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'The Spirit and the Letter'
Camden Arts Centre, London
By Martin Herbert



'The Spirit and the Letter', video, 2007

Like Tacita Dean and Joachim Koester, Matthew Buckingham is a habitué of archives who, in his films and photographs, brings phantoms from the past to bear on a present-day world. There's rarely a scent of library dust either: the New Yorker creates the sort of social history you can feel, most apparently in '*The Spirit and the Letter*'. On video, an actress playing pioneer eighteenth-century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft stalks the ceiling of a Georgian house, reciting her writings, as if beamed into today to survey what's changed for women – the obvious answer being 'not enough'. On the gallery floor an inverted chandelier, matching that in the video, redoubles one's sense of reality being out of joint.

'Everything I Need' is quieter, but again effectively contrasts austere form against fervid feeling. One screen, using sound and subtitles, recites writings – autobiographical musings on love, persecution and banishment by Charlotte Wolf – Weimar medical practitioner, lesbian touchstone and friend of Walter Benjamin. The other shuffles through interior stills of the type of '70s German aircraft she'd have flown back to Berlin in after 40 years of exile. '*False Future*', meanwhile, is a fixed shot of people and traffic crossing Leeds Bridge: this being where, in 1890, Louis Le Prince supposedly shot the first cinematic film – five years ahead of the Lumière Brothers – before disappearing mysteriously, his achievement virtually lost to history. These, like the small wall texts recounting moments in the venue's history, printed backwards and readable with loaned-out mirrors, construct an uneasy past/present parallax. One might wish it otherwise, but history is rarely a closed book.