

'When I Lived in Modern Times': Archive, artefact, album.

Exhibition dates: 16 Sep – 12 Nov 2005

Preview: Thursday 15 Sep 6:00 – 8:00pm

Alice J Anderson

"Archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image."

Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse'

Alice Anderson's practice is based around the resignifying and orchestration of 'found' archives, images and texts, into meditations upon larger issues of nationhood, gender, and our relationship to wider historical events beyond our control. The artist breathes life into previously forgotten or submerged histories and ideas by transforming her source material into unlikely and double-edged narratives. Anderson's video pieces are made in the cinematic tradition of what filmmaker Chris Marker calls the 'photo-roman' [photo-novel]. In such films, like Marker's 'La Jetée', still images or static camerawork are overdubbed with a first-person narration and non-synchronous sound. Anderson's most recent work, the fifteen-minute long video 'Les Deux Voyageuses' began with her chance discovery of an album of discarded sixty-year old photographs and postcards. The work is based upon, though is much more than, the fictional recreation of two women's holiday, of which the photo album was once a precious record. 'Les Deux Voyageuses' is subtitled 'An Illustrated Account of our Holiday in Annecy and Chamonix, Monte-Blanc and Haute-Savoie, France, May 27th – June 4th 1939.' Establishing the diaristic format at the outset, the title sequence also alights upon the possessive tense – 'our' holiday – and an unusual level of precision bordering on the obsessive. Though this archive gives Anderson the backbone for her work, 'Les Deux Voyageuses' yokes speculation and fiction with 'facts' so that the two are indistinguishable. The results become part travelogue, and part history painting.

Though Anderson's first-person narrator is left unnamed, we immediately learn the name of her companion, Elsie, and the trajectory of their journey. Anderson's narrator is a fully rounded character who we might encounter in a novel; her diction, syntax, and accent all persuade us of their historical accuracy. We learn about the two protagonists – about their attitudes, class, geographical origins –

through the slow drip-feed of small and subtle details. The narrator's very first sentence, for example, introduces her as a white-collar, middle-class professional: "At 10:20am on a lovely May morning we closed the office door and boarded the waiting taxi...[having had] an official send off." Soon after, they reveal their suburban pretensions to gentility, noting that their means of transport was "a most luxurious carriage on the continental express. It might have been first-class." And crossing the channel, the narrator describes her ship as "The Canterbury, which needless to say, is the Southern Company's best steamer." The confluence of class, gender, education and income are pinpointed with extraordinary exactitude, without recourse to description. Whilst it is never explicitly mentioned, we come to assume that the narrator is a 'spinster', to use the vocabulary of the 1930s. Whilst admiring a view, the narrator gives us an aside: "if I were sentimental, I should say that this spot would be perfect for 'popping the question' ". Like a novelist, Anderson has the ability to convince us of her character's inner life by evoking a constellation of attitudes. Unlike a novelist, she only has carefully honed dialogue to rely upon.

Anderson interweaves the localised and personal with the broader sweep of history using the lightest of touches. The gentility and placidity of the ladies' attitudes means that they never directly mention world events. Of course, their very absence makes their proximity all the more disturbing. On only two occasions do disjunctures become apparent between the ladies' discourse and the imminent world war. When entering Switzerland, the narrator approaches an institutional looking building, where she notes "the grounds were not as well kept as they should have been." Her fastidious attitudes are intended to build character and to throw us off guard, whilst preparing us for a twist. She continues: "the whole building had a rather derelict appearance, and considering the trend of modern times, was unfortunately a white elephant and a ghost of its former glory." The pair leave, remarking that, "a gale was raging...." Anderson insinuates that this is the League of Nations building, and Europe is about to be blown apart by winds of change.

On a second occasion, we learn that, "at 3:30am the train drew into Dijon station. We were amazed at the number of people, especially small children, travelling at the early hours of the morning. On the platform, a platoon of soldiers from French Morocco [were] wearing full blue trousers gathered at the ankles, red jackets and red and blue caps." We are simply invited to speculate whether the children are being evacuated and whether the soldiers have been recalled from the Empire in preparation for war. The narrator's quizzical and jovial tone leaves the matter entirely open-ended, rather than ominous. At the

same time, it is impossible to tell whether the footage Anderson splices in, at this point, is actually from 1940/1 – at the height of the evacuations on the Western Front. Seeing footage of children, rather than soldiers, we are left to speculate about where they really are, in time and space. The narrator swiftly moves on, to pay meticulous attention to recording each view, each meal consumed, and the times (to the minute) of their travels. These views, of places which would be occupied territories by 1940, are variously described as being “most glorious”, “lovely”, “pleasing” and “delightful”.

Whilst taking the ladies’ own photographs and mementoes – bus tickets and menus, etc – as the starting point for her story, and using them to construct the core of her visuals, Anderson also mixes in a wealth of other archival material. This ranges from her own grandparents’ 16mm film from the 1930s, to postcards from junk shops and images from books and the internet, to documentary footage appropriated from television.

At certain points, the colour postcards of The Louver, for example, make the characters appear close to us rather than quaintly anachronistic in their attitudes. Even as we are drawn into seeing the two women as charming, fastidious, snobbish even, Anderson breaks up the imagery to remind us of the horrors that their generation was about to endure. The subtlety of narrative construction, characterisation, pacing, and the interweaving of the historical and the personal make ‘Les Deux Voyageuses’ a ‘painting of modern life’ of the highest order.