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Ann Lislegaard: Science Fiction & Other Worlds
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“Other Rooms: The Work of Ann Lislegaard”
by Matthew Buckingham

A free-standing white wall, finished on one side, bisects an otherwise empty room. The wall is held up by a series of supports attached to the unfinished side. It resembles a wall from a television or film set, or even a large commercial sign. Four speakers, one mounted in each corner of the wall, play back a dense recording of ambient sounds accompanied by a woman's voice delivering a descriptive and somewhat interpretive third-person narration concerning the actions and limited thoughts of a man she simply calls 'he.' This narrator has a narrow but unpredictable range of knowledge about her subject, largely restricted to observations of his domestic activities which obliquely coincide with and contradict the sounds that we hear in the background, such as a heavy door's creaky hinges accompanying the phrase "he opens the refrigerator...".

Occasionally the narrator reveals that she has access to some inner thoughts of this 'character' who "wonders why he always carries a heavy bag." The only source of light in the room is a single high-watt lamp focused on the finished side of the white wall. A special switch causes the light levels to rise and fall in tandem with the volume of the recorded sounds, illuminating the wall fully during loud sequences and leaving the room completely dark during silences.

Ann Lislegaard's *In Another Room* is at once engaging and alienating. Upon entering the space the viewer is immediately challenged to unify their sensory perceptions which the work continually divides and subdivides. Logical connections of sight to sound are replaced with aggressive shifts between light and dark. Impossibly synchronous events present themselves within the recorded layers of sound and are further refracted through the overlapping words of the narrator. Contingency overwhelms conventions of time-time seems to have folded in on itself. This atmosphere of atemporality resonates with and reveals the fabricated nature of time, exploring it not as an empty container, but rather as an experience in itself, which is a conscious product of human thought. Time is not a perceptual dimension, but instead, a construction based on the dynamic structure of the perceptual field. It is "the way humans stay tuned to the world around them." (Michon, 1985).

Lislegaard's narrator speaks in the present tense, remaining in the implicit temporal mode of the 'now' where human action is performed in relation to the surrounding world, existing after and before explicit

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temporal modes of the 'past,' and the 'future.' But Lislegaard even fragments the present with a narrator who creates a multiplicity of present moments by speaking on top of herself, illustrating a point the French filmmaker Jean Epstein made in relation to cinematic time: "... there is no real 'present,' today is a yesterday, perhaps already old, colliding with a possibly distant tomorrow. The present is an uneasy convention. In the flow of time it is an exception to time. It eludes the chronometer. You look at your watch; strictly speaking the present is no longer there; and strictly speaking it is there again, and always will be from one midnight to the next. I think, therefore I was... the present is merely an encounter." (Epstein, 1926, 1988)

The extremely bright and intermittent illumination of the large blank wall, triggered by the recorded sound, spatializes this fragmentary, unstable concept of the present, slowly transforming the wall into an image-less movie screen. The viewer finds her or himself looking for images of the narrator and her protagonist, his living room and kitchen, and the views from his windows which include a distant highway, some parked cars and a few trees. This lack of visual information points to the wall as an object, or divider of space.

These associative links between the various elements of the piece continually lead back to the title, *In Another Room*. Temporal rearrangements and spatial dislocations are joined together and the white wall suddenly becomes a relocated remnant of the space we are listening to in the recordings-almost a character in this domestic non-drama, a fragment of a space which is explaining itself-a talking wall, linking the room we are in with the conceptual 'other room' of the title, collapsing private domestic and public institutional space into one another.

In an earlier piece, which in many ways is the inverse of *In Another Room*, Lislegaard performs similar operations of defamiliarization on concepts of space with implications for concepts of time. *Nothing But Space*, 1997, also employs the structure of a free-standing wall which divides the exhibition space in half. While the lamp from *In Another Room* effectively materializes and dematerializes the white wall at the center of that piece the wall in *Nothing But Space* becomes a double-sided 1:1 video projection of images of an entire room dematerializing and rematerializing. Distorted people cross this mercurial space disappearing into its undulating floor, walls and ceiling, only to reappear moments later from the opposite corners. *In Another Room* foregrounds

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a soundscape which suggests images through their absence, and Nothing But Space depicts a conspicuously silent interior scene dissolving in constant flux.

Again the title cleverly focuses ideas in the piece in a very open way, suggesting that 'space' as a concept may not always be reliable. The phrase "nothing but space" actually excludes very little, because every space contains a multitude of 'places,' even if they are empty, which carry all the specificity people have assigned to them. Edward Casey (1997) believes that a universal concept of space is often substituted for place, but that being and experience always entail being 'somewhere' which is always a place. A disoriented or lost person has a more immediate relation to these questions and suddenly relates to their own sensory means of navigation differently. Perhaps the most succinct and direct expression of these concerns regarding time, space and place occurs in Lislegaard's recent piece *Out of Scene*, 2000, a series of four photographs reproducing a view from an urban apartment window during a heavy rain storm. The glass window pane is covered with rain drops. In the background there is a dense expanse of out-of-focus two-story houses painted green, yellow and brown. At first the four pictures look identical, but after a few moments very small differences in the position of the rain drops on the window become noticeable. Taken over a duration of five minutes, the group is arranged in chronological order. Perhaps due to their relation to time-passage, which the viewer actively reconstructs, or their slightly larger-than-life-size scale, these pictures seem to resist becoming 'images' and instead suggest the perceptual: 'views' disguised as 'perceptions'-the act of looking out a window with a quiet awareness of the temporal, spatial, social, and architectural elements which frame the experience.