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ARTFORUM

“1000 WORDS Matthew Buckingham Talks
About The Spirit And The Letter”
Introduction by Jessica Morgan
Text by Matthew Buckingham

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WHETHER EXPLORING the colonial history of the Hudson River, recounting the life story of a freed slave in the American Northeast, staging a tale by Edgar Allan Poe, or recording his own attempts to discover the origin of four home movies from the 1920s found on a Manhattan street, Matthew Buckingham, in his film and video projects, often seems also to be documenting the exploits of an amateur enthusiast: himself. Indeed, the New York-based artist's practice might be seen as sharing common ground with the fast-growing hobby of historical reenactment, involving as it does the exhaustive researching and re-presenting of the past. Yet Buckingham is less interested in accurately portraying earlier times than in considering how any investigations of what went before inevitably reflect back on our current condition. Buckingham's works frequently include accounts of his own involvement in their production—the process of discovery, error, and frustration in unearthing events or facts—thereby making apparent the imprecision, personal decision making, and projection that underlie any attempt to record history. As the artist says, “The importance or unimportance that we assign to past events, here and now, is one of the ways that we define or even actively create the present.”

Buckingham's most recent project, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 2007, speaks eloquently to the problem of trying to understand the past with only the tools and mind-set of the present. Currently on view at the Camden Arts Centre in London, this piece consists of a specially devised installation and video in which an actress in eighteenth-century dress reads from Mary Wollstonecraft's writings, principally fragments of her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The decision to center this work on Wollstonecraft was dictated in part by her relationship to the city where the exhibition is taking place; however, to apply Buckingham's own method, we should also ask: Why Wollstonecraft now? Given the attention paid to her life and to writings by feminist critics over the past decades—and, as significantly, in view of the reevaluation of 1960s and '70s feminist politics, art, and writing under way today—Buckingham would contend that the reexamination of her life and work offers a productive means of engaging with the social and critical thinking of our own time.

—JESSICA MORGAN

THE SPIRIT AND THE LETTER is a project I have wanted to make for a few years. I was familiar with Mary Wollstonecraft's life and work through reading political philosophy and the history of feminism, but then, while researching another project, I discovered she had translated Johann Caspar Lavater, an eighteenth-century Swiss proponent of physiognomy. This intrigued me, as it pointed to the conditions of her professional life—the means of her self-sufficiency.

So I returned to Wollstonecraft's best-known work, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, and reflected on what happens to her language and ideas when we read them today.

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Matthew Buckingham, *The Spirit and the Letter*, 2007, color video, 18 minutes 30 seconds. Production still. MaryWollstonecraft (Kate Miles). Photo: Romain Forquy.

Wollstonecraft is widely credited as a founder of feminism, and while true in some ways, this assertion nevertheless raises interesting problems of historiography: The terms *féministe* and “feminist” date from nearly a hundred years after her time. How do we tell her story in a way that avoids teleology, anachronism, and projection? Much of the recent scholarly work on Wollstonecraft takes these concerns into account, presenting her not as someone ahead of her time, but as someone very much of her time. When we attempt to see her in context, we are less likely to find only what we are looking for or what we already know, and more likely to be surprised by unfamiliar or unexpected information that contradicts our preconceptions. This is often a critical confrontation: Reconsidering the past also means evaluating or at least taking into account the position from which we carry out our investigations.

I wondered what the effect might be if Wollstonecraft were able to revisit her own writing now, and I imagined staging a “visitation”—a kind of ghost story—in which she appears in the present and speaks her words live today, bringing them into contact with present-day experience. As a result of this thinking, the installation of *The Spirit and the Letter* has been arranged spatially to evoke a feeling of inversion. A chandelier protrudes upward from the floor, and an inverted mirror hangs high on one wall. A video image is projected onto the opposite wall, depicting another room where the same chandelier and mirror can be seen in the “correct” orientation. In the video, an actress playing Wollstonecraft paces across the floor, exits the frame, and after a moment reappears, this time walking

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John Opie Mary Wollstonecraft, ca. 1797, oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 25 1/4".
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on the ceiling of the room. Wollstonecraft has been placed on the ceiling to emphasize her presence as a ghost and to play with our sense of her as a radical, someone stubbornly objecting to convention and norms. In turn, I try to allow the spectators—who occupy a space similar to hers—to see themselves in her position, to identify with her physically.

The actress delivers a somewhat associative monologue that is mainly made up of fragments borrowed from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. In applying Wollstonecraft to our time, I knew I was projecting my interests or my agenda onto hers. I decided to set myself strict limits—to work only with Wollstonecraft's published writing and, for the most part, not to use her private letters, because I wanted to avoid reading her public life through her private life, which has happened so often. As in my other works reflecting upon past lives or events, I see this investigation of Wollstonecraft as a process of retrieval and restaging. There is always a certain degree of "failure" in restaging something, and this allows a critique to emerge, as well as offering a way to work free of received ideas about "history." In the excerpts from her writing that I decided to use, I shifted the tense from present to past, so that she appears to be commenting in the present moment on the condition of women as they existed in her lifetime. For example, in the video she says that women were "taught from their infancy that beauty was woman's scepter, the mind shaped itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only sought to adorn its prison." As the viewers listen, they juxtapose "then" and "now," perhaps asking, "What is the present condition of women?" or "Have things changed?" It is quite easy when reading *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* to think about how much has changed, and what life was like, but we are just as likely to be reminded that certain powerful social dynamics are still intact, and when that happens we catch a glimpse of how deeply we hide this reality from ourselves.