

Conference Presentation

The FRIDA Series: Frida Travels to Ibiza

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The FRIDA Series: Frida Travels to Ibiza digital film, Karen Heald & Sally Turner, 2017.

<http://www.karenheald.co.uk/films/>

Introduction

Karen Heald has created a new poetic film for the thematic scope of the conference ‘female travellers in arts, music and film.’ Throughout Heald’s practice the relationship between time, travel, art history, film and painting has always been present. This is especially significant in the FRIDAM Series, an ongoing collaborative project with artist Sally Turner researching the life of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. Heald and Turner first began collaborating in 2003. Turner working in the capacity as a fine art performer and Heald as an experimental filmmaker. The title of FRIDAM was chosen as a play on the words ‘freedom’ and Frida, Kahlo’s first name. The focus was on the legacy of Kahlo, her approach to politics, women’s equality, overcoming disability and establishing herself as a painter. Exploring the concept of how Kahlo might react and respond to an evolving art scene, FRIDAM attempts to capture the essence of Kahlo’s spirit in a contemporary world.

Working closely with Turner, who has a striking resemblance to Kahlo, Heald has enabled a relationship to unfold, a rapport to evolve that has transcribed through the films. Together they have created a visual poetry without vocabulary. To act is to pretend whereas a performance artist performs with intent. Trust and empathy is an important part of the collaboration. The artists have developed a relationship that is extremely responsive, thereby allowing the performances to be both spontaneous and experimental in nature; suggesting another space, another time, further compounded by colour. FRIDAM was born out of these experiences.

Filming is predetermined in the sense that locations and attire are pre-arranged but Heald and Turner allow for an intuitive response to place. Initially they undertook a survey of the site to explore what Heald refers to as the ‘poetics of *its*’ space’. By this term she refers to how she tries to uncover the quintessential presence in time, inspired by a site’s resonance. Time itself leaves no trace, it is physical things, people, weather, which leave traces. The traces that Heald alludes to refer back to the semiotic that Julia Kristeva associates with the *chora*. Noëlle McAfee notes, “The semiotic aspect of signification signifies what is ‘below the surface’ of the speaking being,” or in other words in the unconscious.¹

¹ McAfee, N. (2004) *Julia Kristeva*. Oxon, Routledge.

Initially conceptual the films explore feminist notions of art theory yet are also concerned with the graphics of line, colour and form. There then follows a process of critical reflection that utilises graphics in an aesthetic response, which is constantly reassessed. Varying the speed of the films by slow motion techniques emphasizes the films poetics. Working out of a suitcase the artists have travelled together nationally and internationally 'staging' live art performances. These ephemeral events have been portrayed through time-based media and transformed into films and installations.

Context

This sets the contextual background to the research in relation to a ground for a form of psychic space² that Heald is artistically exploring. Here the audience will encounter two of Kristeva's most important propositions - the 'semiotic *chora*' as well as 'women's time', alongside Heald's concept of 'transitory strata', which expands on these ideas.

Heald describes several key terms that she coins 'transitory strata', 'being in-between', and 'in-between-ness'. To assist the audience to comprehend and structurally understand this terminology they are outlined below:

'Transitory strata' are preverbal, personal spaces which draw from Kristeva's semiotic 'chora' and, through the making of experimental 'dream films', visualize a re-interpretation of sleep, the unconscious and experiential time. This differs from the split or the divided self as it pertains to fleeting parallels of time that exist within the creatives' or the depressives' state of being. This ephemerality is discovered within the individual, lying amidst the layers of consciousness, the realms of waking, reverie and wakefulness. These experiences seldom occur whilst asleep, but can be stirred by direct sensitivity to sounds, which when heightened under extreme moments of creativity, stress or illness, can take a person on a more profound pathway. These journeys, or 'transitory strata', have the ability to build and fragment, and the 'dream films' aim to echo, the unarticulated and the unutterable.

'Being in-between' is a space that oscillates between the personal preverbal 'transitory strata' and the public places of 'in-between-ness'.

'In-between-ness' is a conceptual, reflective public space offering a synthesis of collaborative arts and science practice. In this sense, 'in-between-ness' is a system which allows both an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary methodology for these two different subjects to meet through its approaches and media. As such the practice moves between different modes, responding uniquely to the qualities of individual artists, scientists and institutions.

The 'knitting' of eclectic ideas of travel, metaphysics, film studies, linguistics, epistemology and women's time underpins Heald's practice and the reason why she has become increasingly drawn to Kristeva's concepts. Commencing this research in relation to a multilayered sense of time, she initially explored Kristeva's texts with an emphasis on the notions of cyclical, maternal and monumental time. Time for Heald depicts the time and space of 'being in-between', a feeling of being in two worlds simultaneously; a liminal space between reality and another level of consciousness. She views time as an interface between two dynamic states, yet somehow beyond the visible.

Heald draws on Kristeva in relation to time, intertextuality as well as pre-narrative envelopes and non-linear narratives in film and psychoanalysis. The complexity of Kristeva's theories has challenged Heald to create the 'unrepresentable' or the 'unspeakable' through

² The word psychic is derived from the Greek word *psychikos* ("of the mind" or "mental") and refers in part to the human mind or psyche. The Greek word also means "soul".

collaborations with artists operating in a variety of disciplines to critique and engage with Kristeva's propositions, often giving a re-interpretation of time. Time is offered as a mechanism in which to devise significant artistic methodologies, on the 'in-between-ness' of film and research as collaborative practice. Using non-traditional gallery sites she explores the scientific techniques of film while investigating the notions of 'poetics of *its* space' and 'painterly reverie' as well as 'being in-between and 'in-between-ness'. Heald has evolved these concepts through collaborations with artists, and included disciplines outside the arts arena, such as collaborations with sociologists and scientists, to expand her engagement with the *chora*.

Distinct from Kristeva's investigations Heald's enquiry synthesises the *chora*, and all its ambiguities, between film, time and travel within contemporary art practice. Through 'dream films' Heald has evolved her terminology and developed concepts on time, which she addresses in this and subsequent contextual dialogues. The complexity of Kristeva's theories, in particular, the *chora*, challenges the arts practice because "it is not, strictly speaking, representable."³ Constituting imagery and imagination, it is surreal, being barely imagined.

This tactile-kinaesthetic language and the question of time and non-linear narratives within film are prevalent within Heald's 'dream films'. In these films she explores temporal modes and authentically engage with the oeuvres of other women who are working with cinematic time. Feminist filmmaker, writer and composer Trinh T. Minh-ha has explored tenseless time in filming her first digital video feature *The Fourth Dimension* (in collaboration with Jean-Paul Bourdier), which portrays a wonderfully poetic representation of contemporary Japan. Minh-ha, who was born in Vietnam, "rather than taking an ethnographic standpoint, presents a contemplative and multi-layered exploration of travel, space and the rhythms of the country."⁴ She addresses issues around her central theme of "the experience of time, the impossibility of truly "seeing," and the impact of video on image-making."⁵ The film explores Japan's sensual landscape as seen through sliding doors and windows and moving frames of the train, which reveal and conceal at the same time. Playing with the past and the present, Minh-ha deconstructs the meaning of ritual. Speaking within the film through the rituals of new technology, daily life and what is comprehended as conventional rituals such as festivals, religious rites, and theatrical performance, she states: "'rituals' involve not only the regularity in the structure of everyday life, but also the dynamic agents in the world of meaning."⁶ The film encourages the audience to discover that "what is sensually brought on screen" is not "Japan, but the expansive reality of Japan as image and as time-light."⁷ Minh-ha discusses how "travel through Japan is through a camera, a travelogue of images, where a visual machine ritualizes the journey."⁸ This meeting between self and other, human and machine, viewer and image, real and fiction, is where the feasibility of the connection between past and present could occur. The images that come "alive in time also frames time in the film; this is where the actual and virtual meet - *The Fourth Dimension*."⁹ Acquarello comments:

³ "What may be represented, conceptualized, thought of, imagined, made clear and explicit, and is above all a product of regimentation and order, is part of the symbolic order or simply, the symbolic. The ego and its narcissism are part of the symbolic". Lechte, J. (1990) *Julia Kristeva*. London, Routledge, p.128.

⁴ Tate Modern (2006) *The Fourth Dimension* [internet], London, Tate Modern. Available from: <<https://tate.org.uk/modern/.../film/thefourthdimension4818.htm>> [Accessed 21 July 2010].

⁵ Women Make Movies. (2005) *The Fourth Dimension* [internet], New York, Women Make Movies. Available from: <<http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/pages/c546.shtml>> [Accessed 28 August 2012].

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ UCLA Terasaki Center for Japanese Studies (2003) *The Fourth Dimension: Digital Video and Lecture by Trinh T. Minh-ha, An exploration of time, life and art in Japanese culture* [internet], Los Angeles, International UCLA Education. Available from: <<http://www.international.ucla.edu/japan/events/showevent.asp?eventid=458>> [Accessed 24 August 2012].

⁸ Minh-ha, T. (2005) *The Digital Film Event*. New York, Routledge, p.10.

⁹ Ibid.

Creating motion within the observation of a “fixed” image, the dynamic ‘*frame within a frame*’ becomes a metaphor for the film’s titular fourth dimension: a conscious awareness, yet transitory encapsulation of the invisible within the visible - the ephemeral representation of space, time, and memory through the observation of perceptual shifts in the liminal - through the coded aesthetics of capturing perpetual dislocation.¹⁰

It is this effect that is referred to in Heald’s three concepts - ‘transitory strata’, ‘being in-between’ and ‘in-between-ness’ in her PhD thesis ‘*Dream Films’ and Research as Collaborative Practice through Contemporary Arts and Science Methodologies* (2014).¹¹

Karen Heald

Short Biography

Karen Heald is an artist, filmmaker and academic researcher whose artwork has evolved out of working site-specifically and on international residencies. She engages in a variety of collaborations with diverse practitioners such as artists, scientists, medical doctors and numerous other academics. She is a Lecturer in BA (Hons) Photography & Film (2017-) at Wrexham Glyndwr University, UK, an Honorary Research Fellow in the School of Social Sciences (2012-2018) and Lecturer on the MA Fine Art programme, School of Creative Studies and Media (2014 - present) at Bangor University, UK.

From 2011-2014 Heald was an Honorary Researcher/Artist in Residence in the Psychiatric department at Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board. In 2012, she became a board member of the Northern Arts and Science Network. Her research within the University of Salford’s, Contemporary Fine Art Practice Group (2009-2012), focused on narrative, sensory intelligences and kinaesthetic learning through creative frameworks. The concept of *In-between-ness* in her PhD (2014) explored time, creativity and its relationship to film, site-specificity, and the philosophical complexities of arts and science collaborations. Through a variety of media, primarily film, installation and photography, she has evolved her own poetic visual language that engages with the differences and similarities between painting and film, creating a language of “painterly reverie” that communicates difficult social issues with subtle, oblique visual stanzas.

Heald has a practice-based PhD and a MA in Contemporary Fine Art from Leeds Beckett University, UK and a BA (Hons) in Visual Arts from the University of Salford, UK.

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¹⁰ Acquarello. (2006) *The Fourth Dimension, 2001* [internet], New York, Strictly Film School. Available from: <http://www.filmref.com/notes/archives/trinh_t_minhha/> [Accessed 19 June 2011].

¹¹ Heald, K. (2014) ‘*Dream Films’ and Research as Collaborative Practice through Contemporary Art and Science Methodologies*. PhD, Leeds Beckett University, UK.