unit of a French municipal archive, where I had located more than seven hundred 1" and 1/4" videotape reels that lay untouched since their deposit in the mid-1990s. There was no inventory and no way to view the tapes, as reel-to-reel videotape players had long since become obsolete. These tapes were believed to contain recordings of live transmissions from *Vidéogazette*, a pioneering 1970s community television project that was part of La Villeneuve — a large-scale housing initiative and social experiment in community formation. I first learnt of *Vidéogazette* in 2011, when I was invited to participate in a group exhibition at Le Magasin, a contemporary art centre in Grenoble. The curators, aware of my 2008 video installation *Brutalist Premolition*[1] — filmed with residents of the Robin Hood Gardens estate in East London[2] — suggested I explore *Vidéogazette* and work in La Villeneuve. Although the exhibition's short turnaround and limited historical material led me to show a different piece,[3] this encounter initiated the in-depth research that ultimately resulted in the published work discussed in this commentary.

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1 *Brutalist Premolition* was exhibited at the ICA, London and Arnolfini, Bristol, both in 2008.
2 Robin Hood Gardens was a large social housing estate in Poplar, East London, and a significant example of Brutalist architecture. Designed by Alison (1928-1993) and Peter Smithson (1923-2003) in the late 1960s, it was completed in 1972, contemporaneous with La Villeneuve.
3 *The Whole World is Watching* exhibition at Le Magasin Centre National d'Art Contemporain, Grenoble, curated by Shoghig Halajian, Corrado Salzano and Sarah Sandler, ran from June 3 to September 2, 2012. It featured works by Pierre Bismuth, Natalie Bookchin, Richard Serra, Vidéogazette, and new commissions by Pierre Musso, Gail Pickering, Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, and The Public School Philadelphia.

With scant information available about *Vidéogazette* and its activities, my key understanding would come from the videotapes themselves, as well as the discovery of the index cards used by the technicians to log the videotapes' repeated use. Both sources provided insights into the content and methods of its programming, and contained certain material characteristics that influenced my approach in developing my artwork. A significant shift in my research occurred when I learnt that the community had distanced itself from its televisual representation, suggesting that 'militant' activists had dominated the production and programming. Crucially, this revelation made my encounter with the community's televisual image unsettled and paradoxical, as this influence was not obviously apparent upon viewing, and this contradiction became a key concern in this research and productive catalyst for the work.

This aspect resonated with my earlier artworks, where, among other interests, I explored the notion of a community *performing itself*. This concept refers to the actions of individuals who find themselves, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, as subjects within the practices of visual art, documentary, or cinema.[4] Jean-Louis Comolli suggests that 'documentary practice postulates that we are *bearers of fiction* [...] The same gesture reveals both the density and fragility of the person *acting* their own

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4 This idea is exemplified by the former coal miner reliving the events of 1984 in Jeremy Deller's 2001 historical reenactment of the *Battle of Orgreave* (James Lingwood, Michael Morris, eds., *Off Limits: 40 Artangel Projects* (2002), pp. 90-95). It is also embodied by the bricklayer in Abbas Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* (1994), who 'is willing to play any role except that of the bricklayer he is' (Jean-Louis Comolli, 'The Passing Actor: Sketch of a Renaissance' in *Actors & Extras* (2009), p. 70).

character'.[5] The simultaneity and disparity of a lived experience — the refusal to play its part, whether consciously or not, the notion of *performing oneself*, and the implicit nuances of that embodied gesture — are ideas I have explored in my earlier performance and moving image installations, including *PraDAL* (2004), *Christophe* (2007), *Hungary! And Other Economies* (2007-2008), *Dissident Sunset* (2008), *Brutalist Premolition* (2008), and *Not Yet No Longer* (2012). These interests, experiences, and understandings have informed subsequent research and practice and were significantly developed into the body of time-based artworks discussed in this commentary for the PhD by Published Work. In this context, I revisit, reflect upon, examine, and contextualise the research and production of three published artworks: a two-channel video and sound installation titled *Karaoke* (2014), a large-scale three-channel video and sound installation titled *Near Real Time* (2014-2018), and a large-scale installation and performance titled *She Was a Visitor* (2014-2018).

Chapter One explores the background research that informed the production of the artwork, considering the historical, cultural and technological contexts from which *Vidéogazette* emerged. A key part of this investigation is the process of discovering and restoring selected surviving recordings of their live transmissions, along with examining the facsimiles of the tape index cards. By closely examining these *material remains*, the chapter considers *Vidéogazette*'s emancipatory potential for collective self-representation, its aspirations for political reflexivity, and the

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5 Jean-Louis Comolli, 'The Passing Actor: Sketch of a Renaissance' in *Actors & Extras*, (2009), p. 72.

influence of its contemporary, *cinéma militant.*[6] In doing so, it lays the foundation for interpreting the community's contested representation toward proposing the implied gesture of non-participation as a generative act.

The subsequent chapters examine each of the published works in chronological order, demonstrating the unique approach each one takes in responding to this background research. The first work discussed is the two-channel video and sound installation *Karaoke*, which approaches the archaeology of the media repository in its resistance to the archival impulse. Instead, it problematises the found moving image by raising critical questions about its provenance, decay, and contingent materiality as a complex interplay of withdrawal and transformation through its visual subject: the recorded transmission of the unwrapping of an anonymous mummified cadaver.

The chapter further explores how *Karaoke* emphasises participation through its installation, inviting the viewer into an intimate engagement with the image. It introduces the concept of the polyphonic narrative, which develops across subsequent works. The chapter also examines how the amateur nature of the recording amplifies a sense of unease and slow violence. The gestures of destructive enquiry, present in both the archaeological act and the overwriting of the videotape, reflect the elliptical

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6 The terms 'cinéma militant' and 'cinéma parallèle' emerged after May 1968, defined in *Écran* magazine: films generally shot on small budgets (16mm, Super 8, or video) aimed at 'short-term political intervention or long-term ideological intervention.' (Hennebelle & Serceau, 1974, quoted in P.D. Grant, *Cinéma Militant: Political Filmmaking and May 1968* (Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 7-8).

nature of historical distance, revealing how the image embodies its own productive phantasmal temporality.

Chapter Three discusses the large-scale three-channel video and sound installation *Near Real Time*, guided by the project's central enquiry: considering the community distancing itself from their representation, what do these televisual images reveal, and how might we understand them as images? The chapter addresses this inherent contradiction, suggesting that these media artefacts are best understood as instinctively generative and performative. It explores how the work engages with the image of the social body, or the 'people of images',[7] to observe and identify their estrangement from the social project, from one another, and from themselves, as reflected in the *intimacies* of their visible gestures, which the chapter demonstrates as a crucial method in the production of the work.

The chapter also examines the process of *inhabiting* the image, exploring how individuals engage with and exist within these televised images, both during production and in the spatialisation of the installation. This leads to a direct encounter between the projected image and the viewer, emphasising the viewer's active role, where presence and perception shape the meaning of the images.

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7 Georges Didi-Huberman, 'People exposed, people as extras' *Radical Philosophy*, 156, (2009), p. 16.

Chapter Four explores the large-scale immersive installation and associated spoken word performance *She Was a Visitor*, reflecting on the influence of *cinéma militant* on the historical community television project. In the installation, this political inheritance is conveyed through the production of a monochromatic, frameless spatial image, which, through its sheer scale, seeks to sublimate this influence into a sensory experience that envelops the viewer.

The chapter also examines the live performance of *She Was a Visitor*. It foregrounds the polyvocal scripting process developed in earlier works, engaging with themes of participation and estrangement, while drawing on historical references from *Vidéogazette*'s transmissions and *cinéma militant*. The chapter explores how the figure of the 'visitor' is addressed both metaphorically and literally, functioning as a mnemonic agent whose multiple subjectivities evoke a sense of temporal discontinuity. In doing so, the chapter introduces a transformative understanding of the social project and highlights the transient nature of the work.

The commentary is written in a way that is closely aligned with the nature of the practice-based research it discusses, displaying conceptual, structural and formal correlations to the non-linear and 'constellational' (to borrow from Walter Benjamin) enquiry into its historical subject matter. Crucially, the practice-based research suggests that there are other ways of entering and activating historical media artefacts such as *Vidéogazette* in ways that problematise the historical distance of archival logics in favour

of critically performative and formally reflexive interventions that engage the viewer in the present.

Fig 01. Video still from *Near Real Time*.

Cut the line and chronology falls in a crumpled heap. I prefer a crumpled heap, history at my feet, not stretched above my head. Lis Rhodes, 1979.

Chapter One

Material Remains

This chapter provides an overview of the discovery, approach, and detailed investigation undertaken in this research into the *material remains* — the media artefacts — left behind by the *Vidéogazette.* These artefacts served as the starting point for this practice-based enquiry. The chapter discusses the research conducted to understand the socio-cultural, technological and political contexts of the time, linking the community television project and its drive for communal and cultural self-determination to contemporary forms of alternative media and *cinéma militant*. Through this close enquiry, the research uncovers a constellation of subjectivities that inform the published artworks. This account serves as a parallel timeline, revealing the processes undertaken to explore what these material remains might have both disclosed and concealed, echoing the direct experience of working with their fragmentary, often elusive, and perishing nature.

My intimate knowledge of the routine poverty and the overlooked social and physical parameters of English council estates — an innate melancholy rooted in my experience — drew me to sites of community, collectivity, and the unsettled image of the working class. Curiosity about La Villeneuve's early 1970s social housing experiment compelled me to

know more about *Vidéogazette*, though information was scarce and access to video content or recordings of their transmissions was limited.

La Villeneuve, a 'new town' and large-scale social housing site in a district of Grenoble, France, in the foothills of the Alps, was conceived in the late 1960s as a radical model of municipal socialism. Designed as a progressive model of communal living by both local and national governments, construction began in 1970,[8] and by April 1972, the first residents moved in. The expansive project housed many low-income and migrant families, and included a health centre, progressive school, library, workshops, public meeting spaces, and infrastructure for cable television production and transmission, including an audiovisual centre and viewing rooms on each floor. The exceptional utopian character of this new town initially attracted numerous observers, including sociologists, anthropologists, politicians, and journalists. In 1973, Claude Massot directed *Une raisonnable utopia ou l'expérience de Grenoble (A Reasonable Utopia or the Grenoble Experience),* documenting the daily lives of La Villeneuve's new residents, who shared their hopes and the real effects of the social experience in what was then a neighbourhood still under construction. Within this innovative environment was the pioneering, yet short-lived, community television channel *Vidéogazette*, where for 41 months, a collective of activists, technicians, and citizens coordinated its production and distribution. It is now, however, largely forgotten.

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8 On the site of the 1968 Winter Olympic Games in Grenoble.

The *Vidéogazette* emerged at an opportune moment, intersecting several key ideas of the period: the integration[9] of social, cultural, health, and educational facilities into local infrastructure; the burgeoning independence afforded by new audiovisual technologies; the political and economic drive for widespread cable tele-distribution; the call for equal access to culture that emerged from the late 1960s protest movements in France; the imperative for both individual and communal self-determination; and the rapid growth of community media that challenged the dominance of mass media and the power held by state or corporate broadcasting monopolies. These ideological currents underpinned the formation of *Vidéogazette*, whose central ambition was to decentralise the flow of information and transform viewers — and the local community — into producers. It was not surprising, then, that La Villeneuve also attracted post-'68[10] activists and intellectuals from Paris, some of whom would later play prominent roles in the communal activities.

The *Vidéogazette* drew inspiration and influence from several sources, including successful community television projects piloted in Canada, exemplified by Dorothy Hénaut and Bonnie Sherr Klein's metafilmic documentary *VTR St-Jacques* (1969). This early exploration of subject-generated video[11] depicts the filmmakers introducing Sony Portapak[12]

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9 La Villeneuve's urban planners aimed to create an integrated infrastructure reflecting the progressive urban policies of Hubert Dubedout, Mayor of Grenoble.

10 'Post-'68' refers to the period in France following the May 1968 protests and civil unrest.

11 The concept aligns with the contemporary term 'user-generated content', common on social media platforms, where anyone can be both a creator and distributor of their own narrative content as a 'pro-sumer'.

12 The Portapak was an affordable portable video recording system introduced by Sony in the late 1960s. This reel-to-reel system featured a compact black-and-white camera and a separate recorder. It greatly influenced

video cameras and closed-circuit television to the community of St-Jacques, an impoverished neighbourhood in Montreal. After founding a Citizens Committee, the documentarians taught the community activists and residents how to use the video technology to create and distribute their own films. They were committed to the idea that these emerging video technologies could act as a catalyst for social change[13] and as a model for self-determination, collective empowerment, and participatory democracy. Community television was described as an environment 'projected onto the screen to see, talk to, analyse, come to life and set in motion the necessary mechanisms for change.'[14] A mirror effect ensued: by seeing themselves, the community were to develop a collective consciousness that would drive social transformation.

A significant shift in my research occurred when I located a printed copy of a 1977 doctoral thesis written by Claude Schulhof, a psychology student.[15] The thesis primarily focused on the local and national state bureaucracies involved in *Vidéogazette*'s practical realisation and functioning, with scant description or reflection on the actual content or philosophy of its production. Buried in its appendix, an interview with residents post-demise revealed their disassociation from the content, suggesting that 'militants'

the emergence of video art and community activism by enabling independent content creation during a time of deep mistrust in national and commercial media monopolies.

13 The film was part of *Challenge for Change / Société Nouvelle* (1967-1980), a pioneering initiative by Canada's National Film Board to address poverty through documentary film and video. It aimed to foster new interactions between the government and citizens, profoundly influencing the documentary form.

14 Léa Ducré, *Community Television, Analysis of the First French Experience of Participatory Local Television* (unpublished thesis, 2011), p. 35. My translation.

15 Claude Schulhof, *Evaluation of the Grenoble - Villeneuve Cable Television Experiment* (unpublished thesis, 1977).

had dominated the production and programming: what was broadcast did not represent them.

Few documents of *Vidéogazette* survive, consisting mainly of print posters and leaflets. The only audiovisual material available was a homemade DVD from Le Magasin, containing short clips of the transmissions. These clips were featured in the 2006 exhibition *Cinéma(s)*, which highlighted this early period of creative activity in Grenoble nurturing key contemporary artists such as Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster and Philippe Parreno. The exhibition also included work by filmmakers Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville, who based themselves in Grenoble between 1974 and 1978, during which time they explored the production of a new critical hybrid of film and video.

Godard and Miéville co-directed *Numéro Deux* (*Number Two*) (1975), filmed in an apartment in La Villeneuve using non-professional actors. The film employed an innovative split-screen format and unconventional narrative structure, with two parts shown simultaneously on screen: one part depicts the life of a multi-generational working-class family living in the apartment, while the other presents a collage of images and text that comments on and contrasts with the family's life. As Harun Farocki describes, 'Godard focuses relentlessly on the ordinary. He shows a wife masturbating, her husband painting a chair, the family watching television. The result is not conceptual minimalism, but rather an explosion of meaning. Godard allows us to see that even the most routine household

activities and bodily functions are semantically dense'.[16] Farocki's

observation would later influence how I drew visual cues from the

videotaped transmissions into my own work, which I describe in Chapter

Three as the *intimacies* of observed gestures reflected in the visual

material depicting the community.

Following this, Godard and Miéville co-directed two 'anti-televisual' mini-

series for French television. One of these, *France Tour Détour Deux*

Enfants (France Tour Detour Two Children) (1977-78), features Godard as

a fictional reporter interviewing two children, with intertitles, dissolves, and

voiceovers disrupting his persistent questioning. This piece was part of the

2006 *Cinéma(s)* exhibition, alongside *Free AnnLee* (2000), a series of

anime films created by several artists including Dominique Gonzalez-

Foerster.[17] Tom McDonough noted the effect of this juxtaposition in his

review of the exhibition:

> On one hand, the visitor was made aware of the great distance
>
> separating [Godard's] experimental television series of the 1970s
>
> and his desire to contribute to the broader political project of
>
> emancipating human subjects from the conditioning imposed by
>
> dominant ideological apparatuses […] to the almost absurd wish to
>
> 'free' a lifeless avatar. On the other hand, however, the *AnnLee*
>
> series encouraged the viewer to look back on Godard's work with
>
> different eyes and made apparent the degree to which his subjects

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16 Harun Farocki, *Speaking About Godard* (NYU Press, 1998), p. 141.

17 At the invitation of Philippe Parreno and Pierre Huyghe, who purchased the rights to a stock Japanese anime character in 1999.

were curiously puppet-like, little more than empty shells

mechanically responding to his insistent questions.[18]

These observations resonated with the way historical distance, in turn,

enabled a different take on the community's participation in *Vidéogazette*

as disowned social avatars adrift in the surviving tapes of La Villeneuve's

broadcast studio.

Initially, only a limited number of short clips from the transmissions were

available on the homemade DVD. Further research eventually led to the

discovery of more than seven hundred original 1" and 1/4" analogue video

tape reels, deposited at a municipal archive[19] in Grenoble in the 1990s.

These reels were uncatalogued, with no description beyond the faded

handwritten titles on the tapes themselves, and there were no available

means to view or digitise the now obsolete media. Confronted with the

overwhelming stacks of tapes before me, deciding[20] what to digitise felt

like a daunting and almost reckless endeavour.

I traced the creator of the DVD to Christian Bailly, an early participant in

Vidéogazette's activities who had worked as a technician and later

became the director of the Audiovisual Centre in La Villeneuve. Long after

Vidéogazette's demise, he remained involved in educational workshops

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18 Tom McDonough, 'Report from Grenoble, City of Cineastes', *Art in America*, No. 8 (2006), pp. 60-65 (p.64).
19 Departmental Archives Isere, Grenoble.
20 At this stage, I had funding for a short film co-commissioned by Channel 4 and the ICA, as well as a Film London Artists' Moving Image development bursary for a long form film. A portion of these funds were used to digitise a small selection — forty out of 700 tapes.

and community video training. Because of his proximity to the project, he had preserved the surviving tapes for decades, eventually depositing them at the archive himself when they were destined for landfill during the refurbishment of the Audiovisual Centre in the 1990s.

Christian promised an inventory of the stored tapes, which arrived in the form of numerous colour photocopies of the original bright yellow index cards used by the technicians. Each card, handwritten and often faded — sometimes barely legible — listed the tape number, format, duration, date, number of transmissions, and title. This information was frequently struck through multiple times, reflecting the tapes' repeated use. These facsimiles provided the first real and insightful indication of the content of the programmes produced, their transmission methods, and the materiality of the tapes themselves, serving as a kind of echo of the original programmes.

Over time, I came to understand that 'Agora'[21] — a solitude word appearing numerously on the tape index cards — referred to a live broadcast from *Vidéogazette* television studio, where La Villeneuve's residents were actively encouraged to participate. Its 'open studio' format fostered improvisation and performance, the screening and discussion of films, and announcements for community events, among other activities. Designed as a forum for the residents to discuss topical issues, many programmes centred around live debates on subjects such as immigration,

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21 In ancient Greece, the 'agora' was a central public space for civic and social activities.

abortion, education, and drugs, with local political figures invited to participate. Broadcasting on cable channel 65, the line-up also included *El Jerida*, a news programme presented in Arabic; language lessons; *Cinoche*, a cine-club; *Amusade*, a children's show produced by children — the production of which can be seen in Massot's documentary mentioned earlier in this chapter. Music from the neighbourhood media library was broadcast in uninterrupted half-hour segments to separate the programmes. Prominent figures of the time, like philosopher Ivan Illich, were invited to discuss their influential ideas on 'deschooling society' and 'conviviality',[22] concepts that resonated with the lived reality of the de-centralised, participatory, wired city of La Villeneuve.

Watching the channel was considered a progressive activity, though it did not appeal to everyone; for some, it was an intrusive inconvenience due to its periodic technical interruptions of the cable broadcast of national television channels, acting as a legitimate freebooter, so to speak. As one commentator observed, 'The subjects of *Vidéogazette* productions stand out for their proximity to their audience, geographic proximity on the one hand but also political proximity to a specific audience: activists.'[23] This political orientation is evident from the handwritten titles and their multiple revisions on the tape index cards, which reveal numerous broadcasts led by various protest and union groups. For example, there were shows on the assassination of democratically elected Chilean President Allende and

22 In *Deschooling Society* (1971), Illich advocates for alternate approaches to learning and emphasises self-directed education. In *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), he explores the balance between technology and human autonomy.
23 Ducré, p.81. My translation.

the subsequent military coup led by Augusto Pinochet; films on the Spanish resistance against Francisco Franco's authoritarian regime; and the political repression in Bolivia, including *The Courage of the People* (n.d.) and *Free Men* (n.d.). Also broadcast were *Au pays déton corps* (*In the Land of Exploding Bodies*) (n.d.), Jean-Luc Godard's anti-war film *Les Carabiniers* (1963), and traditional militant cine-pamphlet films, such as *Ciné-tracts* (1968). Additionally, on-going reports of the LIP[24] watch factory strikes in Besançon — a critical moment in the history of the French labour movement — were broadcast. The filmmaker Chris Marker, who was notably involved in documenting these strikes, interacted with the striking workers, which led to the formation of *Les Groupes Medvedkine*, whose films were also screened by *Vidéogazette*.

The films of *Les Groupes Medvedkine* were not easy to find at the time of the research, when I did have opportunity to view them, they provided important insight into their desire and vital need for self-representation. Crucially, these films also offered a critical comparison to the tele-recordings of *Vidéogazette*'s and the wider community's self-identification with the broadcasts. My observations on their production, discussed below, would influence the published works discussed in later chapters.

La charnière, a 16mm film without images, features a soundtrack recorded on the evening of April 27, 1968 — a date that was premonitory to the widespread protests that would erupt within weeks. The recording

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24 L'Usine Nouvelle de Montres Lip

captures an intense debate following the town hall screening of the documentary *À bientôt, j'espère (Be Seeing You)* (1967-1968).[25] The debate involved filmmakers Chris Marker[26] and Mario Marret and the workers of Rhodiaceta textile factory in Besançon, whose lives, strike actions,[27] and daily struggles were depicted in the film. The workers' response was brutal, they felt betrayed: 'The director is inept […] to be blunt, the workers have been exploited by the people who are supposedly fighting capitalism!' 'Where are the women workers in your film?' 'Rarely, do workers actually appear on screen [and] Chris saw us, the workers, the union, romantically.'[28] In reply, Marker acknowledged: 'We will always be, at best, well-intentioned explorers, more or less sympathetic, but still outsiders. Our work is to liberate the representation and expression of working-class cinema. Only when the workers themselves have the audiovisual tools in their hands will we see the true films of the working class.'[29]In doing so, he effectively relinquished authorial control and rejected the 'ethnographic position and its perennial activation of a monological representation.'[30]

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25 The film is discussed in Chapter Two.

26 Marker arrived in Besançon in March 1967 after receiving a letter from the CCPPO (Centre culturel populaire de Palente-les-Orchamps), written by one of the directors, René Berchoud, who pleaded, 'If you aren't in China or elsewhere, come to Rhodia — important things are happening.' (Benoliel, 2005, p. 5).

27 What was unique about their demands was the right to access to culture 'not as a utopian slogan but as pragmatic political aim…[contending] that culture was a mechanism for the maintenance of class hierarchies' (Stark, 2012, p. 120).

28 Extracts from *La charnière,* 1968. My translation.

29 Extract from *La charnière,* 1968. My translation.

30 P.D. Grant, *Cinéma Militant: Political Filmmaking and May 1968* (Columbia University Press, 2016) p. 122.

Marker introduced the workers to the concept of 1930s Soviet filmmaker Alexander Medvedkin's[31] *ciné-train*, which he described as having 'essentially invented television'[32] by shooting during the day, editing at night, and screening the footage to the communities the following day. Trevor Stark noted the *ciné-train* had a unique 'ethos of geographical contingency: the subjects of the films were also their intended audience.'[33] *La charnière,* which translates to 'turning point' in English, marked the formation of *Les Groupes Medvedkine* (1967-1971) and signalled the beginning of their autonomous self-representation as a film collective. Paul Douglas Grant describes their approach as 'taking the position of observer and observed and by working to create a collective, immediate filmic history.'[34]

The collective of workers and activists in Besançon, adopting Medvedkin's name, produced a series of short films, beginning with the remarkable *Classe de lutte (Class of Struggle)* (1968). Watching this film is like rewinding *À bientôt, j'espère* for a second take, as if replaying an earlier scene elliptically — challenging our understanding of Suzanne Zedet. In Marker and Marret's film, she is depicted as a seemingly voiceless and timid housewife, seated at the kitchen table alongside her husband, a

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31 Marker had a life-long friendship with Medvedkin, whom he first met in 1967. Medvedkin's *ciné-train* travelled across the Soviet Union under the orders of the Central Committee to make films for and with local people, an approach that deeply influenced Marker's own work. Marker later memorialised Medvedkin in his 1998 film *The Last Bolshevik.*

32 Chris Marker, 'Medvedkin and the Invention of Television' *Documents Cinema Comparat/ive Cinema*, 3.7 (2015), p. 24.

33 Trevor Stark, 'Cinema in the Hands of the People: Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film', *October*, no. 139 (2012), p. 128.

34 Grant, p. 122

factory worker who speaks for both of them. In that moment, she appears as little more than a background extra. However, *Classe de lutte*, by recycling footage from *À bientôt, j'espère*, transforms Suzanne into a compelling and empowered protagonist, using a montage of images, text and voiceover to illustrate her transformation.

The opening scene of *Classe de lutte* shows Suzanne entering an editing suite, foreshadowing the techniques seen in Godard's *Numéro Deux* (1975), which also employs Brechtian reflexivity in its opening. As she reviews footage from *À bientôt, j'espère*, the camera pans to a statement written prominently on a wall: 'Cinema isn't magic, it is a means and a science, a means born from a science and put in the service of a will: the will of the workers to free themselves'. The scene then shifts to her home, where she is types at the table while her child draws nearby. When an off-screen voice asks, 'What are you doing?' she casually responds, 'I'm working for the cause. In the life of an activist, every activity is political activity.'[35] We learn that Suzanne is a worker at the *Yema* watch factory and a union activist. We see her in May 1968, standing on a makeshift podium, addressing striking workers with authority, asserting that she speaks as a worker for the workers. She later speaks in detail about Picasso and modern art, explaining how her appreciation for culture grew through her involvement in the class struggle.

35 Maria Muhle, 'Aesthetic Realism and Subjectivation: From Chris Marker to the Medvedkin Groups', *Appareil*, 4 (2010), para. 15, http://journals.openedition.org/appareil/920 [accessed 31 July 2014].

The film illustrates, according to Grant, a shift 'from the melancholy representation of the workers' endeavours to a far more polyvocal and formally dynamic view.'[36] While still rooted in ideology and advocacy, it is, as Maria Muhle describes, a perspective that links 'self-reflecting images on the production of images and images that describe Suzanne's life as a militant working woman.'[37] Suzanne's transition from worker to militant to art critic epitomises 'the disidentifying gesture of the workers, who take filming into their own hands'. Muhle identifies this as a form of aesthetic realism, where the film 'maintains the uncertainty of the distinction between documentary and fictional representation'. These post-representative forms do not depict reality 'as it really is', but rather underscore the impossibility of such representation, pointing to 'the impossible existence of an objective image and of an objective reality: because reality and images are always negotiated and configured anew'.[38]

As the workers' cinematic gestures sought to resist fixed representation, the rescued videotape reels of *Vidéogazette* embody this very ephemerality. Before the invention of videotape, as Ina Blom notes, television had no memory, 'nothing remained beyond the moment of transmission, nothing could be retrieved; televisual archives did not exist.'[39] The emergence of videotape enabled the recording of live broadcasts, allowing for documentation, editing, distribution, and time-

36 Grant, p.134.

37 Muhle, para. 17.

38 Muhle, para. 18.

39 Ina Blom, *The Autobiography of Video* (Sternberg Press, 2016), p. 159.

shifting, freeing viewers from needing to be present at the original broadcast. The material remains of *Vidéogazette* — the rescued videotape reels and their promise of images — were never intended to be preserved as an archive or collection in themselves. They served as a workhorse to produce its transmissions, embedding a latent temporal characteristic in both their material form and content. Now time-worn and rapidly perishing, the tapes were likely weakened and brittle, with magnetic particles gradually oxidising and a destabilised binder forming acids that create a gummy residue on the tape's surface. This residue — known as 'sticky shed syndrome' — clogs playback heads, guides, and rollers, causing the tape to play erratically or stop altogether.

Aware of the probable deterioration caused by decades of unsettled storage, and with scant information about the contents, I selected tapes for digitisation. I transported forty tapes — a mix of 1" and 1/4" reels — from Grenoble to Dundee, Scotland, to the Rewind Media Preservation Lab, where I collaborated with archivist Adam Lockhart, based at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design. The lab specialises in the preservation of artists' video and the digital conversion of obsolete media, equipped with an expansive array of vintage technology, including an Open Reel VTR essential for viewing the tapes. The preservation process is particularly delicate: the tapes must be carefully 'baked' in a highly controlled environment, where temperature, humidity, and duration are meticulously managed to temporarily stabilise the binder, allowing for playback — albeit briefly. An enormous effort went into exhuming and recovering these recorded transmissions, with the tape serving as the

conduit. I finally witnessed the image stream with a mix of anticipation, curiosity, dismay, and awe.

A conflation of ends. *Vidéogazette* broadcast for 41 months from 1973 until 1976, when its state subsidies were cut entirely as the political landscape changed. During its operation, the specific nature of its local and national funding allowed for little external interference. As Daniel Populous remarked, 'we were very, very free',[40] seemingly affirming the channel's dissenting political orientations. However, the residents felt that the experiment of a 'social utopia' — the television channel, its requisite technical learning and its pursuit of self-representation and inclusion — had been imposed upon them. A certain weariness evidently prevailed.[41] Their presence on tape could paradoxically convey an ambivalence, interpreted as disassociation or indifference, a gesture of non-participation or perhaps quiet resistance.

40 Ducré, p. 64. My translation.
41 Ducré, p. 64. My translation.

Chapter Two

Karaoke (2014)

Two-channel video and sound installation,

incorporating two large-scale curved sound-

dampening sculptural walls and diffused daylight, with

two Sony Trinitron 29" television monitors displaying

black-and-white standard definition analogue video

with synchronised sound. Continuous loop.

Dimensions variable.

Karaoke first appeared as a three-minute film made for television, commissioned by the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, and Channel 4 as part of the *Random Acts* short film strand. Curated by Steven Cairns, this series included short films by artists Duncan Campbell, Steven Claydon, Elizabeth Price, Mark Ariel Waller, and myself.[42] *Karaoke* was broadcast nationwide by Channel 4 on British terrestrial television on December 4th, 2013, at 01:15, with 127,000 viewers.[43] It was subsequently available to view online for a limited period on Channel 4's *Random Acts* website. The piece was later developed into a two-channel video installation as part of the *Gail Pickering: Near Real Time* solo exhibition at La Ferme du Buisson Centre d'Art Contemporain in Paris.[44] *Karaoke* is included in the LUX Collection.

The installation was significantly expanded for the *Gail Pickering: Mirror Speech* solo exhibition at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead.[45] It is this immersive audio-visual installation that is discussed herein and shown in the following video stills and documentation.

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42 ICA launch event, 12 December 2013. https://archive.ica.art/whats-on/artists-film-club-random-acts/index.html

43 Information from a personal email from the ICA, following the 2013 transmission.

44 *Gail Pickering: Near Real Time*, Solo Exhibition, La Ferme du Buisson Centre d'Art Contemporain, Paris, 17 May – 27 July 2014.

45 *Gail Pickering: Mirror Speech* Solo Exhibition, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Level 2 Gallery, 31 October 2014 – 11 January 2015.
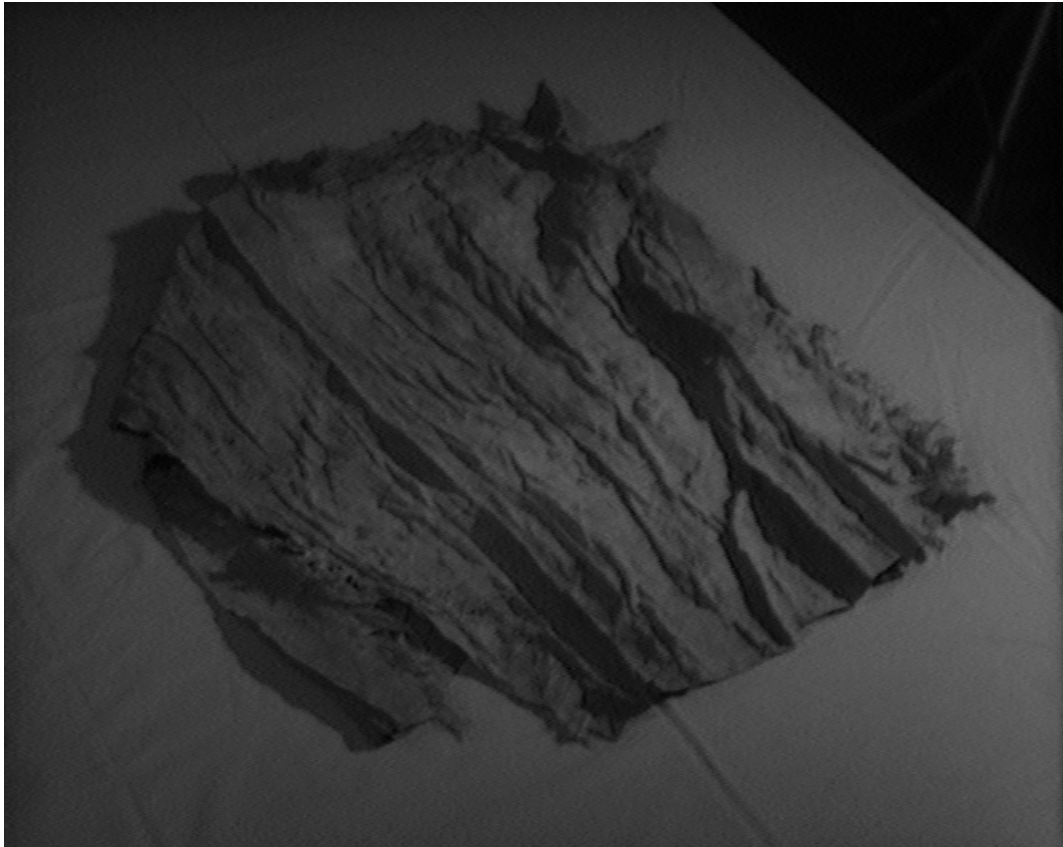
Fig 02. Video still from *Karaoke*.

Fig 03. Installation view, *Karaoke,* Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

Fig 04. Video still from *Karaoke*.

Fig 05. Video still from *Karaoke*.

See, there's more

We'll see the flesh

This is it

Is it flesh?

Its flesh

Of course there's more, here on the hand

Take it off we'll see the hand

Wait, wait, wait

I hope the head's not gonna come off

It's hard

This is the flesh

The heads moving

Be careful the cerebellum is loose [LAUGHING]

The colour's shiny

Just the structure

It's impossible it's twisted

The bones are underneath

Is this a cord?

No its bone

What's the point of the cord?

For decoration

We can't do any better

Did you find something?

There's lots of worms

What?

Fig 06. Scanned image of a page from the printed script of *Karaoke*.

Fig 07. Video still from *Karaoke*.

Fig 08. Installation view, *Karaoke,* Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

The two-channel video and sound installation *Karaoke* explores themes of decay, the pernicious gesture and the contingent causality of signal relay as materialised by the found moving image. Without apparent provenance, this found material is understood as transient and elliptical, qualities that I aimed to evoke in *Karaoke*.

Magnetic tape was one of *Vidéogazette*'s essential tools; each tape was repeatedly used for filming, recording transmissions, transferring films intended for screening, or re-transmission. This deliberate, destructive overwriting gave the evident content of each tape a certain chameleonic and distinct persona: a palimpsest of overlaid temporalities sedimented on the tape substrate, with older layers inadvertently resurfacing in cuts or the peripheries of video interlacing. The coincidental act of slicing the video image appeared innately performative through its chance breaks, interludes and rapid assembly of ends, which invariably progressed to the eventual suspension of image and sound to the blank surplus of unused tape.

The lamellated image materiality of magnetic video tape found a prescient echo in a recording I discovered toward the end of one tape. It presented a strange and incongruous scene of a group of people unwrapping what can only be assumed to be an Egyptian mummy, its scale suggesting that of a child. A fixed camera soberly observes a table on which the shrouded corpse is placed, occasionally zooming in for close observation.

Throughout the scene, I only catch glimpses of those involved, their identities reduced to their arms and hands, and the casual, often muffled discussion during the excision process. There is an implicit violence in this prosaic scene due to its freakish, archaic public staging as an implied televised event, its demonstration of the gradual destruction of ancient remains, and the discernible amateurism of its attendant archaeologists. Even for its time, this was a particularly unusual and disquieting scene, as the unwrapping of mummies was generally considered the domain of late nineteenth-century aristocracy revelling in the spoils of Napoleonic colonial ventures. By the early 1970s, this practice was already seen as outdated, both ethically and technically.

Watching more than forty years on from its original tele-recording, I wanted to explore the tape's essential characteristics: the comparative modes of casual destruction — the pernicious gesture — that are depicted both in the actions on-screen and embedded in the process of the indifferent overwriting, as well as the permeating and unremitting disintegration of the tape surface, and thus the image surface, with its essential promise of transformation. I aimed to suspend the observational televisual image and its traces, situating it at a distinct threshold between being both document and staged event.

I found a correlation with Trisha Donnelly's video work,[46] which uses a form of freeze-frame to suspend the moving image while effectively stalling our sense of linear time. It circumvents the assumed conditions of stasis and narrative transparency by foregrounding an unwavering sense of becoming and transience. This paradoxical manifestation of an object becoming its own image (and inversely, an image becoming object), suspended between presence and absence recalls Blanchot's writings on the unique duality of the corpse being the living proof of non-existence.[47] Applying this concept to the readymade, John Stezaker summarises Blanchot's transfiguration of the everyday object: 'like the corpse, the object withdraws into itself and a repressed or overlooked materiality wells up in the disused arrested object'.[48] Drawn to this notion of withdrawal as transformation, my approach to the found video material in *Karaoke* was to explore its capacity to express a fugitive-like, phantasmal surfacing of the image that could, in effect, materialise its own parallel temporality — one that could encapsulate the ancient time of the mummy and the recent past, or near real time, of the televisual broadcast. What would be included and what would be omitted from the original material was crucial; thus, close attention to the edit was imperative, as was the meticulous restoration[49] of

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46 Trisha Donnelly is a conceptual artist whose work challenges viewers' perceptions of time, space and meaning. Her work has been featured in Documenta 13 and the Venice Biennale. Donnelly is known for withholding information or descriptions about her work. The works referred to are *Untitled* (2015) and *Untitled* (2019).

47 As described in Maurice Blanchot's 1955 essay, *The Two Versions of the Imaginary*.

48 John Stezaker, 'The Film-Still and its Double' in *Stillness and Time: Photography and the Moving Image*, ed. by David Green and Joanna Lowry, (Photoworks, 2006), p. 123.

49 Digital video restoration uses advanced software to repair old or damaged video footage, by reducing noise, removing artifacts, and restoring missing frames.

a selection of the material so that the ambivalence of its age and provenance was heightened.

The literal translation of 'Karaoke' in Japanese is 'empty orchestra'.[50] At its core, it is a participatory social activity where typically amateur singers fill the vocal void left by an absent lead vocalist. I likened this to the distinct unwrapping event depicted in the video, where the grim and inconsequential discovery of an incongruous corpse is perpetually postponed, viewed as a material mass encircled by busy hands, accompanied by a casual verbal exchange of directions, tangible impressions, and comic banter. Having transcribed and translated the original recording of the archaeologists' dialogue, I developed it into a voice script.[51] This process creates an alternate account of this historically situated moment, its origin inscribed within the script, latently evident through both the implied content and its sequential framework. The aim was to externalise the voice from the depicted scene and spatialise it within the context of the installation. Seeking ways to materialise community television collectively in the work, this conversation is now spoken as one shared voice — a polyphony — and this strategy is further developed in the subsequent works.

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50 Invented by Japanese musician Daisuke Inoue in 1971, the word 'karaoke' comes from 'kara' (empty) and 'oke', a shorted form of 'okesutora' (orchestra).

51 This scripting method will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

To better understand this placement of voice, an overview of the work's spatial form is useful. The generic codes of the forensic and televisual, derived from the recorded event, were intentionally foregrounded into an immersive architectural fiction through both the form and concept of the built installation. Upon entering, the viewer encounters a space akin to an acoustically 'dead' room, where a perceptible sense of stillness is produced using two principal installation elements. The first is a freestanding concave modular wall made up of acoustic baffles covered in dense grey wool fabric, curving partially around the room (Fig. 03). Beyond this wall, a floor-to-ceiling window that normally provides an aerial view of the surrounding landscape is instead entirely obscured by a thick, opaque light-filtering film, allowing only subtle shifts in daylight to modify the room's diffuse ambiance. The aim was to use this spatially created physical closeness to focus the viewer's attention toward two videos on CRT monitors positioned across from each other, and the intermittent relay of an amplified voice — intimate and conversational — that seems to address the images displayed on the screens.

One monitor sits on a carpeted floor at the base of the sound dampening wall, (Fig. 03), displaying a jumpy looping black and white full-screen video image of a cloth shroud laid out on a tabletop (Fig. 02). When viewed alongside the adjacent monitor, the viewer understands this to be from the same pictorial source. Although the abstract form of the cloth remains invariably fixed and seemingly eventless onscreen, its stillness is

intensified by the visual distortions and static interference rippling across it, causing its appearance to momentarily pause and flutter. I used this pulsating effect to evoke a sense of ambiguity, relay and impermanence.

The second monitor stands at head height, silhouetted against the slowly fluctuating luminescence of the covered window (Fig. 08). This monitor displays a black-and-white full-screen video showing a close-up of multiple hands engaged in a choreography of gestures as they carefully examine, point, dust, cut and peel away what appears to be aged strips of linen and resin (Figs. 4, 5 and 7). The aim is to bring the viewer up-close to this scene, where the scale of the hands becomes the equivalent to our own. To be brought into this point of view is to be implicated through the unblinking, dispassionate fixed camera, much like the 'staring' witness Hollis Frampton describes in a personal letter to Stan Brakhage, when discussing the latter's film of an autopsy *The Act of Seeing With One's Own Eyes* (1971):[52] 'The camera would seem the perfect Eidetic Witness, staring with perfect compassion where we can barely glance.'[53] The view in *Karaoke* is so close that we don't at first recognise the object of attention, but instead observe the fleshy hands at work as they detach layer upon layer of crumbly encrusted strips binding the corpse.

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52 Part of *The Pittsburgh Trilogy*, this seminal experimental documentary captures Brakhage filming autopsies at the city morgue.

53 Letter from Hollis Frampton to Stan Brakhage, 26 January 1972, Carnegie Museum of Art, Department of Film & Video Archive.

From the outset, I was drawn to the gestural language of the hands at work despite their engagement with a morbid subject. In *Les Groupes Medvedkine*'s *Classe de lutte* (1968), the camera — much like in *Vidéogazette* — is profoundly in the 'hands of the people'. We see the hand that edits the film, the hand that writes the protest banner, the hand that gestures in solidarity with the workers, and the hand depicted in the large advertisement wearing the watch that the workers' hands build, thereby amplifying the hand's unequivocal disposition for cultural coding. Similarly poignant is a scene in Chris Marker's *À bientôt, j'espère* (1968), where a Besançon textile factory worker, interviewed in his kitchen, demonstrates the repetition of his job by performing a sequence of hand movements determined by the now-absent weaving machine — a vivid embodiment of the power structure he seeks to challenge.

This conflicting manifestation of the hand can be understood similarly through the latent memories of landscapes pointed at by the hands in filmmaker Nguyen Trinh Thi's 2013 short film *Landscape Series #1*. Here, a sequence of found photographs flashes on the screen accompanied by the sound of a slide-projector; the images show people pointing, yet what is being pointed at in the landscapes, or beyond the frame, remains unseen. Nguyen was interested in the idea of landscapes as a quiet history, 'in the gesture of pointing to the unseen there is an invitation to the uncertain, the not-yet-defined, the potential of something new'.[54] In *Classe*

54 Christina Demetrio, quoted in *Berwick Film & Media Arts Festival 2016* film programme notes.

de lutte, this something 'new' is *culture*, one that is defined through the gestures of militancy and persuasive disidentification.[55]

I found further correlation to my approach in a short film by dancer, choreographer, and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer, an artist whose work and writings have frequently had critical influence on my practice. In *Hand Movie* (1966), made while confined to a bed in hospital, Rainer's hand is filmed in close-up. Emancipated from her immobile convalescing body, it performs a series of intricate, repeating movements, quietly drawing you into the nuanced detail of what would otherwise be a quotidian gesture — similar to Nguyen's — that gives way to a space for imagination, to something novel. Yet, this novelty is produced only as a result of the injured dancer's body or a landscape marked by past conflict. These inferred choreographed impressions are enmeshed with their contingent context and history, and similarly in *Karaoke*, where the implicit question of the provenance of a body — corpse, archaeologist, camera operator, viewer, artist — is encircled by the implied prolific practices of plundering antiquities, amateurism and destructive enquiry.

In the quietened space of the installation, the viewer encounters a voice. This is not an omniscient voice, but one characterised by discovery — conversational and intimate. Evolving from the transmission's audio transcript, this assembled voice resonates with its context, purposefully

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55 Muhle, *Appareil*, vol. 4 (2010), para. 15-17.

speaking to and about the image. It speaks of cutting, seeing, humidity, smell, worms, sadness, flesh and beauty; it poses questions and offers statements (Fig. 06). As curator and writer Bridget Crone describes her experience of the installation:

> It is as if we are invited into this scene — a voice seems to address us, 'let's cut here', the voice says. There is a sense of a kind of participation in or with the image — a re-materialising of the image, which is pertinent to the fact that this is a mummified body. Yet as we go on, we are constantly denied this participation in an experience of the material that is before us, because while the voice addressing us commands us to participate we are constantly made aware of the limitations of our experience — we cannot smell ('Oh the smell', the voice says) and we cannot see the worms (that the voice speaks about). So, we are constantly being returned to the surface of the image. We're invited into a participation with the image — a kind of being-with the image — and at the same time, we are denied this participation and returned to a world of surfaces.[56]

This interaction instils a sense of relay in the viewer, disrupting the visual coherence and rendering the materiality of transmission tangible. This is

56 Email communication with Bridget Crone in preparation for a screening and in-conversation at Whitechapel Gallery on Sunday, 22 November 2015, as part of the *FLAMIN Film London Jarman Award 2015*. A version later included in *Notes Towards a Sensible Stage*, pp. 171-179, in Crone, *The Sensible Stage: Staging and the Moving Image* (2017).

not to create a histrionic effect but rather to problematise the image, to consider its agency and presence beyond, or despite, the image it transmits. Hans Belting addresses this paradoxical materiality:

> The scandal of death lies in the fact that a body suddenly turns into an image, an inconstant image at that, bound to dissolve forever. It thus makes sense that primitive cultures sought to replace it with a durable image: an image that would make death comprehensible for the living. … Consequently, the enigma of the image lies in its capacity to turn *absence* into a *borrowed presence.*[57]

From this perspective, the presence of the image surpasses that of the living. Thus, we view the images captured on the tape as the *borrowed presence* of the community. While this presence — the community — denies its own representation, the image nevertheless persists. Now emancipated, it materialises its own phantasmal, parallel temporality.

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57 Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body* (2001; English trans. 2011), p. 130.

Chapter Three

Near Real Time (2014-2018)

Three-channel digital video and sound
installation.16.9 high-definition video of 4K and
standard definition originals, colour and black-and-
white, synchronised video projection onto three
rear projection 7m x 4m screens, synchronised
surround sound on speakers. Continuous loop.
Dimensions variable.

Near Real Time exists in several different iterations. It was the central work in the solo exhibition *Mirror Speech* held at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead,[58] and is discussed in this commentary and can be seen in the following documentation.

The work was funded by a Film London FLAMIN Production Award, the Elephant Trust, and Goldsmiths University of London Research Support Award. A version of the work was included in the *Near Real Time* solo exhibition at La Ferme du Buisson Centre d'Art Contemporain in Paris in 2014[59], and at Catalyst Belfast, Northern Ireland in 2018. A single-channel version premiered at the 58th BFI International London Film Festival in 2014. The work was nominated for the Jarman Award in 2015 and toured multiple venues including FACT Liverpool, Nottingham Contemporary, MAC Belfast, HOME Manchester, CCA Glasgow, CIRCA Tyneside, Chapter Cardiff, Watershed Bristol, Turner Contemporary Margate, Plymouth Arts Centre and Whitechapel Gallery, London. *Near Real Time* is included in the LUX Collection.

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58 *Gail Pickering: Mirror Speech* Solo Exhibition, BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Level 3 Gallery, 31 October 2014 – 11 January 2015.
59 *Gail Pickering: Near Real Time* Solo Exhibition, La Ferme du Buisson Centre d'Art Contemporain, Paris, 17 May – 27 July 2014.

Fig 09. Installation view, *Near Real Time,* Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

Fig 10. Installation view, *Near Real Time,* Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

Fig 11. Installation view, *Near Real Time,* Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

Fig 12. Installation view, *Near Real Time,* Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.
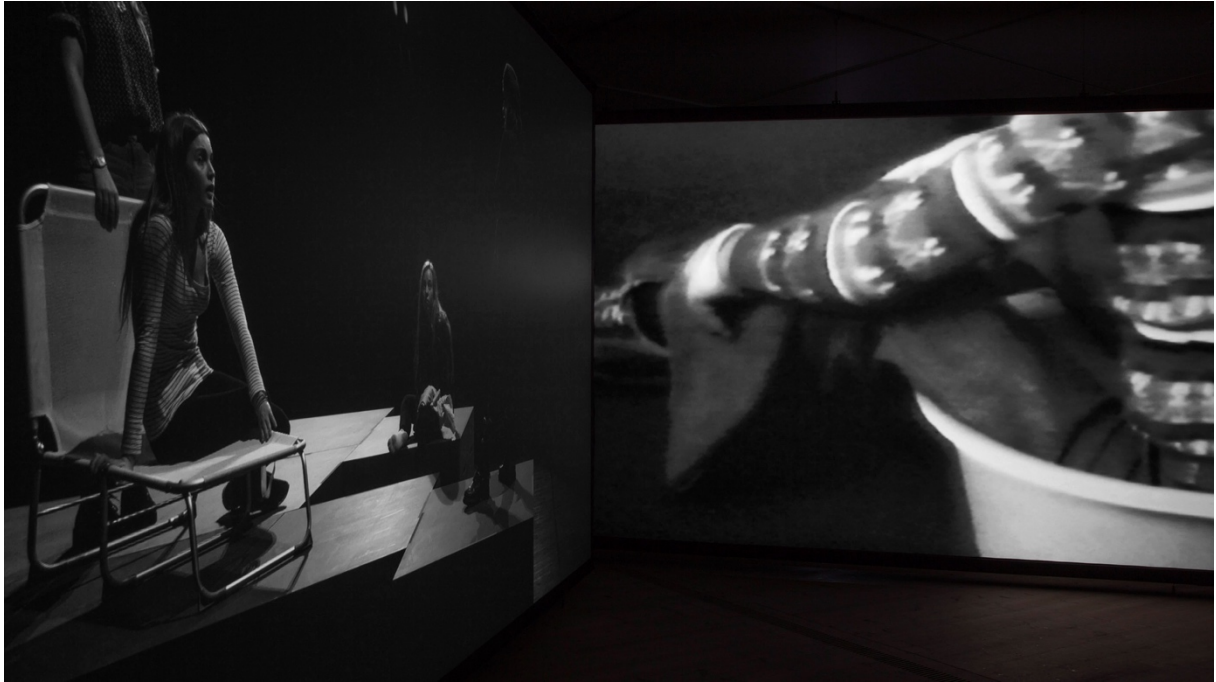
Fig 13. Installation view, *Near Real Time,* Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

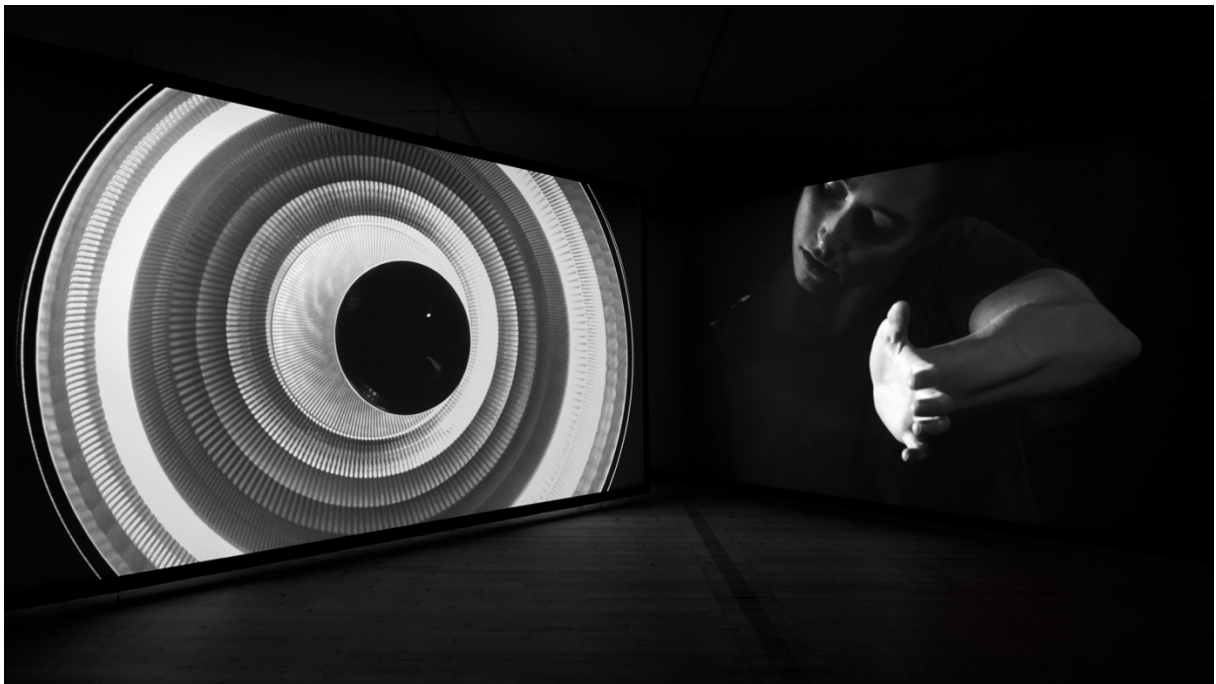Fig 14. Installation view, *Near Real Time,* Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

Fig 15. Installation view, *Near Real Time,* Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

The body is a false promise. To be lifelike is not to live. Or, live-ness

(likeness) is not lifelikeness. Just because somebody is actually

there, a body on a stage is no more of a guarantee that what we are

seeing is categorically live than an emotion portrayed by an actor on

the screen is an indication that something was actually felt, even

though we might think they are these things.[60]

The three-channel video and sound installation *Near Real Time* explores

the critical contradiction at the core of this research: the casual remarks

made by the inhabitants of Villeneuve suggest that *Vidéogazette*'s

activities — and thus its transmissions — did not represent them, even

though the decaying images on the videotape reels clearly depict that very

community. They are shown being interviewed, participating in studio

debates, working collectively in the wood or pottery workshops, making

fictional and experimental films, staging theatrical productions, and holding

community festivals where they dance and perform. This observation

compels the central question of the project: What do these televisual

images reveal, if not this community? And how might we understand them

as images?

It is useful to reiterate the status of the videotape reels here: they are not

an archival medium. As mentioned previously, they were integral to

Vidéogazette's production and transmission processes. Their auspicious

preservation ultimately was a result of their transition from advanced

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60 Ian White, *Here is Information. Mobilise* (LUX, 2016), p. 262.

technological tool to obsolescence and deep storage. It was only through

this research project that a limited number of videotapes were made

visible through digitisation, along with the discovery of facsimiles of the

interconnected transmission index cards. Only then could those that

survived in cold storage ever be chronicled. Even so, my observations

indicated that the tapes were habitually filled with undocumented and

uncredited material. This produced a distancing effect of those

represented, as well as for me, as a temporally displaced, remote, solitary

viewer.

The critical issue is that I, or we, as out-of-time spectators, were never the

intended audience. We cannot, as Brian Rusted observes, 'inhabit the

spaces of the makers or audiences remotely in time'[61] — their past

intentions, aesthetics, and social practices — 'however much we might

insist that, by their nature, the media of film and video transcends such

dislocations'.[62] Rusted argues that documentary — understood here as

the recorded transmissions, televisual images and sound — should be

seen as 'a performative component of the process'.[63] Therefore, we

approach these media artefacts not as an absent subject (or historically

situated body) for reenactment, but rather as *embodied material relations*:

'They are not representations of bodies in a process. The making and use

of the videos are bodily re-enactments of the process. As technological

and material practices, they are multi-sensory performances of the

61 Brian Rusted, 'Portapak as Performance: VTR St Jacques and VTR Rosedale' in *Challenge for Change*, ed.
by Thomas Waugh, Michael Brendan, and Ezra Winton. (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), p. 219.
62 Rusted, p. 218.
63 Rusted, p. 219.

process of social change'.[64] My aim in *Near Real Time* was not to relay the particular history of *Vidéogazette* but to consider its media artefacts as inherently generative and performative.

The televisual images depict a community of people, intertwining this portrayal of the social body with the history of cinema. As Georges Didi-Huberman notes, this intertwining begins with one of the first motion pictures, the Lumière Brothers' *La Sortie des ouvriers de l'usine Lumière / Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory* (1895): 'It was while making the exit from the factory [that] the people made their entrance [and became] 'this people of images.'' At this moment, he proposes, 'they turn from being *workers* — that is, makers of photographic materials — to being suddenly *actors'*.[65] This could be described as the appearance of the first *figurants*, a French term for 'extras', who only exist in the plural, without differentiation, like a monochrome costume seen en masse. In French slang, *figurants* also refer to 'anonymous cadavers exposed in the morgue waiting to be recognised and named'.[66]

As I viewed the material, the critical question arose how I might explore the perceived estrangement of the *figurants* without reducing them to anonymity. Close observation revealed latent details, such as during the televised studio debates, where, for example, beyond the named guests or hosts, a person seemingly indifferent to the discussion is seen studiously

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64 Rusted, p. 232.
65 Georges Didi-Huberman, 'People Exposed, People as Extras', *Radical Philosophy*, 156 (2009), p. 16.
66 Didi-Huberman, p. 20.

reading a newspaper; others watched the haze of their cigarette smoke drifting upwards. Several studio lights shone directly into the camera, casting the audience into shadow, and while we might hear their words, the faces of those handed the microphone were now completely indistinguishable. Elsewhere, the backs of heads nod, long hair gestures in slight movements, and inquisitive children squirm into view staring directly into the camera with a disarming intensity. I discovered a short clip depicting a theatrical production in rehearsal by the *action theatre group*, where the performers appeared uneasy and detached. In another programme, four young women — referred to as *les adolescents* — were interviewed about their sexual experiences. Their faces filmed in extreme close-up appeared as unnecessarily intrusive as the questions they were being asked. Two young men, evidently Algerian migrants based on their discussion, were barely visible as they sat in the shadow of a studio lamp dazzling its light directly into the camera. They playfully probed and teased those setting up the equipment before the recording was abruptly cut. All of these observations were developed into scenarios within the work.

Through these 'people of images' I sought to capture their liminal performance, aiming to express these observed *intimacies* in *Near Real Time*. I began by workshopping scenarios with performers — friends, amateurs, actors, dancers, and students — in a studio, employing improvisation methods to explore and develop a personal connection to the given material. These methods extended their relationship to the historical processes of community video production, with an understanding that the embodied gesture traces a source as much as it asserts its

reflexive autonomy. As Jean-Louis Comolli writes, 'A life speaks to lives, in the same, or another language, familiar or foreign — and a spectator inhabits its echoes the way they inhabit a mirror'.[67] Through this process, fragments of the transmissions seen on the tapes were transcribed and evolved into forms of scripts that included textual, visual, and audio formats. A key group of women emerged from this workshopping process, with varying experience in performance or acting, who took on the names of their *les adolescents* counterparts. They participated in the recording of new material that aimed to *concentrate* the visual and audio grammar — or *intensities* — of the original recordings. This was not *reenactment*, or being 'immersed in history without history',[68] but rather an attempt to problematise historical distance into a critically self-reflexive gesture.

With a similar intention, the title *Near Real Time* refers to a time delay, drawing the viewer into a sense of overlapping pasts and presents. As Walter Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project*: 'It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation'.[69] This concept guided the development of *Near Real Time* as an immersive three-screen installation.

Presented in a zig-zag formation across the exhibition space (Fig. 12*)*, three large-scale rear projection screens are arranged to allow the

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67 Jean-Louis Comolli, 'The Passing Actor' in *Actors & Extras* (2009), pp. 71-72.

68 J. Allen, '"Einmal ist keinmal" Observations on Reenactment' in *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* (Witte de With, 2005), p. 183.

69 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* ([1982] 2002), p. 13.

spectator to walk between, around, and up to them. Occasionally, their bodies are of equivalent scale to those seen on screen. Their physical closeness to the screen surface produces their shadows on the opposite side, momentarily making them part of the projected image for others watching in the space. Bridget Crone described this arrangement as producing 'spaces within which we dwell with the image'.[70] This encounter with the work — the point of view — is in constant motion, producing an evolving perception of the screen space. Its physical circularity is also embedded into the moving image, where the work was edited to the arrangement of screens and the surrounding sound. As Katrin Mundt observes:

> A light shines directly into the camera, whose abstract composition of concentric circles of light repeatedly moves across the installation. All calls to mind the formal concerns and immediacy which characterised these early television experiments. The voiceover describes focus, volume and light, as if to understand its own mediated appearance in a decisively stated present. Forms reproduce themselves and wander from screen to screen, out of the picture into the space and back again. A hanging lab coat becomes a white sheet, a costume, a ghost, a grotesque sculpture of a leg.[71]

In production, the work naturally evolved into an episodic form, this approach became generative as the work progressed, affording greater

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70 Bridget Crone, *The Sensible Stage: Staging and the Moving Image* (2017), p. 177.

71 Katrin Mundt, 'Gail Pickering, Mirror Speech', *Springerin*, January (2015), pp. 60-61. My translation.

flexibility and experimentation. This method ultimately led to a conceptual approach that recognised the work's re-imagining, re-tracing, and re-materialising of fragments of the transmissions observed on the disintegrating videotape reels. This approach was later applied to its exhibition, where the work assumed an intrinsically performative shape-shifting identity; no two installations are ever the same. A uniqueness arises not simply from the changing spatial conditions of a gallery or museum but also from the continuing production of 'scenes' or sequences, leading to subsequent changes in both sound and image editing.

Through this process, the *intimacies* mentioned above took on roles as 'characters' in their own right. For example, a cigarette suspended in darkness (Fig. 09) slowly smoulders as the words 'NEAR REAL TIME' are inscribed onto its cylindrical paper surface. This imagery derives from two elements observed on tape: people seated in studio debates tracing their smoke as they watch their cigarettes burn, and the uninterrupted holding image, or test card, accompanied by music from the community library,[72] which was insistently broadcast to separate each of the *Vidéogazette* programmes. This cigarette sequence, the only colour scene in the entire work, appears at various moments like an hourglass marking time. Its projected monumental scale is intended to be perceived as an extreme close-up, starkly contrasting with the bodies that intermittently surround it, both in- and beyond-screen.

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72 Described in Ducré, (2011), p. 69. My translation.

All other sequences were filmed in black-and-white using both 4K digital

and standard definition analogue video. The decision to use the latter was

partly due to the early 1970s Portapak cameras I worked with, which could

only film in black-and-white, mirroring the historical content on the digitised

videotape reels. This method of combining and working across media

formats, often filming the same scene simultaneously with multiple

cameras, was a continuation of the approach I had used in *Karaoke*. In

that piece, I aimed to suspend the viewer's understanding of provenance

through the materiality of the image. As Mundt notes, '[The work] could be

equally real or staged… whether this is actual historical footage, or a

reconstruction cannot be said for certain'.[73]

Near Real Time's installation form fostered certain relationships between

the projected images on and between the screens. To achieve this, a

complex process of spatialised video editing was necessary, which

involved editing to fit the spatial configuration of the screens. This was not

literal but involved constant reference to a mental visualisation — a

choreographic process. For example (Fig. 15), the light facing the camera

in the community's productions became a conspicuous 'character' and an

intrinsic part of the conceptual, technical and metaphorical framework of

the work. While it might be assumed that its prominent appearance was

due to the community's technical unfamiliarity or amateurism, its luminosity

and the interplay of light and shadow were not only key to the *appearance*

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73 Mundt, pp. 60-61. My translation.

of the community in the videotaped transmissions but also to the activity of viewing, whether on television or in the half-light of an exhibition space.

In her 2017 critical essay on *Near Real Time*, Bridget Crone explores how the interplay of light and image creates a 'stage-like' effect in the exhibition space. She argues that this stage is shaped by the insistent presence of the image spilling off the screen, delineating its own space and time, and drawing the viewer into a closer proximity with the screen. This encounter between body and image reflects what Crone defines as the stage — a space in which the actual and virtual, real and imaginary, lived and projected image meet:

> The images on the three screens beckon us; glowing outwards from screen into the dimly lit space, it is as if they invite us into their realm and into the space of the screen. This sense of invitation into the 'here' of the image results not only from the size and scale of the screens and their situation in the semi darkness, but is also an effect of the formal composition of the images themselves: *Near Real Time* is interspersed or punctuated with moments of footage, in which the protagonists sit, their gaze directly addressing us (the viewer), and with other moments in which the theatre light shines directly onto us; almost violently, accusingly, it insists on the 'here' and the 'now'.[74]

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74 Crone, pp. 177-178.

The light depicted in the work (Fig. 15*)* is concave, its interior reflective surface is covered in multiple concentric circles, textured to diffuse the light from its central lamp, which is outwardly covered with a curved mirror. This mirror reflects the space and the activities around it, creating a form of *mise-en-abyme* — an image within an image — that occasionally comes into view when the scene enacts a closeup of the light's oculus form. It can also be observed from a distance as it circulates among and with the characters and traverses the multiple screens, affecting both the represented space on-screen and the exhibition space beyond.

> *The brightest image is here.*
>
> *We've dimmed out the background.*
>
> *We've dimmed out the other people.*[75]

The voice in *Near Real Time* echoes the direct address heard in *Karaoke*. It maintains the same intimacy, intonation and rhythm. This voice, which resists association with any specific 'character', whether object or figure, is intended to be both polyphonic and polyvocal, embodying the multiple subjectivities within the work. It addresses the viewer, speaks of the light and our situation, and is lyrical and repetitious, with its quiet humming evolving into mournful song. The voice substitutes those seen on-screen; what is 'mouthed' clearly differs from what is 'voiced'. This method separates the face or figure from the voice, cloaking what is actually spoken, refusing simultaneity, and implying that a likeness is not possible.

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75 Extract from the voiceover in *Near Real Time*.

This is most evident in sequences implying the 'action theatre group'
mentioned above, depicted within a large empty theatre space, where they
are seen setting-up and 'acting-out' their performance in a state of
guarded detachment and disorientation. This sensation is cultivated
through scripting, filming and editing processes, where everything seen is
effectively revolving.

Crucially, the soundtrack accompanying the voice is central to this work. In
this sequence featuring the theatre group, it drives their display. At a
certain point, if we listen closely, we realise it is the sound of a parallel or
hidden performance — a band playing music as if in an adjacent space.
Unexpectedly and somewhat violently, the music is disrupted and
suddenly stops; voices can be heard shouting while the *action theatre
group* players sit motionless in the empty theatre stalls. The soundtrack —
excluding the voiceover — was derived entirely from the videotape reels. A
meticulous editing and production process built rhythms and sounds from
the sonic remains of the disintegrating magnetic tape, whose base sound,
noise, or 'vocality' can be heard as a constant *murmur* in the background
in which pasts and presents are irretrievably enmeshed.

Chapter Four

She Was a Visitor (2014)

Architectural installation incorporating a 24-meter

curved cyclorama wall, concealed door, red lights,

printed red text on white paper pamphlet.

She Was a Visitor [performance] (2015, 2016, 2018)

Spoken word performance event, printed red text on

white paper pamphlet (not distributed), variable

duration.

She Was a Visitor was presented at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead, as part of the large-scale solo exhibition *Gail Pickering: Mirror Speech,* curated by Alessandro Vincentelli, which ran from October 2014 to January 2015. This immersive installation was specifically designed for the exhibition space and can be seen in the following documentation images.

The related performance, *She Was a Visitor,* was first performed at BALTIC in 2015 and has since been presented in various expanded iterations, including at Charlottenberg Kunstverein, Copenhagen, in 2016, and at Manchester Art Gallery in 2018. These live performances are ephemeral events and are never recorded, reflecting a commitment to the live, situational nature of the experience.
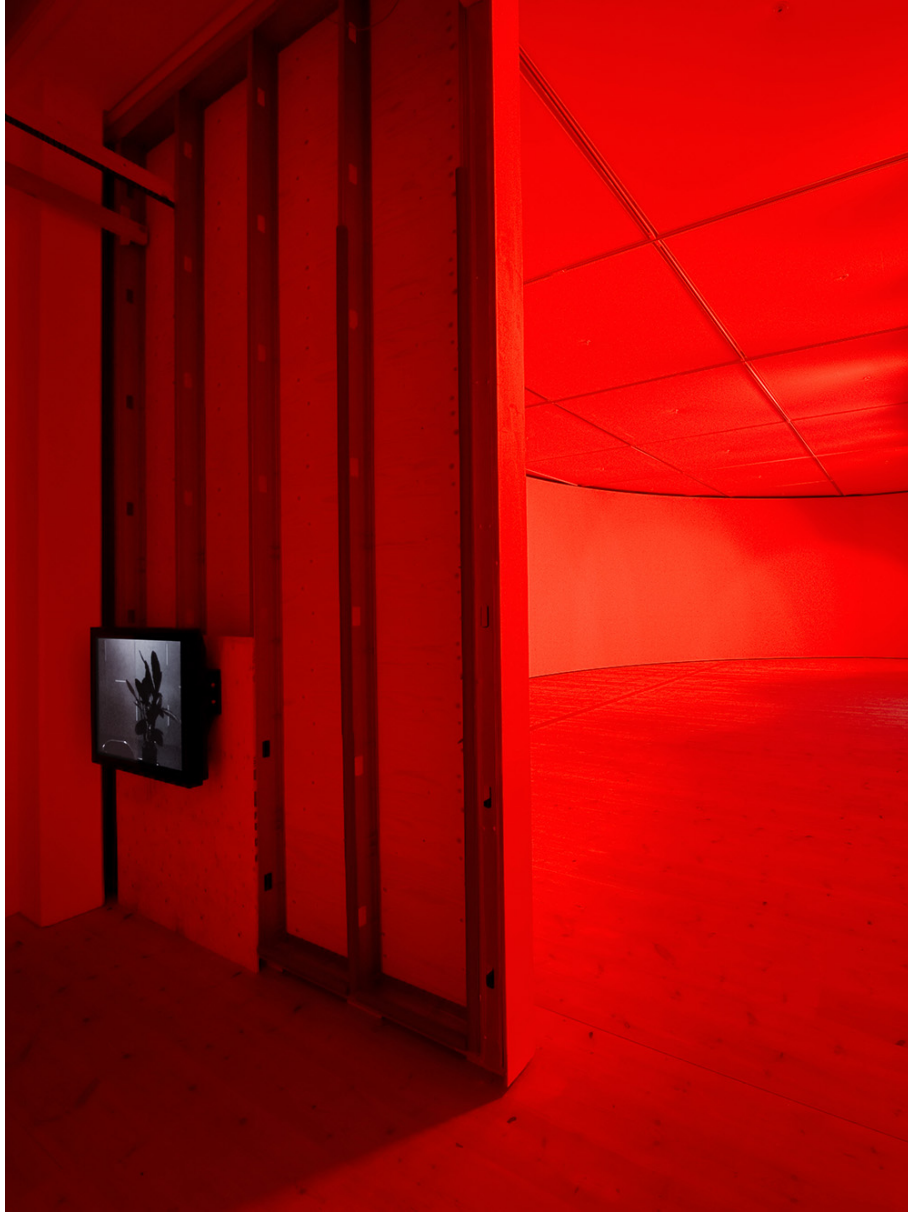
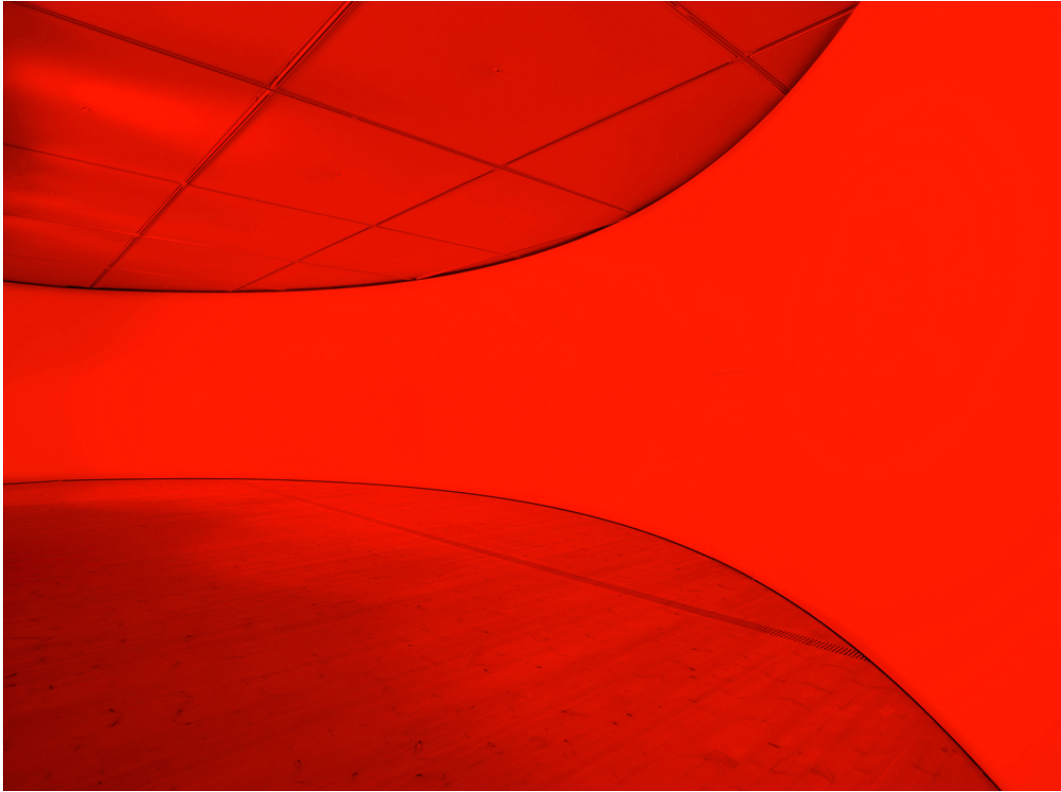Fig 16. Installation view, *She Was a Visitor*, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

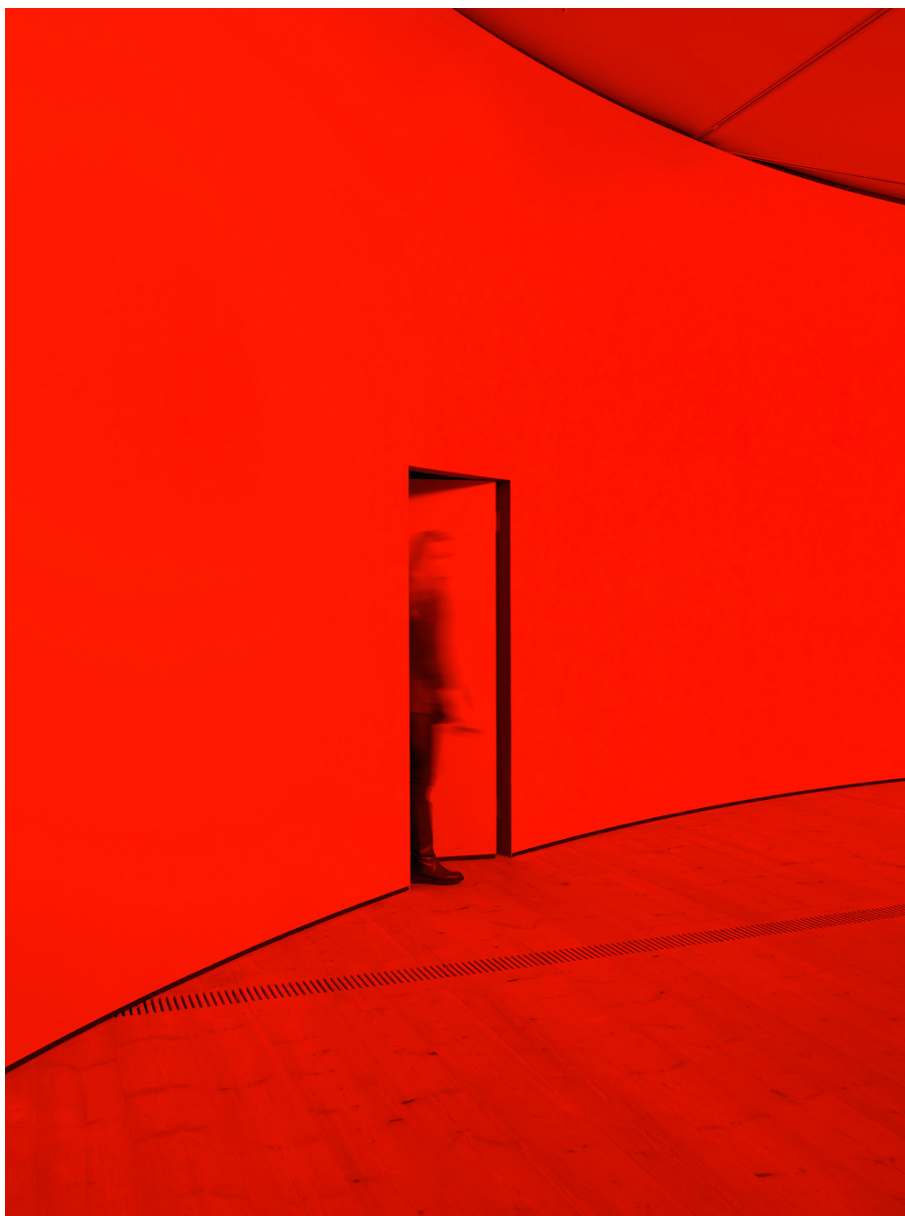Fig 17. Installation view, *She Was a Visitor*, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

Fig 18. Installation view, *She Was a Visitor*, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

It's the atmosphere here.[76]

The large-scale immersive installation titled *She Was a Visitor* was the first work that audiences encountered upon entering the solo exhibition at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art. This chapter discusses the production of the installation and its related performance, which explore the influence and impact of *cinéma militant* on the historical community television project[77] and the materiality of transmission. The installation produced a monochromatic, frameless spatial image — one that embodied a 'transient image', which viewers would activate unassumingly and inhabit quietly as they moved through the space.[78] This 'image' was created through a large-scale installation featuring a 24-meter-long curved cyclorama wall, uniformly illuminated with red light (Figs. 16 and 17*)*.

During research and development, the project referenced Chris Marker's films from the 1960s and 1970s, particularly *Le fond de l'air est rouge (A Grin Without a Cat,* 1977). This epic four-hour essay film explored the 'profoundly transformative'[79] global politics from 1967 to 1977, created amid the 'prevailing atmosphere of contemporary political disarray in leftist

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76 Alain Carignon, union secretary and regular guest on Vidéogazette, discussing the significant presence of activists in Villeneuve during that period. Quoted in Ducré (2011) p. 85. My translation.

77 Refer to Chapter One for a discussion of this influence.

78 Jean-Louis Comolli discusses the concept of the 'passing actor' in *Actors & Extras* (2009), p. 65. Noting that we are all extras in the sense of the observant lenses that surround us daily.

79 Refer to Chris Marker's undated Director's statement on Icarus Films (https://icarusfilms.com/if-grin).

circles and the self-doubts of militant filmmaking itself'.[80] The film is divided into two parts, 'Fragile Hands' and 'Severed Hands', which transition from revolutionary hope to the Left's loss of faith after 1968. Although the film was criticised at the time for its omissions and obliqueness, its montage technique — utilising 'unused rushes from militant films originally considered too ambiguous[81] — and Marker's refusal to conform to 'didactic exigencies'[82] greatly influenced my material and conceptual approach. The film's title also held significance: its translation, 'the essence of the air is red',[83] suggests that while the progressive socialist politics of the time remained urgent, they were fleeting and dispersing.

In *She Was a Visitor*, the atmospheric red haze created by the sheer scale of the installation forms a visual vacuum that envelopes the viewer. As Katrin Mundt describes:

> Political inheritance is addressed in the first installation of the exhibition: a semi-circular space steeped in intense red light which one enters like an empty stage and leaves through a hidden door into the main exhibition space or through a side corridor not unlike going backstage. The viewer literally experiences confusion in their

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80 G. Van Cauwenberge, *Chris Marker and Documentary Filmmaking 1962-1982*. (unpublished doctoral thesis, 1992), p. 187.

81 Marker, quoted in Van Cauwenberge, p. 187.

82 Marker, quoted in Van Cauwenberge, p. 190.

83 The title is a pun on a French saying implying a chill in the air. This subtle wordplay reinforces the film's underlying message about the persistence of the struggle.

perception of light and space, a sudden experience of exposure

and a moment of disorientation in the face of two possible paths

through the exhibition.[84]

The saturated red light reflects and ricochets across the space, disrupting

linear time as its sensorial effect is immediate and overwhelming. With

their vision now monochromatic,[85] viewers, cloaked in red, are suspended

momentarily, assuming the status of an image. This red ambience is

intended to sublimate the reference to the radical militant cinema that

encircled *Vidéogazette* and its transmissions.[86] As art critic Smaranda

Olcèse-Trifan, visiting an earlier iteration of the work,[87] describes: 'Politics,

thus concentrated and sublimated, becomes a sensory, epidermal,

enveloping experience, which insinuates itself through the pores and

works by impregnation and contagion, freeing itself from the order of

ideological construction and increasing the density of lived experience'.[88]

A concealed door, purposefully built into the curvature of the wall (Fig. 18),

punctures this epidermal membrane and disrupts its specific

phenomenological experience when opened (or discovered) by the viewer.

This makes the object of the constructed wall tangible, bringing its human

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84 Katrin Mundt, 'Gail Pickering, Mirror Speech' *Springerin*, January, 2015, pp. 60-61. My translation.

85 A viewer described it as 'seeing in black and white,' followed by a 'negative afterimage' that lingers until their eyes adjust to the new light source.

86 Refer to Chapter One and my observations from the facsimiles of the index cards recording the transmissions.

87 Smaranada Olcèse-Trifan discusses *Red Prologue* (2014), an installation I presented at La Ferme du Buisson Centre d'Art Contemporain, Paris, from which *She Was a Visitor* was developed.

88 Smaranada Olcèse-Trifan, 'Near Real Time, Gail Pickering', A bras le corps, 7 September 2014. My translation.

scale to the fore and suggesting that other perspectives are possible — a way out or a way in.

These shifting perspectives and multiple subjectivities — the overlapping pasts and presents — are explored more explicitly through the performed event, which shares the title of the installation *She Was a Visitor.*[89] It exists as a counterpart to the installation, one that could be performed both in-situ and at alternate sites, allowing for ongoing development and variation. Documentation of any live performance of the piece does not exist intentionally, as the work is committed to its unmediated ephemerality. Access for the purpose of this commentary is only through my recounting of the event and the voice script, with extracts included herein.

The speaker, who had also voiced both *Karaoke* and *Near Real Time*, further emphasises the polyvocal method intended to represent a collective voice throughout the works, resonating through the exhibition spaces. This method, an audible continuum of the bodiless voice, is again explored in the voice script, where positions, experiences, objects, and narratives — the 'here' and 'there' — are interwoven into a carefully paced monologue. Developed to be spoken rather than read, the monologue begins with some discernible hesitation but soon assumes a clear rhythm, as if taking breaths, and is spoken with minimal intonation. Occasional

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89 The title *She Was a Visitor* is borrowed from American composer Robert Ashley (1930-2014), whose work influenced this piece. Written as an epilogue to his 1967 work *that morning thing*, Ashley describes it as 'a lone speaker repeats the title sentence throughout the entire performance,' with a chorus creating a 'staggered, chant-like effect.' The audience could also participate with minimal instruction.' (Robert Ashley, *that morning thing*, 1996, album notes).

long pauses and unfinished sentences interrupt this rhythm, as though the speaker is deep in thought, quietly intensifying the presence of the moment and the interplay between both lived and observed positions.

The speaker stands in the centre of the space facing the curved wall where the audience has naturally assembled along its perimeter, either standing or sitting communally.

> *She asked me to wear this.*
>
> *She didn't recognise me anymore.*
>
> *I'm both a stand-in*
>
> *and a stand-up.*
>
> *Viv built the wall.*
>
> *It's a cyclorama,*
>
> *an infinity space.*
>
> *Its function is*
>
> *to disappear,*
>
> *to disperse,*
>
> *to be invisible.*
>
> *Anticipating our stories,*
>
> *for stand-ins,*
>
> *to perform*
>
> *She Was a Visitor* [90]

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90 Extract from the voice script for the live performance of *She Was a Visitor*.

A cyclorama, like television, has no image memory, yet its invention and continued use serve as a vital structure for both the production and encounter with images. Initially, it provided the scaffold and form for nineteenth-century painted panoramas[91] before becoming a prevalent backdrop for chroma key visual effects in contemporary industrial filmmaking. Early iterations of cycloramas were tied to the travelling moving panoramas of Western Europe and North America, which are considered precursors to film. These painted continuous scenes, mounted onto the surface of a curved structure of a cyclorama, often depicted notorious military conflicts during an era of rival empires and colonial invasions, placing the audience at the centre of the enactment. The goal of these historical panoramas was complete immersion, a process Oliver Grau describes as a 'mentally absorbing process […] characterised by diminishing critical distance to what is shown and increasing emotional involvement in what is happening'.[92] The artist Jeff Wall was similarly drawn to the frameless image of the panorama. Reflecting on his 1993 large-scale photographic work *Restoration*, he noted, 'There is something in every picture, no matter how well structured the picture is, that escapes being shown'. He added that this elusiveness 'expresses the fact that the panorama is unrepresentable.'[93]

The wall tries to disappear,

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91 The concept of the panoramic painting was originally developed by Robert Barker in 1787.

92 Oliver Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion* (2003), p. 13.

93 Jeff Wall, interviewed by Martin Schwander, 'Jeff Wall in Conversation with Martin Schwander,' in *Jeff Wall: Selected Essays and Interviews* (2007), p. 233.

its symptomatic,

of its problem

to be … plastic.[94]

This sense of the circular image is reflected in the communal space depicted in the *Agora* live broadcast. Like its Ancient Greek namesake, *Agora* was conceived as a moment to bring together the inhabitants of La Villeneuve in *Vidéogazette*'s TV studio. The host, speaking live from the studio, invites viewers to participate, echoing the calls to action and participation heard in the films of activist collectives like *Les Groupes Medvedkine*.

If you're somewhere,

come here.

We're,

attempting…

Our potential

orientation

towards a simultaneous

self-abolition

and realisation

its our exceptional expression.

We're,

learning how to see.

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94 Extract from the voice script for the live performance of *She Was a Visitor*.

Look.

Here.

See.[95]

These cues were crucial to the emergence of this project, offering insights into the integral performativity of the process. My approach to writing a voice script is extensive, drawing details from multiple and divergent sources. This involves locating, hearing, and evoking voices from the given material — through careful observation and analysis of the collated historical material and registering my own response and lived experience — as I consciously allow the 'here and now' to affect and intervene in the research and production process. In development, voice scripts constantly shift between text and spoken word, using the page and audio recordings to adjust the script for both the individual speaker and specific site. In this way, the work remains adaptable and fluid, habitually in a state of transition.

After one of the initial performances a member of the audience described their experience as 'stereoscopic'. I understood this to reflect the impact of the interwoven narratives but also its intrinsic reflexivity. Descriptions of certain 'scenes' are repeated with word or sentence changes that alter their meaning. As mentioned earlier, this technique initially refers to the host of *Agora*'s call to gather in the studio, and to the activists' call to join their cause, as their lives and self-perceptions are being irrevocably

95 Extract from the voice script for the live performance of *She Was a Visitor*.

transformed. '*We're learning how to see*' evokes Suzanne Zedet in *Class de lutte*. It also pertains to the transient image continually produced by the audience encircled and listening to the speaker: *'Look. Here. See.'* When uttered, 'here', as in place, could also be interpreted by the viewer as 'hear', meaning the invitation to 'listen'.

This reflexive approach echoes the work of artist James Coleman,[96] who employs time-based media — principally slide projection with synchronised sound — to conceptually navigate the relationship between language and image, cultural memory, and subjectivity. Jean Fisher notes that Coleman's images, through their narrativity and repetition, transform perception into memory, creating a spatiotemporal connection with the work. The verbal narration enhances this by extending the viewer's engagement into a broader sociohistorical context.[97] I am particularly interested in how this viewer-listener role, by insisting on immediacy and indeterminacy, compels the viewer to locate themselves within the work, and as conveyed above, stereoscopically.

> *We don't recognise ourselves,*
> *anymore.*
> *Simply.*
> *It's our own disfigured faces.*
> *In this red light.*

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96 Refer to *Photograph* (1998-1999), *I N I T I A L S* (1993-1994), *Lapsus Exposure* (1992-1994), and *Background* (1991-1994), all projected slide images with synchronised narration.
97 Fisher, 1983, in *October*, (2003), p. 31.

[pause] [98]

The speaker, as both subject and object in the voice script, restlessly describes, comments on, and positions themselves and the audience within alternating and altered visual or narrative scenes. These scenes draw from actual, documentary, and fictional sources, placing the figure of the 'visitor' — both metaphorically and literally — as a mnemonic agent whose multiple shape-shifting subjectivities become implicated in the scenarios as they unfold. This performative approach to remembering evokes a sense of temporal discontinuity, encompassing both cinematic and personal memories.

The speaker references several films, both directly and indirectly. For instance, *Lettre à mon ami Pol Cèbe* (1970),[99] a short film by *Les Groupes Medvedkine*, which captures an extraordinary sense of freedom, wonder, communality, and political purpose, as the dialogue reminisces, 'like the child who sticks his head out the door and breathes in the air of the world, the air of the times.'[100] Additionally, an 8mm amateur film discovered during the digitisation of *Vidéogazette*'s transmissions, titled *Quand les poules auront des dents* (a French saying equivalent to 'and pigs might fly'), credited to Yves Bardin, portrays the housing estate of La Villeneuve

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98 Extract from the voice script for the live performance of *She Was a Visitor*.

99 *Les Groupes Medvedkine, Lettre à mon ami Pol Cèbe* (1970, b/w, 17 min., 16mm) is notable for its lyrical use of sound and image montage. Filmed from inside a car, it depicts three group members driving to a meeting at dusk, where they will screen *Classe de lutte* (1969).

100 Bernard Benoliel, *Les Groupes Medvedkine* DVD notes (2005), p. 35.

as a site of a scientific experiment gone awry,[101] with residents cast as its bewildered, monstrous, and inanimate characters.

I thought I should intervene

I thought I could intervene

They announced their demise,

with a letter to the newspaper.

An obituary,[102]

in fact,

in black,

not red.

[pause]

'Could you please show me the way towards a political cinema?'

It's a practical question.

It's a means to an end.

Social miserablism,

irrationalism,

popular mysticism,

a refraction of self-preservation,

---

101 The 'poules' in the film title refers to a fictional lab experiment where chickens unexpectedly escape and go on to murder the estate's inhabitants.

102 When the State withdrew its funding and closed the project, *Vidéogazette* organised a conference in Paris and distributed an ironic obituary declaring 'the death of *Vidéogazette* at the age of four, due to a well-known disease called the State.' From an unpublished interview with Patrick di Meglio, former resident and graphic designer of *Vidéogazette*, 23 March 2012.

opens the way to self-destruction.

[pause] [103]

She Was a Visitor serves as both the beginning and the end within its exhibition configuration at the Baltic, mirroring the two poles of its historical subject. On the one hand, it reflects the optimism and socio-political aspirations of *Vidéogazette* and its broader context, as exemplified by *Les Groupes Medvedkine*. On the other hand, it acknowledges the eventual demise and lingering doubt about the community's stake within it, perhaps most succinctly expressed in the allegorical critique of Yves Bardin's dark satire. *She Was a Visitor* inhabits this contradictory, polyvocal inheritance as an uncontainable, latent image.

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103 Extract from the voice script for the live performance of *She Was a Visitor*.

Conclusion

The commentary has examined the specific contexts, critical intentions, and artistic methods of this practice-based enquiry leading to the body of work being submitted. It defined the aims and ambitions of the research by discussing the unique set of conditions and associations that informed my approach to the surviving media artefacts of the historical community television project, *Vidéogazette*. Exploring its connections to the *cinéma militant* of its time, with its aspirations for an emancipatory self-representation, the research focussed in on modes of disidentification and ambivalence as forms of reflexive agency that problematise the documentary image. Despite the apparent disavowal of the recordings by the community they depict, the images stubbornly persist, and in their persistence, they were found to acquire a material and performative subjectivity of their own. That these individuations might emerge from the images themselves is largely due to the close viewing and material sensibility inherent to art practice.

The commentary elaborated on the process of discovering and digitising a selection of the surviving recordings of *Vidéogazette* — enabling access for future researchers in related fields — and described the development of specific methods of practice-based enquiry across the three individual artworks. *Karaoke* explored what is at stake when the persistent image opens up to a suspension of linear time and provenance. The ensuing

parallel temporality of the work was shown to address the complex materiality of the found image and the possibility of its transformation. *Near Real Time* explored the community's estrangement from their own representation as a generative process bringing forth a 'people of images' within the recordings. Developing observed *intimacies* with actors and performers into embodied gestures that both trace a source and assert their own reflexive autonomy, the work was shown to further problematise historical distance in the staging of the viewer's encounter with the installation. *She Was a Visitor* investigated the tenacity of context into an all-encompassing image that resists framing. The discussion addressed how the work performatively implicates the viewer in the unresolved and open-ended questions surrounding the political inheritance of *Vidéogazette* and related *cinéma militant.* What these three works share is an approach to scripting a voice whose polyphony embodies the multiple subjectivities and perspectives emanating from the material as much as it is situated in the conditions of the production of the work.

If community television and *cinéma militant* are drawn on for their enduring potential for future generations, then the body of work discussed challenges this sense of linear history by proposing that their productions may be recuperated in ways that extend beyond a singular trajectory toward collective self-representation. Instead, the production of images, intended to represent and activate the community, may individuate into a community of their own, with subjectivities branching into parallel temporalities alongside the 'official' histories they emerged from. Far from

being passive representations of becoming-communal that remains external to them — and thus condemned as collateral relegated to archives — the work suggests that *image bodies*, such as the remains of *Vidéogazette*, can be activated to engage new audiences and communities if approached on *their* terms, as forms of individuated subjectivities seeking agency in dialogue with the present. As such, the research has sought to open a space of potentiality within the remains of *Vidéogazette* for what Siegfried Zielinski has described as the idiosyncratic plurality of 'anarchives'.[104]

This practice-based research has made an original contribution to its field in visual arts, specifically time-based practices. Crucially, the artworks and commentary demonstrate the capacity of a creative practice-based enquiry to engage with an historical subject in ways that emphasise and activate its uncertain position: instead of seeking to stabilise it into an archival logic, the particular circumstances of their encounter in the present are consciously woven into their material fabric, thus activating the images to continue to individuate and evolve in their dialogue with a viewer in the present.

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104 Siegfried Zielinski, 'AnArchaeology for AnArchives: Why Do We Need – Especially for the Arts – A Complementary Concept to the Archive?', *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology*, 2.1 (2015), pp. 116–125.

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