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OCTOBER

Spring 2007

“The Artist as Historian”
by Mark Godfrey
(excerpt)

As its title indicates, the intersection of language and commercial expansion would again be a crucial theme in *Muhheakantuck: Everything Has a Name* (2003), the last work I will discuss. The film was made on a helicopter trip that started and finished near the mouth of the river now known as the Hudson. Buckingham flew upstream for about twenty minutes, covering sixty miles, and then turned back, all the time angling a 16mm camera out of the helicopter so that the recorded shot is divided in three, with the river at the bottom, the land in the middle, and a horizon line and sky at the top. For the first half of the flight, the camera pointed east over Manhattan and Westchester, and for the second half, it pointed west, over the cliffs of the Tallman Mountain State Park and down to Jersey City. Though attached to a moving object, the camera itself was held still. There are no pans, zooms, or shifts in focus: the film comprises two twenty-minute takes with two cuts joining the two shots into one projected loop. In gallery spaces, *Muhheakantuck* is projected through a pink filter onto a low floating screen. This coloration hardly produces a nostalgic image – even though nostalgia is often described as the tendency to look to the past with ‘rose tinted spectacles’. Rather, Buckingham wanted to replicate the appearance of degraded 16mm colour films. If the pinkness of the image tempts the viewer to suppose that this film dates from the late 1960s, the views of Manhattan – including ‘Ground Zero’ – soon reminds them of the work’s real date.¹ A voiceover commences a few minutes into the film. It is read out in one voice (Buckingham’s), but once again different strands of content and register interweave in the 1 Buckingham has always wanted to show the work in a floating cinema on the Hudson. A boat would travel along the river, picking up audiences from the towns on its banks, returning them home after the screening. This proposal adds new dimensions of reflexivity: *Muhheakantuck*’s reflections on the history of the river would be offered to those who currently live by its banks. The role of the horizon would become even more significant. On board, Buckingham’s potential viewers would not be able to see a distant horizon – just the banks across the river and upstream. They would experience a kind of blindness not dissimilar to Henry Hudson’s. But inside the boat’s cinema, these

¹ Buckingham has always wanted to show the work in a floating cinema on the Hudson. A boat would travel along the river, picking up audiences from the towns on its banks, returning them home after the screening. This proposal adds new dimensions of reflexivity: *Muhheakantuck*’s reflections on the history of the river would be offered to those who currently live by its banks. The role of the horizon would become even more significant. On board, Buckingham’s potential viewers would not be able to see a distant horizon – just the banks across the river and upstream. They would experience a kind of blindness not dissimilar to Henry Hudson’s. But inside the boat’s cinema, these viewers would look down towards the horizon, and the horizon in the image would be all the more compelling. This proposal recalls Robert Smithson’s ambition to screen his film *Spiral Jetty* (1970) on the Staten Island Ferry. Smithson also included sections filmed very deliberately from a helicopter, and in fact the circling movement of the helicopter in the film replicates the structure of its subject. Despite these connections, there are important differences concerning Smithson’s and Buckingham’s attitudes to history. As Jennifer Roberts has suggested, Smithson situated his work in opposition to the nearby monuments celebrating the triumphant progress of the modern American nation. ‘Smithson’s crystalline model of time disregards linear, progressive, or triumphalist models by imagining time as an opaque encrustation around a fault or fracture.’ (Jennifer Roberts, ‘The Taste of Time: Salt and Spiral Jetty’ in *Robert Smithson* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), pp. 96-103). Like Smithson, Buckingham is sceptical about the way in which history is constructed in the wider culture but refuses to see history merely as a ‘futile series of turnings’; indeed he demonstrates the value of acknowledging forgotten histories: the possibility of imagining other futures.

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Matthew Buckingham. Photographic component of The Six Grandfathers, Paha Sapa, In the Year 502,002 C.E. 2002. All images courtesy the artist and Murray Guy, New York.

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Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), pp. 96-103). Like Smithson, Buckingham is sceptical about the way in which history is constructed in the wider culture but refuses to see history merely as a 'futile series of turnings'; indeed he demonstrates the value of acknowledging forgotten histories: the possibility of imagining other futures. 2 narration. At times the narrator is objective, at times authoritative, sometimes selfquestioning, sometimes aphoristic. The main strand of the narration concerns the history of the river imaged in the film and focuses on the early activities of the Dutch East India Company here. In the early 17th century, just prior to the moment of colonial activity, Henry Hudson was employed by the Company to find the Northwest Passage, a fabled trade route dreamt up by Europeans who hoped for a way of shortening journeys between Europe and China. Buckingham's narration attends to the way representation preceded reality as much as recorded it: cartographers drew the passage on maps to prompt navigators such as Hudson to search for it, and just as map-makers ignored actual geographical conditions, so too Hudson ignored the Lenape people he encountered on his journey, and their linguistic representations of their land. The Lenape name for the river was 'muhheakantuck' – the river that flows in two directions. The narrator explains: 'As fresh water empties out into the ocean, sea water surges more than 150 miles up the middle of the river.' Had Hudson attended to this name, he would have understood from the outset that he was sailing up a river, not the sea passage to China. Instead he continued upstream until the river grew too shallow for passage, at which point his crew skirmished violently with 'the people of the country'. Hudson returned to the Netherlands without having found the Passage, but the East India Company was nonetheless impressed by the furs he had procured from the Lenape. Company men returned to the river, establishing settlements in Manhattan, initiating more trade, spreading disease, and persecuting the indigenous peoples. During the forty year life of 'New Netherland' 'more than twenty-three thousand Lenape died.' Toward the end of the narration, just as the helicopter looks out over Jersey City, the narrator describes the massacre perpetrated here by Willem Kieft, the third Governor General of the colony. Buckingham seems to have been drawn to Hudson's story because the narrative provides a prehistory of the present. The text describes how the capitalist rather than nationalist or religious interests of the Dutch East India Company led to decimation of indigenous life and the destruction of ecologies, economies, languages and cultures, and such conditions prevail today. But there is also a specific contemporary motivation for Muhheakantuck. Near the beginning of the film, the narrator mentions that Hudson's voyage began on September 11 1609; at that very instant, the helicopter peers over lower Manhattan, a site now tied to the same date. Just before this moment, the narrator reflects on the 'arbitrary and systematic' nature of dates and how they are 'made meaningful because most of us agree to use them.' Though coincidental, the fact that Hudson's trip began on this date prompts the viewer to consider the history and

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repercussions of this voyage through the lens of the present. 9/11, one realizes, was preceded by a much earlier, and much more brutal assault on this place, one perpetrated by white Europeans on an indigenous population. There is also a suggestion that the hostility toward America manifested in 9/11 might have its roots and explanations in the historical barbarism of western capitalist activities. The histories of the Dutch East India Company and the Lenape must be confronted for a proper understanding of the present, post-9/11 moment: this insistence is the political message of Muhheakantuck. But to foster the viewer's imaginative faculties, Buckingham needed to resist an overly didactic presentation of his material. He had to generate in his 3 viewer a sense of expansiveness about the subject of the work in order to encourage a consideration of possible futures in tandem with a reflection on barbaric histories. This is accomplished most obviously by the fragmentation of the narrative, which contrasts powerfully with the free flowing river in the image. Different stories are woven together, one breaking up the flow of the other; different kinds of voices interrupt one another. Neither able to settle into the film, nor to trust the narrator's authority, the viewer is encouraged to subject all conveyed information to questioning. Indeed in many places the narrator insists on the contingency of knowledge, reminding the listener that none of the stories told is objective or factual – that each is learnt via other representations, that each is told for a reason, that each is told through language with its attendant histories and imprecision. If the contemporary moment necessitates the work of memory, at the same time it requires us to question all received knowledge. The form and content of the voiceover creates thinking space, but the openness of Muhheakantuck is most powerfully achieved through the form of the image – an aerial view looking down at an oblique angle towards a distant horizon. Right from the beginning, the voiceover subjects this viewpoint to historical and theoretical scrutiny, reflecting on what it might be to make such an image. Initially, whilst describing ancient toy proto-helicopters produced in China, the narrator muses that 'the dream of vertical ascent and hovering flight is a dream of suspending time through distance – of cutting one's self off from ordinary measures of time – surface time.' Clearly this 'dream' is not realised in this film - the aerial view hardly leads to a timeless perspective on the river. Later on, the aerial viewpoint is connected to the military use of hot air balloons. Aerial transport has facilitated surveillance and control, and in Vietnam the 'maneuverability [of helicopters] ... was a major factor in the US decision to go to war.' The aerial viewpoint is also connected to the cartographic gaze: 'By capturing land on paper, maps always construct their worlds in the image of a society, placing the unobtainable within reach – drawing places in order to possess them.'

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The aerial view has many problematic associations, but these are all clearly articulated so that the specific viewpoint offered in the film can be differentiated more powerfully. Whilst a map-maker or fighter-pilot would look down to survey the river beneath the helicopter, Buckingham looks across to the horizon and thereby refuses the authority and the possessive zeal of the cartographic, militaristic gaze. 'It's easy to forget that it is our eye that makes the horizon', the narrator notes just before the end of the film. Were the camera 'seeing' from lower down, the horizon would be nearer; from higher up, farther. The inclusion of the horizon in the image of Muhheakantuck reminds the viewer that the camera only sees what it sees because of the position it is in, just as 'we know what we think we know' only because of what we happen to have read and heard. As importantly, the horizon acknowledges within the image the presence of the space the camera cannot see. To use a term from the narration, the horizon testifies to the 'unknown'. By using a viewpoint that initially seems so suspect, Buckingham performs a powerful act of *détournement*, substituting a different kind of visual regime for the expected ones. Just as history must be acknowledged to understand the present, Muhheakantuck insists that it is necessary to recognize the inadequacies of knowledge and vision, and instils this recognition through its verbal and visual form. Muhheakantuck thereby places its viewers in a position of uncertainty and humility and it becomes possible from this position to imagine relations and futures that are different from the present – to imagine a future not just as a series of mounting disasters, but as a time of understanding and cohesion between the different peoples residing in the depicted land. Whereas Hudson 'falsely assumed the unknown not to exist', now, 'the unknown is more than an occasion for possibilities; it is a provocation that propels us on a journey, a route of unknowing in which we experience many of the ways that we do not know something.'