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MOUSSE

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"Part of the Process: Matthew Buckingham"
By Kirsty Bell



Traffic Report, 2005.
Courtesy: Konrad Fischer Galerie, Berlin / Düsseldorf.

Kirsty Bell: What you are working on right now?

Matthew Buckingham: I'm working on a little project that is, in a way, a collaboration with my father, who was an elementary school art teacher. For a long time I've been interested in the politics of literacy and the ways that we take literacy for granted, and every so often I've worked on projects that deal with this. One of my father's assignments for his students was to devise a very simple way of cutting the letters of the alphabet from uniform sheets of paper and then, using one cut-out set of the alphabet, to make some kind of statement without repeating letters. I want to circulate this as a silkscreen print project where the letters of the alphabet are the work itself, and whoever exhibits it then decides what statement to make with them. I will also show photographs I made of my father demonstrating the assignment, so it will be a kind of double alphabet. My father's best assignments always posed a problem that could be solved in many ways and would also generate a discussion: what do you want to say? How do you use language?

Kb: You are also working on a new film project to be shown at the Power Plant in Toronto?



Everything I Need, 2007.

Mb: Yes, the Power Plant is organizing a survey exhibition within the next year and a half or two years – the date is not yet set – connecting some recent and older work with my new project, Subterranean Pass Way, which is about the Underground Railroad movement in the US and Canada. With this project I'm specifically interested in some of the philosophical questions this movement raises around the idea of a "moral community": the sense of identification with and belonging to others, who you may or may not know, because of your shared beliefs. It is also especially interesting in the context of The Power Plant and Toronto. Once the Fugitive Slave Law was passed in 1850, escape from the south to a northern state was no longer a

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guarantee of freedom, so Canada became the new objective. Tens of thousands of freed slaves settled there, forming lasting communities. This part of the Underground Railroad narrative, what happened after escape, is often neglected by Americans.

Kb: The Underground Railroad was a loose movement involved in assisting fugitive slaves to escape from the South – does the name have to do with the means of escape?

Mb: It was a very appropriate metaphor, as it were. It wasn't physically a railroad and it was usually not literally underground either, but instead a play on the new language that accompanied industrialisation at the start of the 19th century, and this new, "magical", way of travelling. It was a secret, self-organised, segmented network that deliberately didn't keep records and had no image of itself as a whole. Beginning with a few individuals in the late 18th century it grew, over several generations, into a powerful interracial political movement that formed the entire basis of the broader abolition effort. But, in looking back, the lack of documentation makes it hard not to project onto it.

Kb: When you come across an area of interest such as this, what are the first stages for it to become the subject of a piece of work?

Mb: This project is really still in the research phase – I've been doing general background reading to try to understand what is known about the movement, to see how it has been circulated and look at different historians' approaches. In the next phase I would like to interview a few historians about their interest in the Underground Railroad, and about what's at stake in the narrative for them as historians.

Kb: Do you see the historians as protagonists?



Hitchcock House, Lewis, Iowa, believed to have been a 'station' on the Underground Railroad. Photo: Matthew Buckingham. Courtesy: Murray Guy, New York, and Konrad Fischer Galerie, Berlin / Düsseldorf.

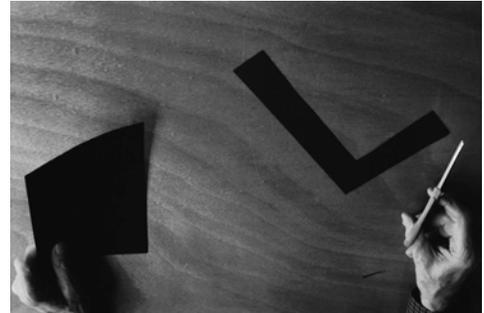
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Mb: I think of them as “protagonists of historiography” in a way – people who live with interesting questions, articulate them, and shape our understanding of the past – and I’m curious to see what might happen if I ask them to reflect on their own positions. I’ve worked with that kind of material in different ways. It isn’t often directly included inside the project in the end, but it’s very formative in setting up parameters or refining the main questions that I’m looking at.



Kb: So it has a tangential relation to the finished film or work, like the bibliographic material you include at the end of *Amos Fortune Road* (1996)?



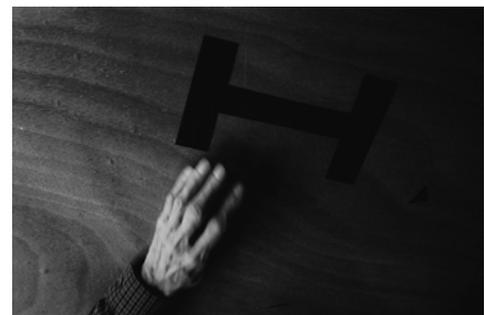
Mb: Right. When I began working with art, bibliographies were a way for me to think about the parameters of information itself, about the relationship between writing and its sources, or even an image and the research that supports it.

Kb: That has a tremendous effect in immediately making your work more porous, especially with film, which can otherwise feel very hermetic.



Mb: Yes, that's a tendency of media that I consciously try to work against: the impulse to synthesize, getting the viewer to forget that this information comes from somewhere. Including a bibliography is like a productive roadblock that says: this is an intersection of the things that I looked at and that went into this project. If nothing else, I hope it implies that these sources could be looked up and reconfigured differently by someone else.

Kb: Although you're still in the initial research stages for *Subterranean Pass Way*, do you already have an idea of how the work will be physically?



Mb: I usually work back and forth between research and material forms. The decisions are often made

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along the same lines as choosing to work on a subject: what kind of problems will a particular medium, or working in a space in a certain way, raise for me, and then of course in turn, for the viewer? So I haven't decided really. But this question of what moral communities we belong to will, I think, be physically part of the project. That will hopefully unfold in the social space of the installation, where the viewer, as well as I myself, will be confronted with answering the question: what moral communities do I belong to or identify with, and why?

Kb: Do you imagine this will occur through having more than once voice?

Mb: At this stage that could be very metaphoric but I think it's a good way of putting it. Even if there's no voiceover or language directly in the space itself, it's about the dilemma of how we use information to make decisions; not only the question of who's speaking, and hearing, but also of what do we do with what we hear? This is so central to the way the Underground Railroad slowly transformed from a means for helping people to safety into a political movement. For instance, why were some Northerners active in the Underground Railroad but not participating in the abolitionist movement and vice versa?

As an American, I think the Underground Railroad represents an unavoidable juncture of the past. The way people identified politically and socially in 19th century America is so formative to American culture today. I was reminded of it more and more during the course of the Bush years, thinking about how easy or difficult it is to hide within our larger social contexts, no matter what our beliefs are. When do we feel not only identification but that we actually belong to someone else in some way? Or what keeps us from feeling that connection? How do Americans identify with other Americans vs. those outside our borders?

Kb: Are there certain figureheads involved with the

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Underground Railroad who you've been looking at?

Mb: I'm curious about two things: this sense of moral community and also the role that violence played in throughout the conflict over slavery. A monopoly on violence is what institutionalised slavery in the South, and the fear of violence prolonged it for decades. The Abolitionist John Brown embodies that for Americans – his failed attempt at sparking a spontaneous armed slave rebellion with his raid on the Federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry pushed the U.S. toward civil war. His morals did not easily fit his own times nor do they fit our own, but for different reasons. He has been recuperated as a hero as well as denigrated as a so-called "home-grown terrorist". In a way John Brown is as impossible as the situation he found himself in, a symptom of the impossible moral conditions of pre-Civil War America. His larger plan to create an escape route for freed slaves through the Appalachian Mountains and protect it with armed militia – a plan he called it the Subterranean Pass Way – ran totally counter to the secretive but effective methods of the Underground Railroad and probably would have destroyed it as well.

Kb: Do you usually work on several projects at once, or do you tend to get absorbed by one work at a time?

Mb: I've always found it necessary to keep several things moving at once because I'm interested in how questions change over time and over the course of working on a project. Another approach would be to quickly record the condition of something, perhaps over say a month's time, but I've not very often done that. I've much more frequently tried to take a longer view, even within the work itself, to let it develop its own perspective

Kb: When you finish a work are you then finished with that subject matter?

Mb: No, there is usually a connection to something new. Even though it's not so obvious, almost all of the works are connected somehow. I started working with the computer as a research

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and writing tool as soon as that was possible and back then there was a lot of talk about “hypertext” and “hyperlinks”. Now we just think of them as links – but that interested me as a model for thinking. My stepmother was a librarian so I was also aware of cataloguing systems and the notion of how a “key word” search influences or determines what you find. There are many connections of that type among the projects I’ve worked on, shared concepts, phrases, or histories.

Take the question of literacy: perhaps now more than ever, literacy determines whose voice is “heard” and who is “listening”. The teaching of literacy – and its suppression – played a key role on both sides of the struggle over slavery in the U.S., and written slave narratives were central to the abolition movement. This was in my mind when I recalled my father’s alphabet assignment: his idea of giving young people a way to transmit their thoughts to a bigger scale, that’s what gave me the idea to work with him on that project.

Kb: The spectator of your work is made quite aware of his/her position in relation to the time and space of the work’s presentation, but what is not so clear is your own relation to it, as an author.

Mb: I guess I have consciously tried to play with that ambiguity, with the reliability or unreliability of the narrator, or author, to encourage spectators to not only evaluate what they encounter, but to also catch themselves doing that – making decisions about what they see and hear. Not “do I believe it” or “is it true” but “what does what’s being said mean to me?”