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ARTFORUM

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"Matthew Buckingham"
Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna
By Brigitte Huck



Matthew Buckingham, *A Man of the Crowd*, 2003, still from black-and-white film in 16 mm, 20 minutes

Once upon a time the fine arts were shown in museums, and movies were shown in the cinema. But now museums have mutated into movie theaters and function under conditions of darkness. The artist Matthew Buckingham, who lives in New York and Berlin, is an interface expert, and, with his most recent work, the subtle, sophisticated film installation, *A Man of the Crowd*, 2003, he has brought the light of the projector into the deepest subbasement of the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig.

The script for Buckingham's work is based on Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Man of the Crowd", from 1840. The tale, set in London – a city Poe never visited – is an Acconci-esque "Following Piece" avant la lettre: A man in a coffeehouse observes the evening crowd through the window, singles out a man due to the "absolute idiosyncrasy" of his facial expression, and follows him for twenty-four hours across the city. Despite his detective-like approach, this precursor of Sherlock Holmes doesn't actually find out anything about the object of his observation; instead he discovers the transitory, the fleeting, and the random in the modern city. The "man of the crowd" is a metropolitan type without a stable referent, a flaneur out of Benjamin's Arcades Project, a man who, on the one side, "feels himself viewed by all and sundry ... a true suspect and, on the other side, the man who is utterly undiscoverable, the hidden man. "Poe's text, to which literary critics attribute Dickensian ambitions, moors the mystery of the city in its dynamism and anonymity.

Buckingham's retelling transfers the action to Vienna. A fictional character steps into the space of the real city, though one whose topography is so heavily laden with cultural heritage that it obscures one's view of the present. Buckingham's man of the crowd resembles Günter Brus as he sets off on his Wiener Spaziergang (Viennese Walk),

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1965: Localities steeped in the history of Actionism and sites of legendary performances by Valie Export and Peter Weibel pass by. The topos of the "third man" doesn't conceal itself in the sewer system this time but hides in the persona of the cameraman who pursues both pursuer and pursued. Buckingham emphasizes the significance of Poe's story for journalism and documentary at the same time as he celebrates the city as a metaphor of transformation and its visual archive as a liturgy of difference.

Buckingham forwent the conventions of the projection space as cinema, with its frozen rows of chairs and rules for polite viewing, in favor of an open, participatory concept of space that – how could it be otherwise? – invited one to stroll and prompted active engagement above passive scopophilia. The film projector and loudspeakers functioned as sculptural elements, while in the center of the installation a semitransparent mirror echoed the coffeehouse window in the film. It functioned as a porous screen surrogate that allowed for the projection of the film on the wall behind while simultaneously reflecting it. The double image thus produced, echoing the film's themes of pursuit, doubling, and mirroring – not to mention that of endless slippage – suggests that Buckingham has imbibed the teachings of Jacques Lacan.