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ARTFORUM

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**"Historical Fiction
Tacita Dean on the art of Matthew Buckingham"
By Tacita Dean**



Matthew Buckingham, *Situation Leading to a Story*, 1999, stills from a black-and-white film in 16 mm, 21 minutes



Matthew Buckingham, *Amos Fortune Road*, 1996, still from a black-and-white film in 16 mm, 21 minutes

Matthew Buckingham is very interested in the land that is America, or rather, the old contested land that was to become America. He examines its natural and social legacies with a scrupulous and intelligent eye, often inviting his viewers to look at its history through the everyday: the ground they stand on, the signs they walk past, and the trees they sit under—even the birds do not evade his particular attention. In 1999, he videotaped himself in Manhattan's Battery Park, trying to interview nonindigenous sparrows, which had been misguidedly imported into America in 1850 to cull a perceived overpopulation of inchworms. (He titled the work *Interview with a Cultural Follower and Public Space Inhabitant*—"cultural follower" being the term for any mammal, bird, or other living organism that has specifically evolved in relation to human society.) In 2002 in Los Angeles, he placed a poster reading SEPTEMBER 4, 1781 in the advertising space at a bus stop. Below it was the address of a website where any intrigued passenger could learn that the date marked the founding of the city, which was officially "settled" by a civilian community of several nationalities. Buckingham has inserted postcards detailing the historic failure to build a shipping canal along New York's Canal Street into postcard stands there, and he recently made two photographic works, *New Amsterdam*, 2003, and *The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, in the Year 502,002 C.E.*, 2002, that explicitly demonstrate a desire to examine the paradigms of American history. The first shows a group of schoolchildren visiting the American Museum of Natural History who are silhouetted in front of a life-size diorama of Peter Stuyvesant, director general of the Dutch West India Company, as he receives a group of Lenape Native Americans at New Amsterdam. The second is an image of how geologists might imagine Mount Rushmore will look in the year 502,002: a formidable bare rock face—face as stone erased—displaying little resemblance to the cultural monument and purported shrine to democracy it once briefly was.

Buckingham, a longtime New Yorker currently in Berlin

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on a one-year fellowship, does not restrict himself to American subject matter. Although many of his works begin or end there, he is also a social observer of a more universal culture, often using the rich pickings of history to generate new narrative possibilities. He researches widely, referencing and cross-referencing the results into a matrix of connections that he transforms into powerful images and narrations.

Closer to narrative filmmaking than his more recent work, *Amos Fortune Road*, 1996, tells its story through subtitles. Buckingham uses a small lattice of two-hundred-year-old roads in New Hampshire as the genesis for his film as “road movie,” which recounts the tale of two fictional characters—a woman teacher and her pupil. Buckingham guides the story by cutting between still photographs of the empty classrooms and amateur theaters where the teacher is staging a play with her students and live-action shots of the pair driving along the bumpy tracks that connect the narrative. Each day, they drive past a historical marker and see the name there of Amos Fortune, a slave who bought his freedom in 1769. They want to learn more about him, but the only evidence of his life that seems to exist is a handful of receipts in the local library, including the one representing the exchange made for his freedom. Buckingham thwarts the usual trajectory of the road movie by giving no satisfactory destination, only a conclusion: that true history is most often found in our social infrastructure and in the very age of the land we walk on daily.

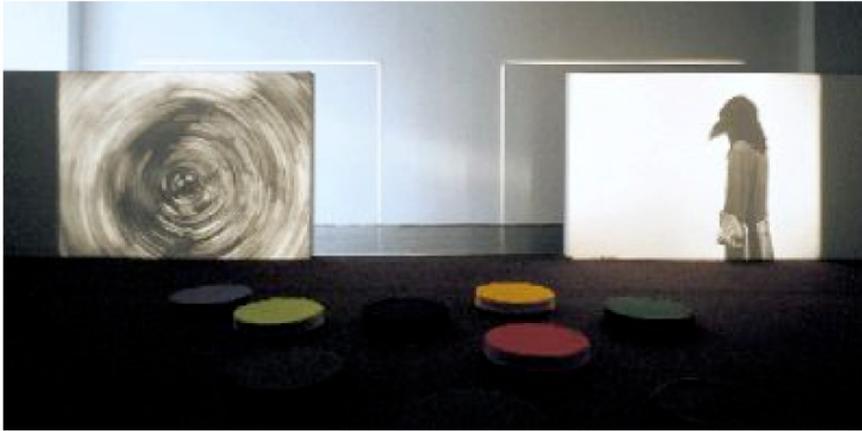
Buckingham often employs a disembodied voice to give ambiguous authority to his narratives, something he accomplishes by means of a voice-over in *Situation Leading to a Story*, 1999. Here, the artist himself recounts the story of finding four amateur movies dating from the 1920s in an abandoned box on a New York street. As we watch the black-and-white films, which have the existing titles “Garden,” “Peru,” “Garage,” and “Guadalajara,” Buckingham tells of his attempt to track down their onetime owner. He looks up the name that was written on the box in an out-of-date telephone directory and finds two people listed at one address. His subsequent discovery that one of the names no longer appears in a current directory makes the film all the



Matthew Buckingham, *New Amsterdam*, 2003, color photograph, 10 x 11”

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Matthew Buckingham, *Subcutaneous*, 2001. Installation view, Murray Guy, New York, 2001.

more about absence and the quotidian loss of personal histories. Home movies and photographs, once detached from the people they mean most to, often become intangible and unwitting vehicles of a collective memory that can, according to Buckingham, stand in for our fantasies of history. The installation specifically reflects something of the origin of the work. The projector is architecturally separated but still accessible, and the film is shown offcenter and at floor level in a small carpeted room, giving the space a domestic feel while also referencing the artist's discovery of the films as discarded objects. The work is about revelation: revealing the intimacies of the anonymous other. Buckingham deliberately guides his viewers through the installation in only one direction until they find themselves, as the title suggests, in a situation that leads them to a story.

An archive can be a subjective arena, often constrained by the whims and taboos of the time. For Buckingham, it is important to take an archive as a collection of raw data—not positioned and categorized by existing ideologies—in which he can roam and pick with absolute freedom. In *Definition*, 2000, a single slide of an empty, gable-windowed room is projected in a sloping, carpeted space while the voice of a well-spoken Englishman begins by telling us that this is probably the room where Samuel Johnson wrote his standard English dictionary. The voice continues by describing Johnson's extraordinary and near solitary feat of completing the work in only ten years and also ruminates on the very nature of the dictionary and how by marshaling language into homogeneous correctness it made a powerful tool in the exportation of cultural hegemony. The dictionary is the ultimate archive, and yet all we see is a single slide of an empty room. Through the juxtaposition of voice-over and image Buckingham causes us to wonder where all the information came from and perhaps to reflect on the subjectivity and vanity of such a mammoth undertaking. In another single-slide work, *Image of*

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Matthew Buckingham, *A Man of the Crowd*, 2003, stills from a black-and-white film in 16 mm, 20-minute loop.

Absalon to Be Projected Until It Vanishes, 2001, we see a statue of the mythical founder of Copenhagen on horseback. The twelfth-century Viking knight appears small at the bottom of the frame beneath the blue Danish sky. Each time the work is shown, the image is projected until the heat from the projector fades it over time into white light: An enduring symbol of national pride is delicately reduced to ethereal transparency. Buckingham has said that for him the principal importance of film is its relationship to photography: The projected image is produced through the holding back of light and so creates black with shadow. He takes this one step further in *Subcutaneous*, 2001, by filming the silhouettes of various people in profile in a work that investigates physiognomy, the pseudoscience of reading one's character in the surface of one's face. A voice-over, this time with a pronounced Germanic accent, discusses the relationships and rivalries between

Swiss theologian and poet Johann Kaspar Lavater, who is now remembered only for his disreputed book on physiognomy, which brought him transient popularity in the eighteenth century when these theories took hold. The installation consists of two film projections shown at ground level on either side of an opening in a freestanding wall. Brightly colored cushions to sit on are dispersed around the room. The film on the left begins with solid single colors projected one after another onto the screen before abruptly turning to black-and-white images. The film on the right starts with the black-and-white images: Lavater sitting in a chair; the branches of an old oak tree beginning to revolve into a blur; and an upside-down human face on which is drawn a face the right way up, with eyebrows on the neck and the chin as the end of the nose. The film then ends with the colored frames. For Buckingham, black-and-white is about removing visual information from the image, and color is about adding to it. Yet color here acts only as the abstract beginning and end to the two films, adding no further information than the more narrative black-and-white. Buckingham is thus more of an ambivalent commentator than his presentation might at first imply, and he chooses to convey as much about the absence of information on any given subject as he reveals

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Matthew Buckingham, *A Man of the Crowd*, 2003. Installation himself. Buckingham found in Poe's story a critique of the reputed view, Murray Guy, New York, 2003

about its presence. One of the final images in the film on the right is of a man in an eighteenth-century frock coat with the head of a bird, a reference to the fact that Darwin was nearly prevented from boarding the HMS Beagle on his way to the Galapagos Islands because the captain, a believer in Lavater's physiognomy, did not like the shape of his nose. Buckingham relishes the irony that Darwin's observations on the beaks of finches went on to inform his theories of natural selection. In this film and other works Buckingham seems interested in our obsession with seeing human features mirrored in the natural world: Trees (their physiognomic aspect occurring often in German literature), rocks, and birds all take on anthropomorphic qualities. The reversal of bird as man into man as bird in *Subcutaneous* must have offered the artist considerable narrative delight. Buckingham had visited Vienna only once before deciding upon it as a location to film his restaging of Edgar Allan Poe's 1840 story "The Man of the Crowd" (*A Man of the Crowd*, 2003). The original was set in London, a city Poe had also visited only once as a very small child, so his descriptions appear appropriately disconnected from the actual place and are, it seems, mainly borrowed from the writings of Charles Dickens. Vienna is also a place much mediated and imagined by others: It was the city of Freud, with its bourgeois café society and the urbane populace that Harry Lime was famously able to reduce to extinguishable little dots as he gazed down upon them from a Ferris wheel in *The Third Man*. It is a city already in our cultural imagination as self-consciously nineteenth century with, one always feels, a hidden underbelly where some mysterious other action is happening off-camera.

In Poe's story, a man who has just recovered from an unnamed illness goes out for the first time and sits observing the passing crowds from a café window. With the zeal of someone reengaging with life, he starts dividing people into types, using the techniques of typology and physiognomy that were common to the day one wonders if this is what first attracted Buckingham to the Poe story—until he sees an elderly man whom he cannot categorize. He follows the man for a full twenty

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four hours, trying to classify him. By then exhausted, the narrator confronts his subject head on, but the man continues past him, seeming not to acknowledge him at all. The narrator is left feeling that this man, or this type of man, who can never be alone and must always seek the crowd, is better left unknown, “like it is said of a certain German book that ‘es lässt sich nicht lesen’—it does not permit itself to be read.”

Buckingham begins his film with his “narrator” character speaking these words into a mobile phone before catching sight of the man he is driven to follow. The artist subsequently resists using the narrator’s voice but instead allows the wild sounds of urban Vienna to convey the shifting atmospheres of the film. It is exquisitely shot in black-and-white by Buckingham himself, with the light sometimes bleaching the image like amnesia. The camera follows the man following the man through many parts of modern Vienna, as well as along the small, narrow cobbled streets that are its emblem. At points, the follower disappears and one sees only the camera and the followed. Then the follower reappears, and the viewer is jolted back to the relatively inactive position of observing the narrative rather than taking part in it. The followed is awkward, gauche, and beautifully played by Viennese actor Heinrich Herki as the unknowable heart of the man of the crowd. At last, the follower confronts him outside the original café and, after the followed brushes past him, walks back inside, and the twenty-minute film begins again. Buckingham’s use of a continuous loop suggests that recognition, rather than dispassionate research, may have provoked the pursuit.

It is difficult to grasp the motivation for the pursuit or even the relationship between the two characters—or perhaps among the three, if one includes the camera—though Buckingham is clearly setting up a notion of doubling and reflection. There are many metallic surfaces in the film, and from time to time, one catches sight of the camera in one of the large plate-glass windows. The follower mirrors the followed. Even the manner in which Buckingham presents the work emphasizes this notion of reflection. He builds a freestanding wall with a small opening through which the film is projected, and places speakers evenly throughout the space. On the other side of the wall, a metal frame holds a piece of semireflective mirrored glass exactly the size of the projection beam midway between the glass and the projection wall. The result is that the mirrored glass throws back the image onto the freestanding wall as well as letting the normal projection through, thereby doubling the image. On entering, the viewer crosses the projection and becomes the shadow or the double shadow. For Buckingham, the mirrored glass refers back to the original café window, where the final fruitlessness of the pursuit reflects back on the pursuer and becomes a blank in which he sees himself. Buckingham found in Poe’s story a critique of the reputed objectivity of the scientific method, namely, that truth could be discovered only by hiding the observer. He finds in this parallels with undercover journalism,

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which was becoming popular in the nineteenth century, and documentary filmmaking, with its use of hidden cameras. However, unlike Poe's story, Buckingham's narration reveals no objective discoveries, only a dull foreboding about the inexplicability of the human heart. The protagonist must return again to the "archive," reenter the café, and start the process anew. And yet there remains a curiosity, which is intelligible, at the core of *A Man of the Crowd*. The young man follows the older one because he cannot recognize him but wants to, because the older man is from a different generation and has lived in, and is living through, a different time but is still with him in the present. The nature of this pursuit is analogous to Buckingham's relationship to history and parallels the many investigations that are his process. Rather than looking to the past to understand the present, he prefers to look for history in the contemporary, the now, following his subjects a few paces behind, unnoticed.