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Blackout / IFFR

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Blackout / IFFR

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Upon entering the exhibition Blackout in Rotterdam's Kunsthal it took a few moments to adjust one's eyes to the darkness. Rather than a typical white cube of a museum or gallery space, the exhibition instead filled a cavernous space marked predominantly by black walls and low light. Within the darkness, in the space's various enclaves, sat a number of beaming slide carousel projectors, and opposite them countless static images flashing by at various speeds.

The slide carousel projector as a distinct artistic medium formed the crux of this exhibition, curated as part of International Film Festival Rotterdam 2019 (IFFR) by programmer Julian Ross. As part of his introductory essay Ross suggests two potential understandings for the 'Blackout' of the exhibition's title. One is technological, and alludes to the signature punctuation of darkness that occurs between individual images when projected using the particular device. In technological terms this micro interruption can be expanded to the macro when considering the 2004 discontinuation of the Kodak slide carousel projector, with the exhibition an effort to highlight contemporary artists that continue to activate a seemingly obsolete technology. Here, Ross has curated the exhibition exclusively with eleven works produced in the past fifteen years, all in the wake of the technology's assumed end. The other blackout Ross explicitly suggests relates to the content of the works themselves, with several of the pieces taking up questions of historical erasure or more abstract forms of absence. In Ross' words, 'the title also references historical amnesia and collectively suppressed memories that any of the artworks call for us to remember'. The artists took up such an idea in various ways, with a number of works both political and playful.

As if in an effort to avoid seeming excessively dour, it seemed intentional that the first work one encountered upon entering the space proper was Cauleen Smith's vibrant *Space Station: Rainbow Infinity*, a piece for two projectors

whose beams were installed next to and partly overlapping a wall painted with horizontal rainbow lines – one of the exhibition's central flashes of colour. The rainbow was an enduring preoccupation for musician and poet Sun Ra, whose unseen archives form the bulk of the work's content, alongside an 'arksestral' constellation of images representing nature, the cosmos, Egyptian symbolism, and more. The material from Sun Ra's archives has elsewhere been incorporated into Smith's *Black Utopia LP* and performance, which she presented elsewhere in the Kunstal as part of the IFFR 2019 program.

Space Station: Rainbow Infinity was the liveliest of the Blackout exhibition pieces, in part due to the inclusion of lush green houseplants and its status as the only piece that required the spectator to manually manipulate the slide's advancements – ideally in collaboration with another curious participant controlling the second device, and perhaps while sitting on the vintage chairs that completed the spatial arrangement. While in Smith's piece the blackout of the exhibition's title and concept can be read through her use of archival material, other concepts of blackouts were interwoven throughout the exhibition in a number of different ways. In addition to their elevated projectors, a number of artists manipulated and halted the means of projection by incorporating a rotating vertical disc in front of the lens that served to block part of the beam, which elsewhere escaped through a perforation of a particular size. Like Smith's work, Aura Satz's *Her Luminous Distance* and Floris Vanhoof's *Fossil Locomotion* invited the viewer to interact with the piece. In this case, one was invited to spin vertical discs before their projectors (two and four, respectively), with the speed of the wheel producing a flicker as the slides oscillated between images. The more abstract *Fossil Locomotion* consisted exclusively of still images of fossils against a black background, which appeared to jostle as the frames jumped around. The piece was accompanied by an equally frenetic sonic whir that produced an immersive and exhilarating geological trance.

Partly inspired by the life of astronomer Henrietta Swan Leavitt, Satz's *Her Luminous Distance* was produced using archival materials from both NASA and Harvard, where Leavitt made vital discoveries as one of the women working as the university's 'human computers'. Several of the parallel images in the piece – which appeared as if superimposed when aided by a quickly-spun wheel and the persistence of vision in the human eye – placed images of Leavitt and other largely underappreciated women scientists over and among the stars, a poetic extension of Satz's revisionist, aspirational intervention into her material. The actual words 'black out' appeared in one

slide as part of Hannah Dawn Henderson's *Between a Gaze and a Gesture*, which also made use of archival materials in its two-projector arrangement. The words were excerpted from a newspaper headline, accompanied by text declaring: 'Tis a fact, 'tis a fact – if you're black you lack.' Along with the rest of the piece, the material was drawn from the archive of Liberty, a human rights organisation founded in the United Kingdom in 1934. Henderson's selections sourced from the holdings include a mix of photos and newspaper clippings showing images of life in the twentieth century in the UK, with an emphasis on the racism directed against Black citizens, including the recent arrivals of the Windrush generation. Interspersed with these images and clippings Henderson inserted fragments from a first-person address, one that could be read as her own or the voices of the photos' subjects. 'I return your glance', reads one, and 'You look away' is another. In a show that emphasised unseen histories and stories, Henderson's piece served to remind that not all gazes are benevolent and none are neutral.

Anyone who has seen a looped 16mm or 35mm film projection in a gallery in recent years knows that the installations tend to operate as de-facto sculptural works as much as specific moving image pieces, with spectators frequently as drawn to the projection apparatus as to their produced images (while a number of installations by the likes of Matthew Buckingham, Simon Starling, and Rodney Graham have explicitly emphasised this reoriented relationship).[1] In *Blackout* the slide carousels throughout the gallery space operated similarly, commanding attention not only due to their light and sound but also their simple anachronistic existence. Elsewhere a number of filmmakers explored less incidental forms of sculpture as part of their projects. In addition to *Space Station: Rainbow Infinity* several artists expanded and activated their works through painting, interactive materials, or unconventional screens, like Raha Raissnia's *Mneme*.

Prapat Jiwangsan's two-part installation *Non-chronological History* featured both an arrangement for nine slight projectors as well as a complementary interactive tabletop. For the projector component the artist produced slides with the names of individuals related to key moments of Thai political history. Produced using photocopy transparencies that resemble microfilm, rather than the standard 35mm of the other installations, each of the slides featured no information beyond the names, in both Thai and English. The free-floating names were paired with miniature photographs of the individuals' faces on an adjacent light table. By using magnifying glasses, spectators were given the opportunity to closely scrutinise the faces of the individuals,

albeit without any other tools to match faces with names or events. In Prapat's piece history is not only non-chronological but also frustrated and fragmentary.

In Kristina Benjocki's *Sedimentation of Memory*, the artist took limestone as a starting point for an expanded consideration of industry in Cannerberg on the Dutch-Belgian border, with some fifteen pieces of stone installed on the ground or on minimal plinths around the dedicated, appropriately cave-like nook. With multiple projectors, including one framed to project directly on the surface of the limestone specimens, the piece consisted of white-on-black line drawings by the artist, with the actual content a heterogeneous mix of offices, people, mine shafts, telephone switchboards and their operators, maps and other cartographic material, and plants. The piece also played with the static nature of the medium, variously including images designed to replicate still frames from video camera footage, including the date and time on the bottom right of the frame. In many ways *Sedimentation of Memory* seemed like the crux of the exhibition, with its concept and execution a subtle (if not necessarily intentional) play on the concept of media archeology that informs much of the research into this project (as part of Ross' academic work). A number of scholars have noted the speculative aspect of media archeology. As a researcher traces a specific medium or platform, examining histories of adoption (or abandonment), questions emerge of potential alternatives or of parallel developments. As the leading proponent for the discipline of media archeology, Jussi Parikka has written that

a lot of media-archaeologically tuned research has been in writing counter-histories to the mainstream media history, and looking for an alternative way to understand how we came to the media cultural situation of our current digital world. It is for media archaeologists as it was for Foucault: all archaeological excavations into the past are meant to elaborate our current situation.[2]

It is in this context that the themes of alternative histories present in the works of Blackout are revealed. Our imaging of a potentially different existence and appreciation for carousel slide projectors (or photographs or cinema) is not far removed from our imagining a more illustrious career for Henrietta Swan Leavitt, a more harmonious twentieth century, or even an acceptance that Sun Ra did indeed originate from Saturn, as he famously claimed. The idea that media archeology is able to uncover parallel histories that have been under-considered is also an approach mirrored in Ross' curatorial bend, which largely reorients the history of artists and slide-carousel

projectors away from Europe and North America to incorporate vital work from practitioners based in the Global South.

Given the time-travelling nature of media archeology as a practice, it is unsurprising that artists working with antiquated technology would also be interested in questions of temporal travels or dislocation, something explored in works by Tamar Guimarães, Ahmad Fuad Osman, and Nguyen Trinh Thi. Guimarães' *A Man Called Love* presented a portrait of the unique figure of Francisco Candido Xavier, a Brazilian civil servant-cum-medium who claimed to channel and publish the work of dead poets. Guimarães' film was the piece in the exhibition that most closely resembled a typical work of cinema, as it operated on a set loop accompanied by a voiceover. With its use of sharp, black-and-white photographs that emphasised architecture as much as people and that softly faded into each other through the use of two projectors, obvious echoes with Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) emerged, alongside playful questions of medium specificity in both senses of the term.

Another play on time travel was Ahmad Fuad Osman's coy *Recollections of Long Lost Memories* in which the filmmaker photographed his friend in various poses, then photoshopping him into archival photos from moments in Malaysian history. At times the figure is foregrounded, while other times he populated the background of an image, inviting a *Where's Waldo*-like searching game. Yet in each photo the nameless individual's colourful garb and long hair also render him identifiable and at place (or time) with the material. At times his presence is ambient, while elsewhere he appears to offer a Westerner a cup of coffee, to light someone's cigarette, or to hurl a Molotov cocktail. Figures in and out of sync with history also informed Nguyen Trinh Thi's subtly comic *Landscape Series #1*. As part of an exhibition tour Nguyen coined the term 'analogization' to describe her work, which consisted of photographing digital photos from news archives in order to create 35mm slides. The photos themselves consisted of a trope from Vietnamese reporting, in which journalists, upon their arrival at the scene of a (since-passed) newsworthy event, instead photograph a witness pointing towards a now-innocuous site, or pointing out of frame. No amount of scrutiny will make legible the events that took place in each location, and Nguyen makes no efforts to offer any contextual information. For all its eeriness and humour, the piece resonated with a sadness that could be found elsewhere in the exhibition, which proved that for all the histories one is able to recover, even the recent past can remain inaccessible and lost.

Jesse Cumming

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Notes

[1] See Balsom 2013, pp. 83-84.

[2] Parikka 2012, p. 6.