

ARTFORUM

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“Matthew Buckingham”
Murray Guy
By Brian Sholis

“Someone with historical sense sees reality differently: in four dimensions,” notes historian Gordon S. Wood. “If it is self-identity that we want, then history deepens and complicates that identity by showing us how it has developed through time.” Artist Matthew Buckingham clearly possesses this historical sense, and his nuanced understanding of time has informed a decade’s worth of installations that use time-based media (film, video, and slide projection) to imaginatively conflate past and present. Buckingham’s alignments of story and image, whether anchored in dry historical fact or conjured from evocative fragments, are palimpsests that instruct and entertain, expanding viewers’ sense of identity. This exhibition featured two recent installations, one of which ranks with *A Man of the Crowd*, 2003, as among the artist’s best to date.

False Future, 2007, resurrects the little-known life story of Louis Le Prince, the French inventor who is now credited with discovering how to record motion pictures onto film several years before the better-known Lumière brothers. The narrator of Buckingham’s ten-minute 16-mm film, speaking in French subtitled in English, describes Le Prince’s late-1880s experiments with recording technology and relates his mysterious disappearance from a Dijon-Paris train in September 1890, just prior to a trip to the United States on which he was to promote his camera. Among the items discovered after his vanishing was a twenty-frame (one-second) fragment of footage shot at the Leeds Bridge in England in October 1888. Buckingham’s film was shot from the same spot, and depicts pedestrians and white double-decker buses—substitutes for the horse-drawn carriages and strollers in Le Prince’s fragment—crossing the bridge in slanting late-afternoon light. The image, projected onto a white sheet strung diagonally across the middle of the gallery, likewise echoes the work of the earlier inventor, who is said to have tested his films at night in his Leeds workshop in a similar manner.

As the work’s title implies, however, Buckingham is not interested solely in an act of historical exhumation, but also in what can be imagined of an alternative protohistory of cinema. What if Le Prince had survived, and his camera gone on to document the Dreyfus affair, or the 1893 overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy, or the anomalous nine-inch snowfall in New Orleans in February 1895? Such questions, posed by the narrator, are rhetorical, but images inevitably arise in the mind. The enormity of such a possibility is brought home by the end of the narrative, which offers close analysis of what is depicted in Le Prince’s fragment. Noting the number of buggies, men tipping their hats to acknowledge friends, and other stray details, the sound track instructs the viewer in how to look at the seemingly simple image

Buckingham has recorded just before the film loops and begins again.

Everything I Need, 2007, a two-screen video projection on view in another room, presents an autobiographical narrative by the pioneering psychologist, writer, and early advocate of gay and lesbian rights, Charlotte Wolff, whose life in Germany and England spanned revolutionary changes in social

attitudes toward women and homosexuals. The installation juxtaposes images of a 1970s-era commercial airplane interior with reminiscences occasioned in part by Wolff’s return to Berlin, in 1978, to speak to a new generation of feminist and lesbian activists. While the installation engages in a dialectical play of image and text similar to that of *False Future* (and, for that matter, much of Buckingham’s corpus), it doesn’t manage to provoke that work’s tantalizing sense of latent possibility.

—Brian Sholis

