

REVIEW ESSAY

Writing on the *What Matters* Festival, 11–15 April 2012

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First Impressions Revisited

I am making daily experiments now and find I am able to take passing horses at a lively trot square across the line of fire—bits of snow in the air—spokes well defined—some blur on top of wheel but sharp in the main—men walking are no trick—I will send you proofs sometime. I shall show you what can be done from the saddle without ground glass or tripod—please notice when you get the specimens that they were made with the lens wide open and many of the best exposed when my horse was in motion.

— Michael Ondaatje¹

The above quote is taken by Michael Ondaatje from an original comment made around 1870–1880 by Western photographer L.A. Huffman, from his book *Huffman, Frontier Photographer*. The photographer's words, a message from the past, are borrowed to mark the introduction to a poetic portrait of Billy the Kid, itself borrowing from many fragments of fact. It is one of the voices that comes to mind when I sit down to write about two of the artworks I was fortunate to see this year at the *What Matters* festival. The history of photography and the moving image has always included documents of animals and human figures in motion and from very early it has always included horses. Many of the pieces that were to be found in the festival, so thoughtfully selected and carefully sited at the Siobhan Davies Studio, refer directly or indirectly to the human experience of movement and draw attention to how we experience watching representations of movement. The artworks here also asked questions about the idea of choreography, whether stylized or incidental. And yet, not all the works chosen were intended to make us think about dancing in any particular way and not all of them even contained images of people moving at all.

In my memory of arriving at the festival, the first thing I encounter is entirely made up of the recorded image of the anatomy of horses—*The Four Riders* (2010) by Chaja Hertog and Nir Nadler. The video installation plays on a loop of almost eight minutes, projected onto four screens in the Research Studio on the first floor. I am immediately drawn into this as a very close movement study with its intense specificity and attention to detail. The deconstruction of the animals is emphasized by the four screens, which are life-size and running simultaneously. The muscles of the chest of each horse seem to become dominant in the image. I find myself thinking that in a sense this would be the part of the horse that is shared with a human body. On the upright stance of a centaur's fantasy body the human

torso necessarily joins the horse body in this place—the horse's shoulder girdle becoming a sort of second pelvic girdle on the front of the mythical man/horse body. But there are no centaurs in this video installation, and no horsemen, yet the title gives us the idea of the imaginary riders. The powerful chest area is also the part of the animal that would strike you first, fell you to the ground, in that imagined apocalyptic moment.

The artists' own online descriptions of the imagery include "wild and grotesque" and "restrained and elegant." They also cite Muybridge's nineteenth century photography and Durer's fifteenth century woodcut as inspirations. Even without these references an audience could recognize here something ancient or biblical, and perhaps an older, more ordinary relationship to the horse as a working animal. With very few visual clues I can gather, this is indeed filmed with the horses on an actual treadmill and the event of the shoot and the choice-making in the edit is quite present, if in the back of my mind, alongside the immersive feel of the sound and the rich surface of the image. The expanses of flesh do become like landscapes, the skin moves over muscle and although we never see the whole animal we are given enough information to know that these are big animals and are reminded by the scale and sense of power just how huge a horse can be and the size of the passions we project onto these animals even now. Many people still work with and rely on horses. Many of us rarely stand this close to one. What matters here? The encounter between the body of the viewer and the body of the artwork. A fascination with an image that is painterly, cinematic, epic and intimate. The horses are never fully revealed but I seem to get to know them. There is a sense of waiting and potential as the hoof paws at the ground (the floor of the treadmill). The eye fills the screen, returning my look. There is always a question in the act of looking at animals.

Writing and editing several weeks later, I plunge into this attempt to describe the work, revisiting my first impressions and finding a curious link. This installation, *The Four Riders*, and the very different work of Patrick Keiller's film *Robinson in Ruins* (2010), were the two pieces I experienced first at *What Matters* and for me they have become strongly connected. Coming across them both in close proximity in terms of time and space was of course due to the way they were brought together by the creative curation of Lucy Cash and Becky Edmunds. Later I felt as if I saw both on the first evening but now I don't think so. I also thought I'd written several pages of notes about *The Four Riders* but I hadn't at all. I misremembered, picturing them alongside the notes on *Robinson in Ruins* in my notebook. The connection I find between the two works is in a particular kind of rigor, a commitment to movement on screen and a patience with the passage of time, even though their form of presentation and duration is completely different. Curiously, both have little or no evidence of actual human figures—the four riders don't ever appear and in Keiller's film it feels like a long way in before we see any people in the long shots of the streets or landscapes. The humans that do feature seem to have the same degree of importance as any other figure in the picture, such as a road sign, or a bee, or a car. Yet I find there is a trace of the human body in the experience of watching each of the works. In both of these pieces something in the approach to the use of camera, the edit and the care for the subject in the frame tells us that we know we are seeing *because of* the eye of the camera and with the reminder that someone was there behind that camera.

The screening of Patrick Keiller's film, the third in his *Robinson* series, took place the evening before the actual Private View and the Roof Studio on the top floor became the

temporary cinema and performance space for the weekend. Before the opening of the other installed and durational works throughout the building, this first evening offered a single screen feature-length film, a chance to tune into the festival in advance, to get a taste of what mattered to the curators in terms of art and artists. Time was set aside for the particular vision of one artist to unfold and begin our thoughts and conversations around the field of practices to be found throughout the coming days. The curators called this a Pre-festival screening and this allowed an artwork to provide an introduction, a kind of foreword, laying out some ideas and concerns as meditations, as provocations.

Robinson in Ruins touches on four kinds of ruins: architectural, personal, ecological and economic. Keiller turns again to the landscape as "an appropriate context in which to examine the tensions between dwelling and displacement."² The film works on me as a kind of visual essay, made up of facts narrated through the "wandering" story of a journey pieced together through the abandoned documentation of an invented research project—which it so happens resembles the very research project being undertaken by the film's director. The fictional character of the melancholy academic Robinson has a wry humor as he persists in his investigations into social and physical infrastructures and their histories. Keiller uses fictional pretexts to deliver a measured, descriptive style in a survey of selected examples—from industry, sites of scientific interest, defense installations, historical sites and architectural curiosities. The effect is a mass of information, a dense narrative and a sense of the tip-of-the-iceberg in terms of engrossing facts and references that alternately make me think "I know that" or "I can't believe I didn't know that."

Scale seems to matter here. Attention is drawn to the 1940s mapping of the UK's oil pipeline networks and the British Council's mapping of oil fields abroad in relation to potential areas of war. Reference is made to the price of land, the price of wheat, the price of oil. The narration constantly connects back to histories of colonialism, and the politics of land and property ownership in Britain, specifically here, England. Stirring accounts of historical uprisings, including Peterloo in 1819 and the protests against enclosures of common ground at Otmoor in the 1830s, are outlined. But as Keiller himself points out in the publication accompanying the recent *The Robinson Institute* exhibition at Tate Britain (2012), *The Possibility of Life's Survival on the Planet*, quoting Robert Wade: "Some caution is in order. There is a recurrent cycle of debate in the wake of financial crises, as an initial outpouring of radical proposals gives way to incremental muddling through, followed by resumption of normal business."³

The hum of an industrial estate. A car pulling out of a large edge-of-town supermarket. A yellow lichen is captured, over several years, growing around the honeycomb pattern on the surface of the large green reflective road sign. It is identified precisely as *Xanthoria Parietina* and you would only notice it if you looked closely and returned later to look again (and again), carefully and closely.

The film's narrator tells us how Robinson "inclined to *biophilia*, the love of life and living systems." There are long takes of the eye marking on the wing of a butterfly appearing and disappearing as the insect makes its way around the last flowers on a prickly teasel. A white foxglove performs a slow dance, swaying in and out of frame. The screen is often full of extended moments with little apparent action but the image will always reveal a movement within the stillness—of trees and grass in the breeze or the progress of huge farm machinery moving patiently across a field.



“What patterns connects the crab top the lobster and the orchid to the primrose and all the four of them to me?”

Gregory Bateson



Grafting and Budding (2005), performance by Sheila Ghelani



From left: Siobhan Davies, Lucy Cash and Lin Hixson, in Conversation

What Matters.
Photography by
Andrew Downs.



A Self Portrait (2009) 3 mins 39 secs, Dickie Beau



Four Riders (2010), 7 mins 52 secs, Hertog and Nadler



Virtual Employee (2010), 2 mins 30 secs, David Brazier & Kelda Free



25-76 (2012) Becky Edmunds & Charlie Morrissey



Medearoom (2012) performance/installation, Julia Bardsley with Jacob Alves

The moon is moving away from the Earth at 3.8cm per year, and so has not always appeared to be the same size as the Sun. When it was closer, tidal movements would have been more extreme, and the conditions for life's emergence perhaps even more favourable.⁴

The movement and measurement of time returns on different scales, whether biblical, geological, industrial or agricultural. The film is full of history lessons and reminders of instances of short-term thinking—not least in terms of modern economics and the unplanned ways which familiar environments can become altered. There are no horses here, as far as I can remember, but there are cows and sheep grazing—on common ground, such as the former US Air Force Base at Greenham Common.

"In 1993, the Atomic Weapons Establishment became a 'Government Owned, Contractor Operated' or *Go-Co* institution [...] The government later sold its BNFL share to the Jacobs Engineering Group, a US company, so that the UK's nuclear weapons production was in two-thirds US ownership."⁵

Quite often something is shown to be covered up, changed, forgotten, abandoned or grown over, left to time and the elements. An image of dilapidation often uncovers the less than shiny aspects of a contemporary capitalist culture. It starts to feel that the wanderer doesn't have to search too hard to find it. It's all around us. But we know he spent some real time, noticing what is there, by the side of the road, and methodically turned the camera towards it, often repeatedly, often over several years.

The film *Robinson in Ruins* and the video installation *The Four Riders* both have a sense of ghosts about them. I return again to some of the voices that come to mind as I think about film technology and its fast-moving history of capturing movement that soon followed the first examples of still photography and its early love of portrait and landscape. I think of the voice of the photographer and also the ghostly voice of a fictionalized version of a wild young American cowboy, telling stories of traveling on horseback, at an earlier moment some time ago, in a history of Western expansion and progress:

MMMMMMMM mm thinking
 moving across the world on horses
 body split at the edge of their necks
 neck sweat eating at my jeans
 moving across the world on horses
 so if I had a newsman's brain I'd say
 well some morals are physical
 must be clear and open
 like a diagram of watch or star
 one must eliminate much
 that is one turns when the bullet leaves you
 walk off see none of the thrashing [...]

Michael Ondaatje⁶

Notes

1. Ondaatje, *Collected Works*, 5.
2. Keiller, *The Possibility*, 12.
3. Ibid. 12.
4. Ibid. 47.
5. Ibid. 38.
6. Ondaatje, *Collected Works*, 11.

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- The Robinson Institute*. Patrick Keiller. 2012. Exhibition. www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/patrick-keiller-robinson-institute