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““Exhibition Picks.” Mathew Buckingham's
Situation Leading to a Story”
Institute of Greater New York, P.S. 1, Queens
By Melissa Dunn

Buckingham's project began with the discovery of four canisters of film on a New York sidewalk along with several clue: a box from Best & Co., a defunct department store; names, Mr. Harrison M. Dennis and Mrs. Lillian A. Dennis; and an address, 52 Underhill Road. Buckingham, an artist-detective, picks up the trail, becoming fascinated with the possible connections between these four seemingly unrelated films, which turn out to be home movies from the 1920s. The films document an upper-class family enjoying a pleasant day in the garden; a bullfight; the construction of a garage; and a mining project in Peru. Who made these films and why did they abandon them? What connection do these films have to each other, to the filmmaker, to the artist, and to us, the viewers? What private or historical information do these films reveal or conceal?

Like Buckingham, we become voyeurs, passing from the public realm—a city street or a museum—into the private world of home movies. Buckingham reveals the boundary between these worlds as constructed and collapsible. A viewer entering the gallery must first pass a projector and walk around a wall that bisects the space. On the other side of this wall Buckingham has created a secluded area that suggests the intimacy of a living-room. This architecturally enforced intimacy emphasizes the home movie's role in capturing private, familial moments, and exaggerates our awareness that we are viewing publicly what the filmmaker intended to be viewed privately.

Projected through a small opening in the wall and into the space, the images appear to flash up out of the chasm of a distant, undefined past. We have discovered something secret in the children, the men in white jackets, the flowers, the afternoon light, a bull charging a matador—all exist in a preserved moment that lacks context. A strip of carpet invites the viewer to cozy up to the projected image tucked away in the corner like something forgotten, something we see out of the corner of our eye and reach down to pick up.

The artist's voice narrates the discovery of the films, his relationship to them, and the clues he pursues on the path he hopes will lead him to...what? He searches Ossining, New York for 52 Underhill Road, scours the phone books for Mr. and Mrs. Dennis, and researches the Cerro de Pasco mining corporation. Buckingham reaches an elderly Mr. Dennis by telephone—but no—he knows nothing about the films. He is puzzled, cranky, hangs up before giving Buckingham time to explain. The trail goes cold. The artist pursues other circuitous paths: the development and social history of home movies, the relationship of Ossining to Sing Sing prison just "up the river," and the impact of an American mining project on a town in the Andes. Buckingham gets no closer to the men playing croquet or the women relaxing in lounge chairs on that afternoon seventy-odd years ago. The private meaning of the films remains opaque, supplanted by the

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public, political, and historical implications that unravel into so many threads.

Buckingham's project raises critical questions about the methods and value of historiography. For Buckingham, like Walter Benjamin, the process of discovering history is personal, non-linear, and open-ended. We are confronted with an image from history that flashes up into the present; a tunnel forms between the suspended past and present moments that we can enter. History is a dynamic interaction between then and now, in which the past informs the present, and the present continually reconstructs the past. Benjamin viewed the historian as a kind of archeologist who sifts through the debris of the past, pulls out fragments, and brings those fragments into relation with one another. Buckingham enacts this process as an artist-flâneur who, on a stroll down a city street, salvages an interesting piece of debris. The smell of vinegar indicates that the process of disintegration is already underway, and that Buckingham has snatched the films from the perpetual dissolve of history.

Buckingham demonstrates that what we discover in the past is always contingent, relative, subjective—we have a compulsion to construct a narrative from fragments, without having all the pieces. What is frustrating is that our desire to get closer remains unresolved, even as the recovered historical details pile up. What is interesting and vital about history is the search itself, our own personal involvement, and the desire to create narratives. While history does not yield up definitive meaning, it does make a great, if unfinished, story.