

# ARTFORUM

November 2009

“Matthew Buckingham”  
Murray Guy  
By Joshua Decter

## Matthew Buckingham

MURRAY GUY

How to become a radical? Find yourself in the midst of a campus anti-war demonstration, mix in some law enforcement violence against your fellow students, and you have a recipe for political transfiguration. In a rather subtle, well-timed gesture of deft historical analogizing (to the issue of student activism and the Iraq war), Matthew Buckingham conscientiously excavated a seldom-recalled episode of '60s anti-Vietnam activism: On October 18, 1967, a group of University of Wisconsin–Madison students staged a peaceful sit-in against Dow Chemical's on-campus recruiting, protesting the company responsible for the manufacturing of napalm. Local police officers, functioning as campus security (a fateful decision by the president of the university), were authorized to use force to break up the demonstration, leading to a violent melee.

Understandably, this triggered a further politicization of the students, supposedly leading one to publicly declare: “I'm a radical! I'm a radical! I don't know what it means, but will someone please explain it to me. I've just become a radical!” (paraphrased by the artist for the exhibition's title). Buckingham exhibited an archival photo of a group



of these students (originally published in the university's newspaper), their expressions betraying shock and bewilderment at having witnessed the police brutality. In a delicious coincidence, the pro-Vietnam War Dick Cheney was a political science graduate student at UWM at the same time, indelibly linking this historical episode to the conservative ideologies that helped shape the Iraq war.

Buckingham reanimates stories, both real and fictive, to tease out their possible relevance for the present, their *transhistorical* resonances. The “factographic” character of location-specific engagement is carefully de-realized by the intrinsic *placelessness* of the filmic or still image. History is here considered a discursive method, the artist manipulating the codes of film, photography, and other projective media environments to produce a kind of reflexive historiography. Buckingham has effectively utilized the heterotopic condition of the cinematic experience to transport the viewer to an imaginary space in which historical “knowledge” is understood as a conflation of research and conjecture. In doing so, he evokes Hayden White's examination—in his 1973 volume, *Metahistory*—of the fictive conditions of historical reconstruction.

Buckingham maintains a kinship with the notion of history as a story that is continuously reiterated to produce meta-narratives of the past. In “Will Someone Please Explain It to Me, I've Just Become a Radical (Nos. 1 to 12),” he seeks to reanimate and reconstruct the

aforementioned UWM episode in twelve photographs shot on-site at what was known in 1967 as the Commerce Building. With his usual diligence, Buckingham selected the specific locations within the edifice where events unfolded: bathrooms, stairways, exits, entrances, and other nodes. In these relatively small-scale photos, the codes of a straightforward, “objective,” or “neutral” visual condition appear to be deployed without irony, as close to pictorial reportage as one might imagine. They provide descriptive information about the mundane locations, yet are rather ordinary to look at. Their construction, in order words, appears to be almost wholly determined by contextual “reality,” and so there is a transparency effected here. The artist appears to be embracing the truth-telling capacity of the documentary gesture—but is this partly ironic?

Apparently little has changed in the infrastructure of the building over the past forty years, and so in a sense historical time, as embodied within the edifice itself as a neutral backdrop, has “stood still.” We are probably meant to experience the images as incomplete signifiers, as situational sets upon which we might project an imaginary reconstitution of that historical moment in Madison, so that we might productively link it to our conditions. Is Buckingham asking what it means to be a radical, or just political, in response to this administration's war policies, its ideologies of fear, and the complicity of particular corporate interests?

—Joshua Decter