The Woolworths Choir of 1979

Indeed, We Know

On the Video Art of Elizabeth Price

"All the things she does, written in her diary
But when the day is done, she cannot tell the truth."
— Talulah Gosh, in "Talulah Gosh"

In the pages leading up to Roland Barthes' generous, accurate, and still vital conception of our relationship to photographic images in *Camera Lucida*, he devotes a fair amount of space to writing about the discomfort he'd always felt as a spectator forced to judge images through two languages: one critical, the other expressive. In most senses, this uneasiness spoke to a fundamental and paradoxical problem that long characterized Modernism—namely, that it was a tendency balanced on the tension between its stark obscurantism and its self-conscious intellectualism—and this is partly what drove Susan Sontag, in the mid-'60s, to try to annihilate once and for all the primacy of exegesis over experience in the evaluation of art objects. This debate never fully went away. Even now, we are still finding new ways to terrorize ourselves with fresh battles—mostly waged on the wellspring we call social media—over the (dis)utility of subtlety, the devaluation of plot and narrative, the lack of "substance" in our cultural vegetables, and so on and so forth. No one is lobbying for the end of logic or purpose in the arts—nor should they be—but there are few impulses toward which I feel greater ambivalence than the one that drives us to complete a text through decipherment, to decode and extinguish its mysteries, privileging our own knowledge by conforming objects to the world as we already see it.

The world is too variegated for that. Perspectives, resources, and reference points continue to atomize and proliferate, while our aesthetic and formal strategies have become increasingly heterogeneous—collage and patchwork constructions, regardless of material or medium,

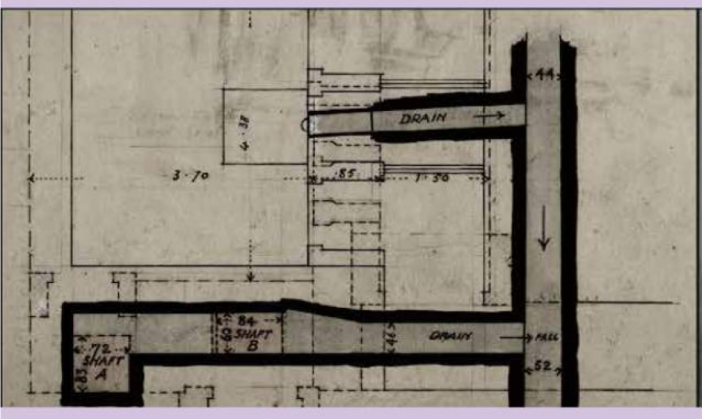
have arguably never had greater currency. This has initiated an appetite to move beyond (or at least build new ground from) our established institutional modes of interpretation, and to embrace new, expressive modes of connecting with and making art. This line has recently picked up steam in academic circles, and will hardly seem radical to cinema's avant-garde, which has been a proponent of lyrical and Romantic strategies for well over half a century now. But there was a perhaps more far-reaching validation for this when the jury for the 2012 Turner Prize (through the avatar of one Jude Law, who announced and presented their selection) awarded the UK's most high-profile and prestigious arts award to Elizabeth Price for her rapturous, addictive, virtually artspeak-resistant video, *The Woolworths Choir of 1979*—a work of experimental historiography that, to my mind, not only represents the most precisely calibrated challenge we have seen this century to time-based storytelling and meaning-making, but is effectively a manifesto against orthodox delivery systems of information and knowledge.

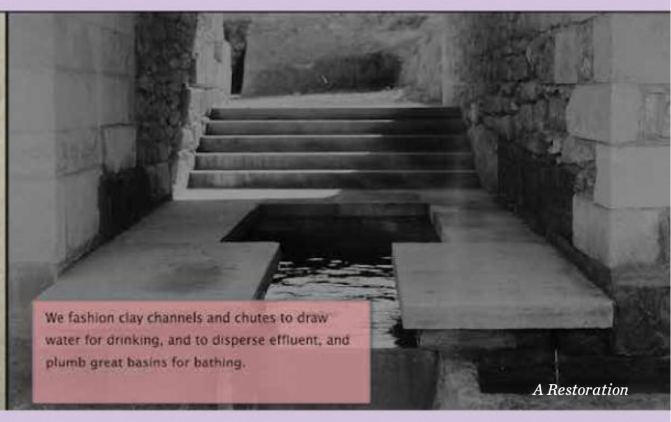
While Price didn't exactly come out of nowhere with *Woolworths*—a piece that had already been making the rounds in a shorter form called *Choir (Parts 1 & 2)* at European and New York galleries about a year prior to the Tate exhibition—her swift rise to the top tier of Britain's post-YBA art world no doubt seemed unlikely to anyone not actively attentive to the UK scene. Until her Turner Prize victory, her name was most commonly linked to Talulah Gosh, the short-lived, Ramones-influenced twee-pop band she help found in the '80s while studying at Oxford's Ruskin School of Art. After completing her Masters at London's Royal College of Art in the early '90s, she began crafting a body of work using PowerPoint as her primary medium, drawing from the playbooks of text-based conceptual artists like Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, and figures associated with Institutional Critique, such as Andrea Fraser. Her arrival, then, can be said to be part of a wave of female British artists who, while not exactly militant against the YBA ascension, felt the need to push back against certain macho ideals forwarded in that clique (a group that, to be clear, included Rachel Whiteread, Tracey Emin, and Sarah Lucas), which often relied on shock tactics, irony, and a confrontational audacity to "go there" with their work.

The post-YBA generation of artists, which also includes the likes of Eva Rothschild, Katy Moran, and Rebecca Warren, is less a unified collective than a generation of like-minded individuals with a common sensibility. Compared to the previous group, they take an overall smaller and less polemical approach; their work lacks bombast, engages more with the past, archives, and collective memory, and aims to place spectators' consciousness at a point between representation and abstraction, between certainty and chaos, where ideas, information, and matter become reactive. This latter skill—of which Price can already be called a master—is the invaluable ability to render objects that are not simply brought into the world to be scrutinized by us, but which are unstable and curious beings in their own right. They induce sensations of not only being inside a space or pictorial illusion, but of being in an entire system of thoughts and ideas that are forming and acting in the present tense.

The signature strategy in Price's toolbox for developing this intoxicating state is her declarative narrations, always presented as animated onscreen text atop images of a location or structure, situating us *here* as the subjects of a direct address. In *Woolworths*, words announce to us our presence before the ecclesiastical choir of a church (specifically, the Church of England), describing in minute detail its layout and the terminology belonging to each element of its decor. "On the lecterns and under the seats, there are other kinds of carved images. There are human and supernatural heads. Here they are." Divided into three movements, the film spends its opening minutes explicating first the architectural design, then certain specific eccentricities, before finally fixating on some sepulchral effigies that had been consciously represented, in the video's words, "with a conspicuous twist of the right wrist." Through the gaps between images, Price inserts glimpses of movement—blurred figures clapping and snapping their fingers along to its hyper-stimulating montage grammar—while the ominous mantra "WE KNOW" glows and undulates before our eyes in a large, bright red font, only to vanish almost as soon as it appears. The text, which started off written in a squarely pedagogical vein, completes its transition into a more poetic mode, and the film, by way of The Shangri-Las' 1965 pop hit "Out in the Streets," breaks into song, announcing the second movement.

After this section crescendos and recedes through this hallucinatory found-footage reverie—amounting to what is easily one of the most ecstatic sequences I have ever experienced in a moving-image work—a new pattern of graphic associations emerges. The dan-





A Restoration

cers' hands, arms, and wrists wave and whip through the air, slicing through one another, and through a new archive of footage. More hands, arms, and wrists, only these are cut with glimpses of smoke, fire trucks, and concerned faces. What is it that this text keeps claiming to *know,* anyway? Price provides an answer, though perhaps not *the* answer, which is spelled out in *Woolworths'* final, elegiac minutes: "In the centre of Manchester, ten people died." Still instructive, the words are less educational and more journalistic, reporting and inquiring into details about a tragic fire that claimed innocent lives in 1979. Phrases are now modelled after what read like witness testimonials or police reports, juxtaposing expressions of trauma and disillusionment against statements of facts—both supported by onscreen diagrams that explicitly lay out how the fire spread through the building. Meanwhile, in the sound design: still the claps and snaps that have been punctuating the cutting all along.

Woolworths works through itself at such a brisk, methodical pace that it usually only becomes clear to viewers some time after it's concluded just how tenuous its logic system is. The connections it forwards—in the graphic matches, in its wordplay and rhymes (choir/quire/fire), in the rhetorical poise of its communication style—are so convincing in and of themselves that an illusory sense of a gestalt arises, uniting its observations and evidence into what feels like an argument about something or other. Part of the piece's brilliance, though, is that it loses none of its artistic integrity once the realization that it "doesn't say anything" settles in. Asked at the end of an artist talk about how she plans and conceptualizes each of her videos, Price claimed that she tends to move through a mass of archival material, setting aside the scraps that interest her. "What's important is that when I start making a piece, I don't know what it's going to be, so the process of making the work is determined by finding the relationships between elements, and trying to understand the materials that are its constituents...So the artwork comes out of this process of trying to understand my interest in them." This methodology also functions as an instruction for how we, as viewers, can engage with her style of organization. What we're experiencing is essentially an update and saturation of the Surrealists' exquisite-corpse technique—a stream-of-consciousness daisy chain for the digital age.

Working either backwards or forwards from *Woolworths* through the rest of her present body of work—a body that spans from *A Public Lecture & Exhumation* (2006), a video (her first) presented in the style of a public-service lecture that compiles six years of research into an art collector's bequest, to her new dual-screen projection *A Restoration* (2016)—one sees how consistent and generative this creative technique has been for Price. In *At the House of Mr X* (2007), she surveys a luxurious modernist home built on the outskirts of London in the late '60s that houses an extensive collection of postwar sculpture (Enzo Plazzotta, Paul Mount) and designer furniture (Ettore Sottsass, Marcel Brauer). Approaching the unoccupied confines, the textual narrator beckons to us, "Seek the house...Yes, enter the house," seducing us with its features in a vernacular culled from architecture journal articles and advertising lingo. ("See the varied furnishings of plastic, leather & velvet, chrome & anodized steel.") Later, a thesis of sorts emerges—intoned as though it were a scandal ripped from the tabloids—revealing that this estate belongs to the owner of transatlantic cosmetic brands like Outdoor Girl, Mary Quant, and Miners ("Miners are for Moderns"), the inventor of the first spiral mascara brush, eye wipers, loads of lash, and shot-silk lipstick.

One of the dangers of making work that is so predicated on intuitive connections and thinly sketched conclusions is that it risks becoming merely a formalist trifle, and *At the House of Mr X* embodies how Price manages to make her videos thematically rich without betraying the enigma of their motives. Diving deep into the collections of multiple independent yet associated archives, her close readings and inquisitive juxtapositions inevitably reveal the overlapping ideologies that are shared amongst these materials, revelling in their inconsistencies, blind spots, and common traits. In *At the House of Mr X,* high modernist indulgences get crossed with the commercial slogans for feminine beauty products, implicitly tapping into, e.g., the late-'60s social milieu (the ripening of second-wave feminism, the legalization of homosexuality in the UK, etc.), even as the piece resists making any specific judgments or critiques with regards to these particular cultural developments. What we get instead is a unified expression of the varied voices that populate any given historical moment, which allows the units that make up our archives to retain the autonomy that they had when they were active, when they were still in the process of being performed in the world.

These works are manifold, but they are also, in a Deleuzian sense, about many folds—or, to borrow one of Price's own puns, voiced by the *Woolworths* choir, "We are quire...We are four-fold...We are five-fold." They connect (and therefore expand) various departments of society, uniting them through difference, pleating them into a structure where everything is either outside or inside of its support system. In 2010, Price (perhaps inadvertently) literalized this in *The Tent*, a work about *Systems*, a published survey of the British Systems Group (led by painter Jeffrey Steele), who made a brief splash in the early '70s with their abstract art generated from system theories. In *The Tent*, all imagery, text, and even sound are scanned or derived from the book, but with an emphasis on the process of translation at the fore. We see Price physically handling the book, turning the pages to produce editing wipes (much like when, in the musical mid-section of *Woolworths*, the camera sometimes consciously sways to reveal the edges of the laptop monitor), and we hear ambient street noise from outside of her studio, making sure that we're conscious of the video's construction. Easily her most bare and verbose video—the first half is almost nothing but black text on a white screen—*The Tent* ultimately finds eccentricities to latch onto, as particular concepts or theories that seemed innocuous become viral, initiating startling mutations in the work's thematic make-up. By the end of its 13 minutes, the *Systems* book itself has become an actual tent structure, and the narration's preoccupations have entirely transitioned into a treatise about the sun—its light equated with the shine of the projector bulb exhibiting the work itself.

Perhaps the most arresting quality of Price's videos is that they are constructed to seem as though they are self-aware—responsive, alive, and entitled to become something other than what we expect of them. From the artifacts to the archive, from cultural history to her artworks themselves, these are expressions where inanimate objects become animated subjects; this is the spectacle of witnessing beings achieving sentience. Pedagogy graduates into poetry, ideas grow bored with themselves, and tools strive for a utility that is beside or beyond the function that humans ostensibly designed them for. In

The Tent

West Hinder (2012), one of Price's most purely enjoyable videos (and surely her funniest), this phenomenon plays out in a "community" of new luxury vehicles, which—drawing inspiration from an actual event that took place off the British Isles in 2003—ended up at the bottom of the Atlantic after their cargo ship sank. Extracts from auto commercials and sales catalogues narrate the evolution of the cars in their new environment, facilitated by the cutting-edge technologies installed into their interfaces, which includes "clear organization and delineation of user and control-oriented functions" and "a consistent flow of information in the larger, higher-definition control display." They are, by most definitions, artificially intelligent machines (think *Christine* [1983], or, less malevolently, Herbie from *The Love Bug* [1968]), and thus demonstrate survival instincts and adaptability. So, with the DNA of a capitalist market inscribed into their sleek, aerodynamic bodies—designed to comfort and provide user-friendliness for society's most elite—the cars repurpose their state-of-the-art entertainment centres, and resolve to reconstitute themselves as a balletic underwater dance troupe.

Stopping short of launching into a full-on disquisition on object-oriented ontologies, *West Hinder* nonetheless expresses an implicit alliance with the notion that our technologies may not belong to human-scribed histories in the ways we think they do. The will of an object to become distinct from its designers' intentions permeates all of Price's video work, not least of which her latest and most ambitious piece, *A Restoration*. Presented in an ultra-wide dual screen set-up, the video surveys Sir Arthur Evans' extensive archive at Oxford's Ashmolean Museum. Looking over a broad range of artifacts, Prince eventually fixated on the discovery, and subsequent restoration, of the Knossos site on Crete, which is believed to be Europe's oldest city. Naturally, her investigation into this material is less concerned with the artifacts themselves (though we do see plenty of them) than it is with the varying methods and technologies used for the documentation of the artifacts over the decades. From drawings that predate photography to early daguerrotypes to the relatively cleaned-up and precise digital images that were taken more recently, *A Restoration* is less a project about Knossos than it is a history of the way historical elements are created—or, further, a history of representation itself, and our waxing and waning faith in automated representational technologies.

Such is the way *A Restoration* begins, at least. There is, again, a chorus—in the form of both an onscreen text and a digitized, robotic voice reading the text aloud—and the intelligence it offers once again starts in an informative mode before erring toward the poetic. The presentation of the documents soon becomes heavily doctored, rendering them into CGI animations; Knossos becomes kitschily "alive" before our eyes, in some sense, which has the effect of chloroforming much of the project's documentary value. Finally, in a climax that once again postures as a thesis, after we're told of traumas and violence that exist in the bowels of this history the narrator's focus hones in on the structural fractures observed in certain objects, positing that the ruptures were created because of the sound emitted by their break. Just as a gavel strikes a surface, or a fork taps a glass, the theory is that these pieces were broken in order to re-establish order or control, calling attention to the striker. It's a compelling case, and one that aligns well with Price's running theme of explaining visual phenomena through her interests in the auditory. She readily admits that this conclusion was her own invention, a fabrication conjured up for the sake of new questions, exploiting the liberties of the historian to infuse the past's gaps with her own fancies. And though it has no concrete basis in historical truth (and could, therefore, qualify as a lie, should you wish to press that charge), the function is finally, again, complex and enervating, touching on the uncanniness we sense when an experience feels both real and imagined. Art, in this case, points out the artistry of history, and the past's ability to tell itself apart from us. There is, indeed, a sharp sound to this idea's arrival, as it's one that prompts us to consider if the removal of truth from life might be only a small sacrifice.