In her multi-layered digital works currently on view at the SCHIRN Kunsthalle Frankfurt, artist Elizabeth Price restages overlooked histories and cultural and socio-political occurrences. Price’s videos raise questions of power, gender, value, and language and explore them in the shared space of technology and culture. For V/A and SCHIRN MAG artist and writer
Katrina Palmer talked to Price about “fabulating” as an artistic tool for shaping the present and reimagining existing narratives. The interview is co-published by SCHIRN MAG.

Text KATRINA PALMER
Photos ELIZABETH PRICE & SCHIRN

Katrina Palmer One of the many things that intrigues me about your work is its ability to disrupt established social memory and challenge the hierarchical spatial metaphors that dictate what is forgotten or remembered. It exposes the structural hegemony that promotes a perceived natural order and its inherent value judgments. In terms of spatial thinking I understand part of your creative process in terms of an archaeological unveiling. I’m curious about the connection between future-oriented thinking and this metaphor and how it relates to power structures.

Elizabeth Price I am interested in things that are regarded as subordinate, low, or base. The prevailing status of an artifact is something I will express frankly, if satirically, in my work, often using spatial metaphors. You are right to say that many of the things that are featured in my work have been to some extent forgotten. Part of the reason why I am interested in them is exactly because they are not fully remembered – and my reason for working with them isn’t simply to rectify this. I mean, a meaningful ‘rectification’ isn’t usually possible, but even when it is, that would never be the limit of my commitment. I’m not trying to elevate the things that I’m interested in, to move them into a category of greater value. I’m interested in the psycho-social consequences of them being almost forgotten.

Maybe a better way for me to answer the question would be refer to an aspect of the work itself. I mainly use the present tense – or, rather, the chorus of speakers that narrate my videos usually speak in the present tense: the tense of the viewer’s experience. Whether the narrators are addressing a social or cultural history or framing a futurological fiction, they will usually make reference to the present, to the ‘here,’ the ‘now,’ the ‘this’ of the viewer. My objective is always to create a kind of un-lifelike liveliness, a theatrical ‘liveness,’ for the artifacts I present. I do this to convince the viewer that the matter in question, the history being presented, is not settled and that this unsettledness is present in the room.
This leaves the possibility of something beyond what it is there already. Fantasy becomes essential to the everyday: not deceit or half-truths but the imaginative fabulation that allows us to invest desire or belief in what we can’t see; not only the other two legs of the chair we’re about to sit on but also more capacious alternative realities, novel trajectories, or thoughts and fictions that come into play as speculative presence, realized through creative practice. Do you think fabulation isn’t so much about the new but about recycling and attending more closely to what’s there in the present?

Absolutely. For me fabulation is never about making something new. It is about taking the stuff we collectively inherit, that we had no hand in, that we didn’t shape but which shapes us, and making it do other work, adapting it for other purposes. I would describe this as something that falls between ‘the other two legs of the chair we’re about to sit on’ and the ‘capacious alternative realities, novel trajectories, or thoughts and fictions that come into play as speculative presence’ you outline above – in so far as I think that potentially radical departures are possible on the basis of ordinary knowledge.
There was a moment in making “THE WOOLWORTHS CHOIR OF 1979” when I properly understood this. I was researching the testimony of witnesses to a fire in a department store. They described how a group of female shop-workers, trapped in the building behind barred windows, started throwing small ceramic objects such as cups and plates out of the window. Reading this, I became emotionally engaged by the women’s actions in ways not limited to the peril of the fire itself. At first I thought it was the image of the department store evacuating its commodities that interested me, then perhaps that I experienced it as a furious dissolution of the domestic ideal. And yes, these lines of flight did interest me, but I realized that what really excited me was the idea of a cup being reimagined as a sound-making thing. In a critical moment quotidian objects were radically reinvented by these young women to raise an alarm. And it worked: they escaped.

The title of the show at the SCHIRN refers to this lesson, and the gesture of breaking the Jacobean wineglass in “A RESTORATION” is a conscious nod by me to the invention of the Woolworths escapees. The glass was made in England as a souvenir following the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. It is engraved with an image of Prince Charles (later the restored King Charles II) during the earlier civil war. On the glass Charles is depicted perched precariously in the high branches of an oak tree during the battle of Worcester. As the story goes, undetected by Roundhead soldiers below, he was able to flee and in doing so to secure the survival of the monarchy.

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I remember the curator at the Ashmolean Museum showing me this glass, holding it in his hand. All I could think about was it falling out of his hand and smashing on the floor. (Maybe I thought this because of the ingenuity of the Woolworths escapees? Maybe I thought it because the glass itself expressed the threat of a fall?) I asked the curator if it was possible that this artifact also conveyed a subliminal revolutionary message? Given that this souvenir of the Restoration was rendered in such delicate glass and called to mind the risk of a fall might it not also express, even unconsciously, a desire that the monarchy would not endure?
He didn’t agree, and art-historically he is right. I would not dispute that this object was created, exchanged, and preserved as a royalist symbol, but I would also argue that in spite of this he’s wrong too insofar as the object does entail some contradictions, which a different narration might emphasize. I certainly think this object allows you to imagine a different, unfulfilled history: Charles falls out of the tree, lands (crash!) on the ground, and is captured by the Roundheads. Much like a shattered glass, the patrilineal monarchy cannot be put back together.

This interpretation may be perverse, but it is not a lie. Indeed, my story only has rhetorical power if you also know what actually happened. Whenever I propose a recourse to the imagination in relation to a historical artifact in my work, I am not just making stuff up. I am not saying history doesn’t matter or that making stuff up shouldn’t be distinguished from history – I’m applying imagination to the inconsistencies and unfulfilled possibilities of the artifact. I’m saying that the past’s present conditions are available for radical invention.

KP Your work “UNDERFOOT” (2022) shows photographs of a library before it’s inhabited by books and readers. Is there an analogy between the plans for the library prior to the public and the solitude and level of exactitude that is inherent to you working in your studio? What does the presence of the public do for the work?

EP The building featured in “UNDERFOOT” is the Mitchell Library in Glasgow, Europe’s largest public lending library. Building work started in 1972 but was not finished until 1980. On completion the Council could not afford to open the building nor start populating it with books for six months. It was during this interregnum that those extraordinary photographs were made. This false start to the library’s life interested me as well as the fact that it landed outside of its own historic moment. The concepts of public space, of the public itself that underpinned its design, had radically changed in the interval since, most particularly with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979.

It was possibly one of the last buildings of its kind: expressing the values of the post-war progressive thinking through modernist design. And there were aspects of its design that were unusually generous, that expanded the function of the library: the inclusion of carrels – spaces to make noise – and a space called a ‘splash area’ in the art reading-room: a tiled area fitted with sinks and easels for making art. Amazing, right?

The building imagined a rather different future for its inhabitants than the one they encountered. I think it is impossible to look at them and not think of Mark Fisher’s writing on hauntology and popular modernism. The first half of my film acknowledges this unfulfilled future, but after a few moments of considering these images
they become less optimistic, less simplistically benign. Perhaps because there are no books, no stories, we search for the stories of the space itself. I think the second part of the film considers some consequences of this.

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As for the emptiness: yes, hardly any of my videos feature human action. Whenever they do, it occurs in found footage. I don’t ever point my camera at other people. I’ve made only four films that feature existing architectural spaces, but I think just about every video I’ve made summons up a specific institutional or ideological realm: a place made of ideas, laws, conventions. And I guess every time a question I ask myself and pose to others, at some point in each video is – can we survive in there? Or, rather, can we survive in here? That place is always called ‘here’ by the narrators. I do this to bring it into tension with the literal site of the installation and the corporeal, embodied presence of those watching and listening. In this regard the audience is essential for the work – they populate it and complete it.

And the precision? I think that is because the expressiveness of my art relies above all upon timing. The precise timing of a joke, a gesture, a narrative turn, or suspense – the precision of rhythm or beat in musical composition and for choirs. In visual art we tend to think exactitude lies in opposition to an experimental approach, but my experiments in the conjunction of writing, sound, and image seem to require it. If we think of music or dance or performance, precision is usually essential to formal experimentation, so maybe it’s not so surprising. But, I think you are right; there is something in the exactitude which does follow from the rather intense, social isolation I experience in making the work.

KP Can I take you back to the library photographs? The luminous whites of still and empty chairs in the archival images highlight the spectral yet-to-be-present figures. In place of people the lives of oak trees, black bean, and teak are stultified in veneer; peonies and lotus blooms are mediated through technological processing and synthetic representation. These elements are part of the restless immediacy or the ‘unlifelike liveliness’ of this work as I understand it. It is unsettling – and necessarily so. Given the attention you pay to the particularity of the gestures of performing bodies; of objects, their surfaces, and contours; their materiality; and how they are
I think some of my work is memorial, about mourning, about grief. “UNDERFOOT” is about being overwhelmed by memory, a sort of panic attack, of feeling ensnared within an undergrowth of ancient and modern historical forces. In that empty, high-modernist building I was surprised to discover the presence of the medieval gothic, and in the medieval gothic it is possible to discern the image of a forest. The gothic cathedral is a forest made out of stone, which is a deathly, uncanny image. Now, if that library is also a sepulchral forest, the silvery, flayed trees it is bounded by were seeded across the former empire, maybe 100 years ago. If we unravel the carpets their elements would disperse similarly. With this in mind, the function of these things within that library, to enclose and mute its sonic world becomes somehow dreadful – full of dread. This is a rather wild, anxious, hallucinatory leap. But, I’m not saying this is what the library ‘really’ means, rather that this meaning is discoverable – it also lives – microscopically – in its detail.

So, anyhow... There are these contradictory strands of feeling and thought that occur through the work, but ultimately I think perhaps the reason why the empty library induces anxiety, is because without its books, its stories, we experience it as an abstraction, one that is surprisingly austere and inhospitable.

Do your videos intentionally create an unsettling experience through shifting surfaces and a heightened present tense? The repetition of “HERE” and “NOW” in your texts manifests in the room, demanding attention and engagement with the evolving meaning of these terms. This anticipation arises from the interplay of words, silences, spins, pauses, falls, sways, and interruptions. The inclusion of “YES” in your scripts shifts the present into a sensual experience, involving the audience and creating a shared understanding. The cumulative effect of the repeated “YES” is both subtle and assertive, transforming discrete affirmations into an ecstatic, almost eroticized conviction across your projects. Is this accumulative approach intentional or just my own imagination?

I think the ‘yes’ is a moment of admission. By admission I mainly mean allowing something into the work: a transformative idea, a perverse thought, a desire, feeling or sensation. In every work there is something like it; a drama, crisis or emergence that is often announced with a ‘yes’. Ok, let it in.

The ‘yes’ moment isn’t always straightforward, though. Sometimes it expresses the lure of deleterious or repressive ideas, the injunctions of advertising, the exhortations of institutions. The narrators say ‘yes,’ but I think: ‘NO!’ But regardless of this, I think there is always a kind of pleasure and relief in the expression of the affirmation itself. Your description seems right to me – I feel something like this, of being simultaneously present and transported.
There is another tension there: the profound pull of a defining cultural identity.

To be totally candid, I think it is influenced by a memory of a religious experience. I was raised in a devout Roman Catholic family, and I often suspect the contours of something Catholic in the aesthetic character of these moments, which usually include rhythm and melody and imply dance. (I don't mean they look or sound Catholic, but that they permit something that Catholic ceremonials did). These are conscious pre-occupations of mine – part of my interest in pop music, for example, is because it offers secular space for certain intense, collective experiences that previously occurred within religious events. I often detournement existing footage of pop performance to express a more ancient form of lamentation, for example. But my fascination with these moments exceeds research interests. There is another tension there: the profound pull of a defining cultural identity. I'm not ideologically Catholic anymore, but my aesthetic imagination was shaped by Catholic culture.

I've been tempted to allude to an incident in our own history, when I handed you some of my writing with a separate section of dubious and disruptive writing at the base of the page, apparently rejected edits, but it not being clear if that was intended to be read or not. There's a parallel here with the way you work in your audio-visual editing process, and I wonder if it says something about maintaining access to those excessive or obscene elements that are almost forgotten in order to inform a contended present?

Yes, I remember that piece of writing, with the notes that tailed off, seeming half-finished, out of sequence, pornographic. It was great how it seemed to break down as prose and disassemble into fugitive thoughts. And yes, I think this relates to aspects of my own process in the sense that I don't discard elements but inter them on the video-editing timeline. I bury them under other things. This is not because they are necessarily more excessive or obscene; it is often because they are similar but different to the thing concealing them.

I think when I'm editing, I'm looking for hidden patterns, but you only get to name a pattern after observing it. To look for a pattern you haven't identified yet is to be lost but alert. And I think in this frame of mind imaginative leaps can be wild, funny, paranoid, morbid.... As I conclude a work, I'm always juggling how many of these leaps can be expressed, or whether they must remain buried. I often change my mind again and again. Perhaps this contributes to the sense of things being unsettled, being contended in the present, because I'm often unsure about even the most provisional kind of settlement in concluding a work.

But in your text there is also the idea of waste... the thoughts for which no place has been found. There is always so much of this in making art: the half-formed, semi-embarrassing ideas that hang around like litter, at the end of a text, at the bottom of a timeline, in a folder called 'misc' or 'stuff'. So to conclude I'm going to use a half-formed note that I made trying to answer a part of one of your questions, concerning sculpture (which has also now been edited out)...

"...if we go back to the sound-making cups, the gesture (of the Woolworths escapees) is not just a detournement of the cups' function; it is also a sort of animism. The women need to break the cups to raise the alarm, because their voices are not enough. They get the cups to speak, to shout, to announce on their behalf...."
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