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# ArtReview

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"Rewind: Matthew Buckingham"  
Camden Arts Centre, London  
By Cherry Smyth



Matthew Buckingham, excerpt from *The Spirit and the Letter*, 2007, 18 mins 31 sec, continuous video projection installation, dimensions variable. *The Spirit and the Letter* is co-commissioned by Film and Video Umbrella and Camden Arts Centre in association with Frac Bourgogne, Dijon; Dundee Contemporary Arts; Des Moines Art Center and Henry Art Gallery, Seattle.

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## REWIND: Matthew Buckingham

TWO NEW FILMS BY MATTHEW BUCKINGHAM TACKLE PROTOFEMINIST FIGUREHEADS CHARLOTTE WOLFF AND MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT IN UNPREDICTABLE WAYS

words CHERRY SMYTH

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**WALTER BENJAMIN** describes the vanishing point of history as being always in the present moment rather than in some distant past. This notion is key to Matthew Buckingham's practice of confronting history as a construction. But his is no simple, predictable act of deconstruction that becomes clever-clever with its unearthed archival facts. Instead Buckingham uses a meditative, poetic detaching of image and text until both the past and present are undone.

Influenced by installation techniques of the 1960s and 70s that made visible the means of mechanical reproduction, Buckingham likes, for example, to have the projector on show or to mimic the pinkish look of degraded 16mm footage. In *Muhheakantuck: Everything Has a Name* (2003) he filmed the Hudson River from the air and, in a leisurely, erudite voice, explains how Henry Hudson's colonising trip began on 11 September 1609. Already the altered, just visible, Manhattan skyline is re-situated by Buckingham's damning chronology. Using a beautifully associative approach to storytelling, Buckingham's digressions always dovetail into multiple meanings that you can't anticipate – in the case of *Muhheakantuck*, from Chinese toy dragonflies to the use of helicopters in Vietnam to the dream of selling vertical real estate in US airspace. In a style that recalls W.G. Sebald's fascinating blend of autobiography, fact and fiction, the narrator draws the listener in with the intimacy of radio. "I don't think of it so much as a voiceover as a voice, whether it's mine or someone else's," he says. "I'm intrigued by circumstances where a voice is put over a system – in a train station or aeroplane – and there is that split attention. Then you have to keep track of the visual in a real space or in an image. I open up that gap between image and text in critical ways."

In his current project, Buckingham brings his historical imaginings to the work of two women: Charlotte Wolff and Mary Wollstonecraft. Wolff was a Jewish doctor who worked in a family planning clinic in Weimar Germany and lived in an open lesbian relationship. After being arrested by the Gestapo for impersonating a man, she fled to Paris in 1935 and later to London. Forbidden to practise medicine, she took up chiromancy (hand-reading) and wrote books about same-sex relationships. Buckingham is interested in the sense of identification as a German that blinded Wolff to what was happening around her before she was arrested and, for others, enabled the Nazi persecution. As Buckingham explains: "The question of vigilance is central to Wolff. She ties that vigilance to all forms of progressive thought – that such forms are never completely safe, that they've never been fully achieved. I've tried to let that echo in the present."

In 1978 a German lesbian activist group invited Wolff to return to Berlin for the first time. Buckingham's film *Everything I Need* (2007) is set in a preserved Caravelle jet of the type that may have carried Wolff back to London and triggered what was to become her 1980 memoir, *Hindsight*. In an unpredictable move typical of Buckingham, the flight attendant's voice that conveys Wolff's ideas is read by actor Ingrid Metz, the 'voice of the Berlin U-Bahn', Berlin's underground system. In a strategy that echoes Wolff's resistance to categorisation, no images of Wolff appear. The audience will be left with their own picture of her.

"Who does the naming when the unknown is falsely assumed not to exist?" asks Buckingham in *Muhheakantuck*, when he discovers that Hudson's crew called the Native Americans 'the people of the country'. Similarly, in the new work *The Spirit and the Letter* (2007), he explores the question of how Mary Wollstonecraft's ground-breaking *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) could exist when feminism wasn't supposed to have been imagined yet. Wollstonecraft once wrote, 'I do not wish [women] to have power over men, but over themselves.' By resetting her writing in the present tense, separating it from her infamous biography, Buckingham tries to dismantle the idea of post-feminism and examine what conditions could provoke another Wollstonecraft. Buckingham asks how her public life can be re-received without the contentions around her private life, which overshadowed her work. Rather than situate her as a visionary, ahead of her time, Buckingham draws on feminist theorists like Cora Kaplan to place the writer as someone expressing their time, and in that, expressing ours too. "I think it's impossible to be ahead of your time," Buckingham says. "Wollstonecraft wasn't a totally unique person but was connected to other women writers. I try to invoke a community of voices, rather than a single voice."

In the nineteenth century, women who stepped out of line socially, intellectually or sexually were often named 'inverts', for what was seen as their 'inverted' femininity. *The Spirit and the Letter* anticipates this term by turning an eighteenth-century drawing room upside down to capture the effect of Wollstonecraft's radical rethinking of identity by showing her miraculously walking on the ceiling.

Matthew Buckingham's new films, including the site-specific installation *Specularia*, are at Camden Arts Centre, London, until 1 July

Everything I Need, 2007, video installation. © The artist