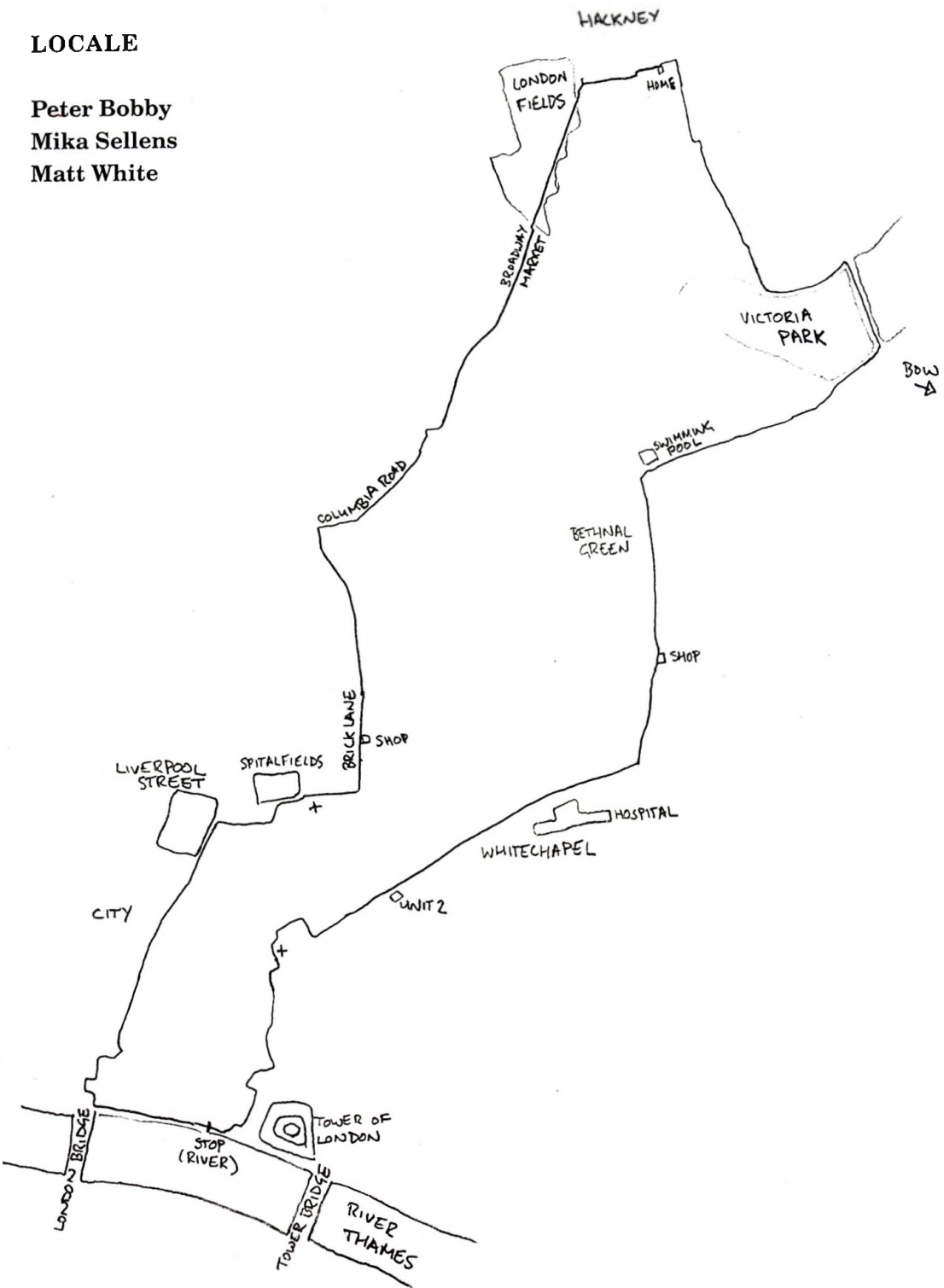


LOCALE

Peter Bobby
Mika Sellens
Matt White



Mika Sellens, map for Circular Walk 1: Hackney, City, and Thames, via Whitechapel, 2005

LOCALE – tenses and tensions

The conundrum of the status of the image has engaged western thinkers from Plato and Pliny to Baudrillard and Blanchot. At the centre of this perennial debate lies the precarious condition of the relationship of the image to its object which, in effect, speaks both of its similarity and its difference. Moreover, this fissure, this gap, is exactly the space in which the image may separate itself from its object, to endure, to persist. With the invention of technologies to make recordings of experience – visual and sonic images – came the interruption of the inexorable flow of time as the present fell into the past, in effect proposing then as now. Famously, Roland Barthes, contemplating a photograph of his dead mother as a child, noted the baffling and spectral tense of such images: this will have been. The three artists in *Locale*, each with their own medium – the still photograph, the video, and recorded sound – offer us a rich investigation of what we might call ‘the grammar of the image’ at the heart of their practices.

Consider Peter Bobby’s unpeopled photographs of those immaculately styled spaces in show homes contrived in their every aspect to seduce the viewer. Here we have the phenomenon of the doubled image, the image of an image, Bobby’s preened photographic surfaces acting as both relays and amplifiers, transmitting these glossy confections with a transparent fixity. For these spaces and the objects which inhabit them are fixed images too, every flower a generic image of a flower, every abstract painting a generic exemplar in a perfect harmony with the untouched and untouchable soft furnishings, all contingencies erased in pursuit of ideal, aspirational spaces. Their glossy perfection is hard won and *immaculate* a word which, in its Latin origins, means ‘without stain’. The price paid for this condition is the abolition of time itself, since that would render the spaces vulnerable to the contamination of contingency, the stain of change. No, these vases, we sense, cannot move or be moved, these chairs need their exacting symmetry, the concealed light sources must perpetually regulate and smooth out all possibilities of ebb and flow. In effect, these photographs offer us a tenseless present: this will have been, the future anterior, replaced by a glacial ‘*this is*’. The stillness of these spaces and the objects within them is best conveyed by the term ‘stock-stillness’, a term that defies logic in its redundant doubling of the absolute term ‘still’ but satisfies experience. However, this alluring promise of stasis, this abolition of the future tense, is, in truth, curdled with contingency: for these are in fact photographs of temporary constructions, honed to a honeyed but fleeting perfection. Bobby’s photographs would appear to conspire in the seduction as there can be no ‘decisive moment’ in his delivery of this mythic, perpetual present; he does not wait for the prefabricated unit to be removed from the site or the construction to be demolished or for the unit to be made over in order to sell the next phase of the development.

Yet, just as these photographs offer relish and delight in the perfections they portray, a closer look reveals some ripples disturbing their ostensibly imperturbable surfaces. For Bobby makes the most discreet and precisely gauged interventions: an elided space here, an unexpected reflection there, or a blank walled hiatus separating one zone from another, signalling exactly sufficient to detain and sustain our contemplation. He makes us think about these spaces which have been designed with the intention to undo thinking, to hide their ideology of aspirational consumerism under their artful transparency. Paradoxically, by arresting and stabilising these images, he returns time to them – time to think.

Matt White's video projection, *The Argument* (2001/02), begins by proffering the pleasures of voyeurism, furnishing the viewer with an opportunity to spy on a couple in the street locked into unexplained but entirely familiar tension. No sooner have we identified with this gaze and allowed ourselves a frisson of Schadenfreude than our gaze is rerouted to a fresh locus: now we see the same man from across the street, in his home, engaged in fixing a net curtain in the window through which we watch him. He attempts to secure the pole in place; his efforts fail; the pole will not hold, he cannot restore equilibrium; he looks down onto the deserted night street, his gaze and our gaze triangulated on the absent third party of his partner. The futility of his attempts to secure a private and serene space becomes farcical: the screen, a net curtain, which he is attempting to install, is transparent, no insulation against our privileged voyeur's gaze. But this privilege is abruptly challenged, the 'garrulous ribbon' of the narrative (in Barthes' memorable phrase) is cut, as White reveals the artifice of his story, going behind the screen and revealing the precise, scripted actions of a rehearsed experience. What we had thought to be the unfolding flow of the present tense (or that paradoxical version of the present tense that surveillance video offers us) is revealed now as the past: this is a restaging of what has been.

As in Bobby's photographs, we now see that White is constructing an image of an image. The almost metronomic recitation of the directorial instructions, delivered as a voiceover, dedramatises this unfolding and unfolded narrative. The male character's inability to suspend the curtain pole mirrors our own inability to suspend our disbelief. The screens separating time, space and event are all removed, leaving an uncomfortable transparency. If Bobby's photographs concern themselves with the ambivalent cumulative effects of the idealised superficialities of mythic spaces, White's piece is unequivocal as it goes about its business of undoing each layer of its own construction to reveal the flimflam of theatricalised space. The artist himself is emphatic that the piece found its genesis in real, observed behaviour, the 'reality' taking place in his immediate locale which we see enacted at the outset of the video. Somewhat after the manner of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, we may deduce



Matt White, *The Argument*, 2001/02, video

that there can be no innocent act of witness: our own viewing, it seems, is deeply embedded in the reflexivity of even the simplest narratives.

In foregrounding the syntax of his medium White requires of the viewer a series of renegotiations in the hierarchy of 'authentic' images, suggesting, perhaps that even 'first order' behaviour – the feuding couple in the street – represents a hyperbolic version of an anterior and no longer accessible reality. If we take this argument to its logical conclusion, we are required to see reality itself as a *mise-en-scene*, rather like the way in which Mark Boyle in an early and sometimes overlooked piece of 1964, *Street*, turned his front room into a viewing space. Pulling back the curtains, Boyle offered to his perplexed viewers whatever happened to be going on in the locale of the street as his subject: the real as image. White's video also requires of the viewer a reframing of our expectations of 'reality' and its representation and the interstices of the two: this dialectic powerfully propels *The Argument* at every turn.

Mika Sellens' new sonic installation *Circular Walk 1* (2005), is, like White's video, grounded in an actual experience in its genesis – specifically, a spontaneous and unplanned circular walk she undertook one evening from her studio which, by coincidence, included the locale of Unit 2. Just as White's video revisits and reworks an actual observed experience, Sellens undertook once again that same journey, at the same time of day, following the same route, making the same stops. This time, however, she made a sound recording of the entire journey – the recording that in fact provided the raw material for this installation. But Sellens' piece is by no means to be understood as a simple linear sonic reconstruction. Walking, thinking, noticing, remembering, responding, reflecting: a walk, even through a familiar locality, is, after all, a complex activity. For the walk – especially the repeated walk – calls to mind stirring phrases: 'a sentimental journey', perhaps, or 'an act of pilgrimage'. Indeed cultural historians rarely allow the term 'a walk' the innocence it ostensibly offers and we might, at times, crave. From the elegant *flâneurs* on their peregrinations through the streets of European cities in the second half of the nineteenth century to the Surrealists' pursuit of erotic chance encounters in the labyrinth of the city in the 1930s, walking through a city must, it seems, be understood as a complex cultural activity. As we walk, we are wholly immersed in a rich palette of sounds and at first this might seem to be incidental, as though we were walking microphones, mere passive receivers. However, psychoacoustics takes it as an axiom that the brain has the power to screen out a great deal of the sounds that the eardrum receives: our own subjectivity intercepts and regulates our perception. Famously, Rodchenko once said 'we do not see what we are looking at' and we might surmise, equally, that we do not listen to what we are hearing.

Sellens explores this discrepancy with sophistication in her repetition of her walk and uncovers the many differences that inevitably separate the second, repeated experience from the first. For we think of repetition as a familiar and powerful device to regulate and control our experiences (think of those dysfunctional repetitions that sufferers of Obsessive Compulsive Disorder endure). Chance, the incidental, the coincidental, the unanticipated, flux: those aspects of the city walk the Surrealists and the Situationists so relished seem inimical to repetition: one cannot, after all, repeat a spontaneous act, such as Sellens' original walk. In *Circular Walk 1*, Sellens attempts to explore such structures of subjectivity in their fragile and touching relationship to memory and event. What we hear on the loudspeakers and headphones installed in the gallery are different combinations of different sections made from her original sound recording and the sequence of the sections heard in the exhibition is in fact determined by the random function of the CD players used for playback. Sellens' process of editing is complex, based on selecting sounds as she progressed through the original recording from start to finish, her choices determined by, as she says, 'the events or experiences which I could remember most readily, thinking back on the walk. When I got to the end (of the recording) I returned to the beginning, and moved through again, selecting the sound relating to the next events I could remember. Eventually the only audio left related to parts of the walk I couldn't remember'. Her piece thus derives its essential momentum from her quest to discover a fresh hierarchy graded upon what she terms the 'memorability' of different experiences, any one of which may be linked to a correlative sound acting as a Proustian trigger. That rhyming linearity of time and the linearity of the walk – '*the garrulous ribbon*' – is thus cut and braided in fresh permutations in her quest to revisit the experiences of the retaken walk and in turn recollect the experiences of the original walk. The cumulative effect finally generates a fluid structure emphasising circularity over a linear trajectory. This Bergsonian flux of sound in effect offers the past as the present and this, too, has a spectral quality.

In addition to the loudspeakers and headphones in the gallery, other speakers will 'return' sound into the space outside the gallery, back into the locale of their origins, and of that original walk which was the genesis of the entire piece. Moreover, as John Cage would have been quick to point out, Sellens' piece is further suffused with the present tense – with the actual, real-time, ambient noises of the gallery itself. Including, perhaps, the sound of your own walking through this gallery or the rustle of paper as you turn this guide in your hands...

Paul Kilsby, 2005



Peter Bobby, *Temporary Marketing Suite I*, 2002, Lambda c-type print, 140×90 cm



Peter Bobby, *Temporary Sales Centre II*, 2002, Lambda c-type print, 140×90 cm

LOCALE New and recent work
in photography, video and sound
Peter Bobby Mika Sellens Matt White
7 October – 11 November 2005

Locale is the culmination of a project originally proposed to UNIT 2 by Peter Bobby and Matt White back in 2004. At that stage, the artists' idea was to develop a show that would explore their interest in ideas relating to representation and reality. Unit 2 welcomed and supported the development of this project which following a further period of research resulted in the artist, Mika Sellens being invited to contribute a new work for the exhibition.

As the title of the exhibition suggests, particular settings that are at once familiar to us, form the backdrop to the works in *Locale*. Peter Bobby's photographs capture the idealised world of the showroom apartment, where the promise of style and perfection exist in environments seemingly untouched by human presence. The sleekness of these images is such that they would not look out of place in any showroom apartment, suggesting that for Bobby, the power of the photographic image lies not merely in its ability to depict, but also in its ability to be the subject or object of fascination.

A mundane residential street by night is the setting for Matt White's video, *The Argument*, (2001/02) in which a series of events involving a number of characters unfold. As we observe what initially appears to be surreptitious filming of a dispute between a man and a woman, the narrative begins to unravel in unexpected ways. Seamlessly shifting from something 'real' to something all together more theatrical, with the aid of editing techniques, actors and a set, White undermines the authenticity of film and video.

In Mika Sellens' new work, *Circular Walk 1* (2005), a recording of the artist walking a circular route in the east end of London, is the starting point for her sound installation. Sellens' 'walk' represents something quite ordinary; yet in revisiting a previous journey with recording equipment, Sellens considers the relationships between memory and experience, repetition and chance.

In different ways, the artists in *Locale* explore the nature of consumerism, aspiration and illusion. However, their respective insights not only observe but are also, through their particular constructions, interwoven to these acts of scrutiny, providing the show with further narrative twists.

Richard Hylton, 2005

Peter Bobby was born in 1975 and currently teaches Photography at the University of Wales, Newport. Recent shows include: *Inner Space*, Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea; *Reception*, Ffotogallery/Mission Gallery, Cardiff/Swansea, 2003; *Carte Blanche*, Nouvelle Galerie, Grenoble, France, 2002; *Interni*, Plastica Gallery, Bologna, 2002. His work has also featured in several art journals and magazines.

Mika Sellens was born in 1978 and lives in London. Trained as an acoustic and electroacoustic composer, Sellens' work involves the use of acoustic and recorded sound. Sellens collaborates regularly, and has worked extensively with dance and with physical and devised theatre. Recent works include: *Beagle Travels into the Abyss*, 2004; *The Argument*, with TheatreO, BITE 2003; *And Between Two*, with dance, The Place Theatre, and Laban Theatre, 2004.

Matt White was born in 1968 and is currently based in Bristol. Recent shows/screenings include: *Staged*, Focal Point Gallery, Essex; *Axes Through Europe*, Ludwigsburg, Germany; *Golden Cow* award for best film at GSTAADFILM, Gstaad, Switzerland, 2004; *Afterlife*, Chapter Arts, Cardiff, 2003; *Disparations*, UWIC, Cardiff, 2002.

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