

*Dissolving the Frame: Amy Dickson's film Performances and Performance Films.*

Since graduating from the Royal College of Art in 2012, Amy Dickson has produced over 177 video works at the time of writing. A large number of these involve her participation in the moment of production, which is inscribed in the work, either tacitly, as the animateur of the image, or as a performer or participant visible within it, as in a recent work *Car Journey* (2020) to which I shall return. Dickson works on her own with a camera-phone and there is no post-production of either image or sound. This is important for the viewer, in order that they understand that the films are complete records of improvisations, with all the risks and unevenness that can result from this way of working. Her work is as close to free-improvised music as it is to experimental filmmaking: there is an empirically grounded idea that is tested through an experimental process. The experiment is often revised during the course of a single work, as the artist loops back to reframe previous moments in a film. This is not to imply, however, anything teleological in her process, since the looping back invariably serves to complicate rather than clarify or resolve.

Dickson's first degree was in textiles. This background, combined with an interest in Standard 8 and 16mm cameras via their use by family members, while at the same time her: 'being slightly intimidated by film, video and 'cinema' without a background in it' led to the use of thermochromic screens to record real time images using light-producing heat, in performance works that bring these diverse interests to a fruitful synthesis: 'thinking about changes/movements that occur in textiles and textile-print processes which involve photographic/developing processes that seemed analogues with film, dying and tinting too'. Subsequently Dickson developed an interest in live sound as part of the thermochromic works. The addition of sound was stimulated to some extent by her working at Café OTO in Dalston, where she regularly listens to improvised and experimental music. For the last several years she has lived in Lower Clapton, on the edge of the Lea Valley in North East London, and a great many of her films have been made in the vicinity. All of the foregoing evidences Dickson's ability to find inspiration in the available and the close to hand, in her openness to contingency and to embracing experiences of whatever kind and finding ways of incorporating them into her oeuvre.

In *Light Time* (2013) a grid of 24 small candles is arranged on the back of a gridded wooden frame to which a thermochromic screen is attached. The image is not latent, as it is in photo-chemical photography, but one that develops over several seconds in the areas of the screen adjacent to the candles. The candles are lit one by one, then extinguished in turn, invoking film's often involuntary movement, its flickering light and duration, as well as literally actuating these phenomena. The performer switches on the projector, as it were, and the light source recursively illuminates itself: the candles are both source and image, thereby two normatively distinct moments of film projection are collapsed into a single event. On the screen the image is both formed and projected, similarly collapsing the moment of recording and projecting. Framing may be seen as durationally rather than spatially defined, since the thermochromic screen doesn't have a hard border, but rather functions as a field within which the candles become visible and whose edges dissolve into the surrounding darkness. Contingency is embraced in the unpredictability of the behaviour of the candles and the screen.

Aspects of Dickson's para-cinematic performances are carried over to her video work in the various ways in which she attempts to dissolve the frame. *Car Journey* (5', 2020) is shot from the back seat of a car speeding through a verdant summer landscape. The frame is split vertically, with an uninterrupted view of the exterior on one side and a view of the inside looking out through the car's windows on the other. Two young women are visible on the edge of the frame, plus a third person (?), the filmmaker, who's out of frame, whose presence can only be inferred from her hands, which are occasionally visible in front of the lens as she operates the camera, such that the framings equalise or contrast as she zooms far into the blur of passing greenery. The vertical split moves left to right, shifting the balance between the two views. Later, the views swap places in a series of increasingly rapid, disruptive cuts.

The constant effort to locate and compare the two views -in effect to frame them- constitutes a corresponding activity by the viewer, who becomes a co-author, since their framing efforts add a third frame to the two operating on-screen: the viewer's 'performance' frames that of the filmmaker. By placing herself within this dynamic whose 'off-screen' external border is the activity of the viewer, Dickson effectively hands the work over to the latter. Marcel Duchamp's statement about the viewer

completing the work is usually applied in semantic terms, to the interpretative process<sup>2</sup>, but in this case the activities of artist and spectator are aligned at least equally in physical-optical terms, so that the different ways in which the camera and the human eye see are tested against each other, and in which the viewer struggles in a conflictual process of vision and revision.

*Park Works* (4', 2020), shot in Springfield Park, Stamford Hill, demonstrates as well as any other film Dickson's camera strategies. Dickson seeks out, finds and abandons framings, juxtapositions, layers and phenomena within the scene. While the work could be said to be highly 'performative', to describe it as such is to put the focus too much on the filmmaker, rather than the scene in front of her. Her approach is reminiscent of that used by Peter Gidal in some of his films, except that with the latter there is often a clear sense of pre-planning, of method, or at least a directed exploration within predetermined parameters. Dickson's videos are open-ended, her camera is more undecided, sometimes seems to get lost, finds its feet again, gets lost again: this is an essential and evidently deliberate way of refusing to settle or foreclose, but rather to prolong the investigation. *Park Works* is also reminiscent of some of Helga Fanderl's more tightly organised Super 8 films, in which grids filmed through other grids create distinct layers, or interference patterns. This activity foregrounds the inescapably contingent nature of photographic compositions: an unstable field of provisional juxtapositions in which as much is obscured as revealed and in which parallax plays a fundamental part.

Health & Safety notices and Warning Signs, attached to a building site hording, framed initially in terms of their textual/semantic function, are later realigned as aesthetic framing devices in themselves: an object becomes a frame or a screen for something else, such as the shadows of a tree. The mesh (texture) of a wire fence becomes grid (measure), becomes frame, depending on scale, framing and degree of camera movement. Thereby a dynamic relationship between framing, scale and movement is established. Camera movements across the grid of fencing animates them, so that a kinetic layer is interposed between camera and middle distance. Thereby three levels of movement are distinguishable: camera, grid and subject. The mesh-texture also references the raster grid, or video pixel array, in a manner that corresponds to the way film grain is figured in films of sand or dust blowing in the

wind. In a related approach, Dickson also manipulates the image so that, for example, when she de-focusses the view of a fountain in a pond, the texture of splashing water dissolves and flattens into a whited-out graphic form, arriving at a terminal point where spatiality surrenders to the dead light of the video projector (or laptop screen).

Energies are juggled in a manner that recall the way grids function in Mondrian's paintings, as elaborated by Rosalind Krauss in her essay on the same: 'There are certain paintings that are overwhelmingly centrifugal, particularly the vertical and horizontal grids seen within diamond-shaped canvases...But other works...are just as explicitly centripetal. In these the black lines forming the grid are never allowed actually to reach the outer margins of the work'<sup>3</sup>. In Dickson's restless film these contrary forces are constantly pushing and pulling. When the camera briefly settles squarely on a rectilinear array, there is at the same time some movement that generates a centrifugal effect, while at other moments, such as a zoom, the image content rushes out beyond the frame, yet this at the same time creates a centripetal movement, since we are moving in on the subject. At various other moments in the work a contrasting camerawork is at play. When the camera scans across foliage its default cropping functions normally but is at the same time minimised, because when Dickson zooms into flowers and moves the camera, parallax effects are generated, drawing attention away from the framing edges and thereby effectively dissolving them. When the camera movement increases, a pointillist whirl of contrasting colour is conjured. Thus, nothing is stabilised: the entire film is a work in-process, an endless enquiry: neither in-progress, nor a search, with the teleology implied by these terms.

The struggle to displace the frame is explored in a very different approach in *Jamie's Window* (2', 2019), where a view through a window onto Morecambe Bay and the Furness peninsula, on the Northwest coast of England, is split and mirrored into a Rorschach pattern. The jittery, tentative hand-held image flips frequently between vertical and horizontal axes and is cropped and continuously shifted so that any settled or balanced symmetry is denied. The frame is prised apart, the field of view abstracted. This is achieved simply by turning the symmetrical split onto its side, so as to favour the unbalanced left-right horizontal axis. The thick window bars form a

chevron that cuts violently across the screen left-right. The chevrons' thick black lines reframe the image, momentarily turning four edges into five. As much as the work continues Dickson's project by other means, it also constitutes a critical rejection of the popular practice of creating more or less complex, slow and smoothly turning kaleidoscopic images using post-production tools. Dickson's film, like her others, is improvised, the mirroring and flipping created on the fly, actively using built-in filters. This sets it radically apart from other such works.

Many of the films inscribe into them the literal position of the filmmaker. The three-part Series *Footwork 1* (1' 47", 2019), *2* (1' 18", 2019), and *3* (6' 6", 2019) all made during a trip to Hamburg, focus on grids of tiles, and each explores aspects of the persistence of vision (on which Thaumatrope depend). In *Footwork 1* the camera points at a floor composed of tiles with zigzag edges. As the pace of camera movement increases a double image is gradually conjured and sustained. Onto this unstable field the filmmaker's feet enter, appearing to float above the brown surface of tiles. Two kinds of phenomena are thereby instantiated in the same image space: the tenuous, ephemeral double-image effect that exists purely in the viewer's head, and the contrastingly concrete one of the filmmaker's shoes that exists independently of the viewer. The filmmaker is the common connecting element: one imagines a circuit of production: feet – body – camera – tiles - feet, in the process of which the feet and the tiles on which they stand yet become perceptually detached through the agency of those self-same feet-body-hands-lens-recorder. The question is raised: where is the work and what does it consist of? Is it ever enough to think of a film or video simply as the trace-image on the screen?

In // the tiles are hexagonal and their animation by the camera leads eventually to a 'seeing-as' experience where what appeared hitherto as flat now presents as diagonally stacked, Necker Cubes. This aspect then gives way to an experience of texture, where the camera's zooms and movements generate momentary after-images of the surfaces of the tiles that creates an appearance of very coarse texture more akin to film grain than poor video resolution, (something that does occur in the third film). Overall, then, there is a move from flatness, to apparent depth then back to surface flatness. In the absence of contextualising spatial surroundings, the frequent shifts of camera angle onto the tiles simply squash them anamorphically,

without generating a sense of three-dimensions. These moves link the work to *Park Film*, which is similarly interested in the disruptive shifting between apparent depth and flatness. In conjuring everything from a flat, patterned surface, Dickson generates an analysis of the conditions under which impressions of three-dimensionality can be generated or suppressed. The active camerawork operates in a dynamic that is both generative and analytical: the abrupt zooms in and out, shifts of position, speed and angle force a variety of perceptions from the viewer.

The third film, which at 6'06" is substantially longer than the first two, begins very differently, with a low resolution shot of an indistinct space but gradually evolves into another work around tiles, in this case the wall as well as the floor tiles. Towards the end the filmmaker briefly reveals herself in the mirror, concentrating intently on the shooting. The clear, clean click of her shoes on the hard floor contrasts strongly with the fluid and highly mobile camera movements, yet of course they are united in the same body. Thus, Dickson comments on contrasting aspects of the physical, of bodily being, as well as the gulf between modes of seeing and hearing.

Dickson's work is distinctive for its improvisational character, which aligns it with activities conventionally associated with the performing arts and to some extent 'performance drawing'. While there have been numerous filmmakers for whom hand-holding the camera has been an important aesthetic principle, the resulting work is invariably edited and structured into something more controlled and considered. (David Larcher's films and videos are rare examples in which editing is itself an open-ended improvisation). Dickson's videos are preeminent explorations of the interplay of body-camera-image. They invite us to witness a creative process in action and to think about what's going on in terms of moment-to-moment judgments; what's drawing her attention, why is she doing a certain thing at a certain time. We enter her spatio-temporal world and struggle within it as she juggles with the various forces and possibilities presenting themselves in the continuum.

1. Email to the author, 08.21.2020.

2. Marcel Duchamp: 'The Creative Act' (1957), in *The New Art* (revised edition), Gregory Battcock ed., Dutton & Co. Inc. pp. 46-48, 1973.
3. Rosalind Krauss, (1994) 'Grids' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, MIT press, pp 20-21.