

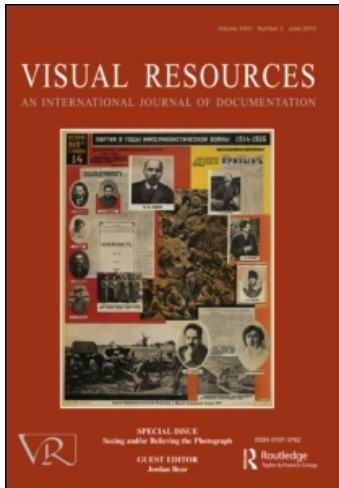
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Urban Archaeologies: Embodied Viewership in Recent Media Art

Robin Clark

This article examines self-reflexive strategies by which contemporary media artists exploit the specific capabilities of photography, film, and interactive video to investigate the roles of memory and personal agency in urban experience. Works by Isaac Julien (British, b. 1960), Matthew Buckingham (American, b. 1963), and Matthew Ritchie (British, b. 1964) utilize a range of aesthetic and technological approaches to mine imagery of real and imagined cities, in ways that foreground the subjectivity of the viewer.

Keywords: Archival Impulse; Embodied Viewership; Media Art; Urban Archaeology; Baltimore, Maryland; St. Louis, Missouri; London, England; New York, New York; Buckingham, Matthew (b. 1963); Julien, Isaac (b. 1960); Ritchie, Matthew (b. 1964)

From the intimacy of domestic spaces to the overwhelming expanse of urban sprawl, the psychological import of architecture has become a major motif in contemporary art. In the past year alone, large group exhibitions organized in Berlin (Germany), London (England), and San Diego (California) have engaged the topic with diverse approaches. Organized by Berlin's Ehemalige Staatliche Münze (the former State Mint), Megastructure Reloaded reflected the responses of contemporary artists to visionary architecture developed during the 1960s; Psychobuildings offered the Brutalist architecture of London's Hayward Gallery up for physical intervention by installation artists; and Automatic Cities, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, explored the influence of the architectural imaginary on contemporary visual art.¹ These projects and others demonstrate that the city and its image provide rich material for contemporary artists working in a wide range of media. Prominent examples include monumental drawings by Paul Noble (British, b. 1963), cast sculptures by Rachel Whiteread (British, b. 1963), and layered paintings by Julie Mehretu (American, b. 1970). Noble's large, dense drawings of a decayed metropolis present an alphabet city in which architecture is conflated with language (the building blocks of Noble's *Nobson Newtown* are letters based on forms abstracted from modernist architecture).² Echoing the writings of Robert Smithson (1938–1973), Noble represents traditional artworks as mausoleums, while his crumbling city itself constitutes the living and dying artwork. Rachel Whiteread's castings of domestic objects and—most dramatically—of a London row house, slated for demolition, have made material the idea of architecture as a locus for somatic memory. Julie Mehretu's paintings, in

which floor plans for stadiums and battlements from various historical periods are overlaid to create visual maelstroms, provide chaotic and polemic images of a militarized urban surround.

Yet because the experience of a city involves the temporal and physical condition of bodies moving through space (both that of the subject and those of the other inhabitants), it is perhaps through the manipulation of sound and moving images that kinetic urban experience can be most compellingly reflected and deconstructed. In the pages that follow, this hypothesis will be tested through case studies of works by Isaac Julien (British, b. 1960), Matthew Buckingham (American, b. 1963), and Matthew Ritchie (British, b. 1964), three artists for whom foregrounding subjective experiences of the viewer is a central concern. Rather than constructing a passive viewer in the mode of traditional cinema, their works each posit and facilitate embodied viewers whose physical presence in the installation completes the work. An “archival impulse,” as articulated by Hal Foster, also operates in these projects in the sense that each of the artists use found and fabricated documentation concerning the histories of particular cities as their points of departure.³ Utilizing strikingly different aesthetic and technical strategies, Julien, Buckingham, and Ritchie each perform a kind of urban archaeology, employing archival materials related to different cities to foreground subjective experiences of both their characters and their viewers.⁴

One could say that Isaac Julien’s installation titled *Baltimore* has three main characters: an “Afro-Cyborg” played by the British actress Vanessa Myrie, Melvin Van Peebles as “himself,” and the city of Baltimore. Julien’s *Baltimore* is an homage to African American cinema and to Van Peebles, who is presented in the work as a man of few words, echoing in that sense at least the disposition of the title character in *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song* (1971), the landmark independent film for which Van Peebles was director, writer, producer, and the lead actor. Van Peeble’s *Sweetback* was a sex worker turned reluctant crusader for racial justice in South Central Los Angeles in the early 1970s. For *Baltimore*, Julien appropriates the styles, language, and iconography of so-called blaxploitation cinema, or black action films, of which Van Peeble’s *Sweetback* is often cited as the original example. An important aspect of *Sweetback* is Van Peebles’ sampling and layering of sound elements to introduce associative, nonlinear elements to the narrative. *Baltimore* liberally samples the audio track from *Sweetback*, layering it with a recording from a Black Panthers rally, and with the low ping-pong sound that indicates the exploration of deep sea waters, or deep space. Filmed on location in Baltimore, Maryland, at the Walters Art Museum, the George Peabody Library at Johns Hopkins University, and the Great Blacks in Wax Museum, Julien’s work quotes past and present histories of the city and posits an encounter that could happen in the near future between Van Peebles and Myrie’s Cyborg. In the opening sequence, the Cyborg and Van Peebles appear to be on a collision course, both making eye contact with the camera in a manner that implies confrontation between them, while also implicating and engaging the viewer. Rather than colliding with Van Peebles, the Cyborg enters the Great Blacks in Wax Museum. From this point on, the film could be considered an exhibit in or odyssey made possible by the Great Blacks in Wax Museum. This conceit is reinforced at the conclusion of *Baltimore*, when the Cyborg exits the museum and the film cuts to alternating views of the Cyborg and Van Peebles

walking away in the same directions from which they approached one another at the beginning of the film. Although the Cyborg and Van Peebles do not enter and exit the museum together, they encounter one another there repeatedly throughout the narrative. In the course of the journey that they take through Baltimore's streets and museums, they witness statues of now-legendary African Americans, including Billie Holiday (1915–1959), Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968), and Malcolm X (1925–1965), transposed from their vernacular wax exhibits to the beaux-arts splendor of the Walters Art Museum. By initiating the collaboration between the Walters Art Museum, the Peabody Library, and the Great Blacks in Wax Museum necessary to produce the piece, Julien not only depicted aspects of Baltimore's past in his work, but also made visible new developments and alternate futures in the social and cultural life of the city.

Due to layered tracks of textured audio and visual information and high production values, Julien's single-channel version of *Baltimore* (2003) is a lush sensory experience; the work is even more immersive in its three-channel iteration.⁵ In one still from the three-channel version of *Baltimore* (Figure 1), Van Peebles (at right) confronts his own wax image (at left). Outside this frame, but visible later in the video, the Van Peebles waxwork is flanked by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. The doubling of the wax museum within the Walters Art Museum and the doubling of Van



Figure 1 Isaac Julien, *Baltimore*, 2003. Three-channel projection with sound, dimensions variable. Image © Isaac Julien and courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures.

Peebles in flesh and in wax is trebled in the three-channel version of the piece. The tripling of a single image, which is also present in the single-channel version, demonstrates the three-screen installation's ability to amplify the visual and audio volume of the experience of the single-channel work. In another still from the three-channel version (Figure 2), a close-up of the Cyborg character forms the left and right wings of a triptych. Its wings frame a view of the Peabody Library as seen from the point of view of the Cyborg character when she levitates in a demonstration of physical prowess for the benefit of Van Peebles. Julien tinges the Cyborg close-up in blue light to demonstrate her otherworldliness and also to couple her image with the architecture of the library, tiled in blue and white. At another juncture in the single-channel version, the horizontal grid of Baltimore's elevated highway system is laid transparently over the vertical grid of a descending open-ironwork elevator containing the Cyborg, so that the character is visually woven into the mesh of the city. In addition to the two versions of *Baltimore* discussed here, the work also exists as a suite of photographs and as a two-channel video installation. The single channel version of *Baltimore* is an engaging video that conflates the genres of documentary, science fiction, and Black action films. The two-channel version is a diptych, inviting the viewer to follow and contrast two parallel narratives. The three-channel version fills the viewer's peripheral vision, confounding efforts to track all three channels simultaneously; the experience of the three-channel version is thus simultaneously immersive and fragmented.



Figure 2 Isaac Julien, *Baltimore*, 2003. Three-channel projection with sound, dimensions variable. Image © Isaac Julien and courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures.

Julien's recombination of images in the various iterations of the work and his refusal to offer a single, climactic conclusion to the overall project make the viewer an active participant in the way that meaning is constructed. Foregrounding the importance of the viewer is both an aesthetic and political act on the part of the artist, in whose practice these approaches are intertwined. Julien's selective excavations from the city and from African American films are remixed to present a high-tech, streetwise, revisionist history and experience of Baltimore.

Matthew Buckingham's installation *Traffic Report* (2005) takes an analog approach to the city and its image. *Traffic Report* is based on his research into the last days of Mill Creek Valley, a historically black neighborhood in St. Louis, Missouri, that was razed for freeway development in the mid 1960s. This installation consists of the syncopated projection of 35 mm slides and an audio track played over two parabolic speakers. The slides were photographed from the windows of a moving car, a 1960 Pontiac that Buckingham hired to drive through the former Mill Creek Valley neighborhood during his artist's residency in St. Louis in 2005 (Figure 3). Each slide dissolves into the next at a speed slower than film but nonetheless moving, as if driving time had been slowed back to walking time, the former pace of the neighborhood. The screen onto which the slides are projected is installed at an angle to the gallery wall, recalling the rearview mirror of an automobile and thematizing the role of looking back, or memory, in the project. The audio track mimics a radio traffic report, complete with headlines, weather, and freeway conditions. News items are bracketed by the sound of a teletype machine that implies the immediacy of the information. Buckingham based the script for the narrative of *Traffic Report* on local newspaper



Figure 3 Matthew Buckingham, *Traffic Report*, 2005. Projected images and audio loop. Image © Matthew Buckingham and courtesy of the artist and Murray Guy, New York.

headlines from 25 June 1964, the day that St. Louis city officials admitted that their urban renewal plan was flawed.

In addition to Buckingham's recorded sound track, the rhythmic dropping of the slides in their projectors act as markers of time, functioning like a metronome. Although the recorded audio component is barely audible, unless a visitor stands directly beneath one of the speakers in the gallery, the dropping slides are audible everywhere in the installation. The isolating effect of the parabolic speakers, under which one stands to hear the sound track, suggests the privacy one experiences when listening to a car radio, in contrast to the social ambience of a sidewalk or the rest of the museum's gallery. Buckingham based this project on the notion of "unlearning" St. Louis, questioning what is known about the development of the city and how it is known. Field trips, archival research, and discussion groups with the graduate students he was teaching at Washington University unearthed the material that he shaped into *Traffic Report*, a low-tech mise en scène highlighting the devastating erasure of one neighborhood, while alluding to many others across the country. In the course of his research, Buckingham was struck by the habit of older St. Louis residents he interviewed to give directions based on landmarks that no longer exist. "This persistence of a mental image of a city through times of rapid change," he explained, "led me back to questions of how the urban space is used and what kind of city is desired by its citizens."⁶

In his interactive work titled *The Iron City* (2006–2007), Matthew Ritchie takes more liberties with his archival sources than either Julien or Buckingham; its narrative conflates histories of two actual cities and others that are imagined, rather than presenting a selective history of one city. *The Iron City* is a three-dimensionally rendered environment that viewers interact with through motion tracking software and a processing program that translates physical movement into layers of sound. Through a round aperture evoking the porthole of a ship or the lens of a camera, the viewer experiences a post-apocalyptic environment awash in ocean waves and sepia tones (Figure 4). It is no surprise that he offers the viewpoint of a ship's porthole because for Ritchie, "when you are at sea, you are a participant, a swimmer in all the seas of the world."⁷ Collapsing bridges and decaying piers are glimpsed from below. A lulling narrative accompanies the imagery and alludes to scenarios that may have caused the conditions rendered in the video, including the possibility that "the renunciation of gravity converted back, up, and through pressure into a hurricane of dreadful and sublime desire." In addition to the narrator's voice, *The Iron City* includes recordings of the earth's magnetic fields, described by Ritchie as "the earth's voice"; a piece of music titled "The City Didn't Sleep" by a now-defunct Polish ensemble; and an anonymous recording of the spiritual "Ezekiel Saw a Wheel." The work draws on time Ritchie spent living close to the abandoned docks and waterfronts of London and New York City. Embedded in *The Iron City* is Ritchie's experience of violence and disaster in both cities (IRA attacks in London, the bombing of the World Trade Center), although from this the broader theme of cyclical decline and ascendance emerges.

We have seen that Isaac Julien, Matthew Buckingham, and Matthew Ritchie each exploit specific capabilities of photography, film, and interactive video to investigate



Figure 4 Matthew Ritchie, *The Iron City*, 2007. Digital animation, audio, and motion tracking software, dimensions variable. Image © Matthew Ritchie and courtesy of the artist and Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

the roles of memory and personal agency in urban experience. The immersive quality of Julien's lush, multichannel installation couches a riveting yet fragmented narrative concerning Baltimore's past and imagined future in the flexible genre of science fiction. Buckingham's use of slides in *Traffic Report* (still images kept set in stop-time motion by carousel projectors on timers) produces a kind of slow speed, calling attention to the transition from driving time to walking time that is at the heart of his story. The isolating effect of the parabolic speakers in Buckingham's installation foregrounds the visitor's trajectory in the space of the gallery: directly underneath the speaker one is engulfed in sound and isolated from others, while any other location in the gallery is a social space with the shared audio experience of the metronomic dropping of the slides. *The Iron City's* porthole view locates the visitor visually within a ship's hold, but the motion tracking software in Matthew Ritchie's installation allows the viewer to influence the *The Iron City's* visual and audio sequencing with body movements through the space of the gallery. *The Iron City's* narrative concerns the rise

and fall of cities, while the range of possible outcomes (depending upon viewer input) resists interpretive closure. Considered together, these works by Isaac Julien, Matthew Buckingham, and Matthew Ritchie demonstrate the potential of time-based art to engage complex questions of individual agency and public space in the early twenty-first century.

ROBIN CLARK is curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego and co-curator (with Hugh Davies) of the exhibition *Phenomenal: California Light and Space*; she is also editor of the accompanying publication (forthcoming 2011). Clark is curator of the exhibition *Automatic Cities: The Architectural Imaginary in Contemporary Art*, which features new work by fourteen international artists and is accompanied by a catalog authored by Clark and Giuliana Bruno (2009). Clark recently curated site-specific outdoor installations by Ann Lislegaard and Sebastian Hungerer & Rainer Kehres at the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts, St. Louis, Missouri (2008) and contributed an essay to *Danskjävlar*, the catalog for the inaugural exhibition at the Kunsthall Charlottenborg in Copenhagen (2008). For six years, Clark was a curator at the St. Louis Art Museum, where she organized solo shows of work by Matthew Buckingham, Tara Donovan, Ellen Gallagher, David Hammons, Isaac Julien, Julie Mehretu, Rivane Neuenschwander, Roxy Paine, Philippe Parreno, Neo Rauch, and Matthew Ritchie among others; prior to that she was assistant curator of the Eva Hesse and Diane Arbus retrospectives organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Clark earned a PhD in art history from CUNY Graduate Center, an MA from Boston University, and a BA from Smith College.

- 1 These projects are each well documented by accompanying catalogs. See Sabrina van der Ley and Markus Richter, eds., *Megastructure Reloaded: Visionary Architecture and Urban Design of the Sixties Reflected by Contemporary Artists* (Berlin: European Art Projects, 2008); Ralph Rugoff, *Psychobuildings: Artists Take on Architecture* (London: Hayward Gallery, 2009); and Robin Clark and Giuliana Bruno, *Automatic Cities: The Architectural Imaginary in Contemporary Art* (San Diego, CA: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2009).
- 2 On the relationship of architecture and language in his work, Noble comments, "I wanted to make a big, Gaddis-like novel—the irony of this is that the Nobson drawings are, essentially, one word poems." E-mail correspondence with the author, 21 February 2009. William Gaddis's first novel, *The Recognitions* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1955), is the 956-page story of a minister's son who makes a living by forging paintings.
- 3 See Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 3–22. While the list of artists that Foster cites in his essay (Thomas Hirschorn, Sam Durant, and Tacita Dean figure most prominently) does not include Isaac Julien, Matthew Buckingham, or Matthew Ritchie, the "impulse" he describes applies to them equally: "the work in question is archival since it not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private" (p. 5).
- 4 Urban experience is a recurring theme in the oeuvres of both Matthew Buckingham and Matthew Ritchie; Buckingham tends to identify a narrow slice of archival information regarding a place and to investigate it rigorously, offering new knowledge and posing new questions about a city. Ritchie's approach is cumulative, combining elements of many places during many moments to produce ever-expanding content.

In contrast, urban experience is not a major theme in Julien's overall oeuvre. Julien is best known for investigating issues of race and gender. The multiple iterations of Baltimore are unique in his oeuvre for playing out questions of race and gender through actual and imagined moments in the past, present, and future of the city of Baltimore.

- 5 The stunning image quality of *Baltimore* results from Julien's technical skill and his method of shooting on 16 mm film, which is transferred to DVD for museum exhibition.
- 6 "Interview with Matthew Buckingham and Robin Clark," in the exhibition brochure, *Currents 94: Matthew Buckingham* (St. Louis: St. Louis Art Museum, 2005), n.p.
- 7 Matthew Ritchie, "Into the Bleed: Einstein and 21st-Century Art," in Peter L. Galison, Gerald Holton, and Silvan S. Schweber, eds., *Einstein for the 21st Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 150.