



Grace Schwindt
*Only a Free Individual
Can Create a Free
Society* 2014
video

concrete: voice, via the disassembly of normal meter and stress, becomes a body.

Exteriorities and interiorities shift throughout, in the openness of the stage, the dynamics of speech and the driver's journey itself; the significance of his transition from city to countryside made manifest in the set, hovering above and outside of London, within battling without until its sham walls fall. Even inside, an oppositional schema is established between abstraction and the odd homeliness of a pot plant or sheepskin rug. All speak of an ultimate discord between private and public, and spun thus around a fragile and intelligent reflexivity wrest meaning from even the most meagre of referents.

Costumes change the way bodies move and the amount of space they occupy: they alter the dancers' position to themselves and others and improve or impede their movement. Schwindt describes a shifting locus of power via the interactions her costumes allow. The currency is one of relative encumbrance: those weighed down falter, stumble and fall. Humbled by white jumpsuits or clacking a cracked staccato in a Bauhaus burlesque, the figures' costumes articulate an order, often a hierarchy, as precisely as their syncopated movement and shuttered speech.

A policy of provocation was instrumental for the RAF activists, and so it is here: while one function of Schwindt's attenuation of language is to neutralise those words invested with the loaded logic of the hegemony, another is to instigate action, to disarm only in order to reactivate. The group, here, works to undermine the semantics of ownership and control by selectively pluralising a singular narrative.

As with the work's treatment of language, the meticulous choreography sees order asserted by a collective consciousness. Modulating from a gestural minimalism to elaborate courtly masques of engagement, solo mechanical movement breaks to form distinct groups marked by tempo, orientation and position, bodies in negotiation with one another, establishing positions. The group splits and disperses as though from solid to gas.

In the room adjoining the film, a plain, unglazed porcelain vase sits on a polished black plinth, lit from the side by a low, raking spot so that it casts a decisive shadow on to the far wall. Though otherwise carefully

thrown, the very top of the vase is spoiled; clumsily squashed and bent around its perimeter. Made as a replica from a description of a Tiffany vase, it is a thing undone or not-done: a structure in collapse.

That other unstable structure, capitalism, has nevertheless tightened its grip since the RAF declared itself out in 1998. The question is, is there room for anything less than the absolute in the struggle against capital? Schwindt's taxi driver argues for a more nuanced reading in place of the binaries of the APO and RAF's militant policies: that degrees of freedom count. Depending on how the dissolution of the set is read, this is either a realistic policy re-engineered for our current situation, or a statement of defeat and damning indictment of the advance that situation has made in the past 50 years. ■

ADAM PUGH is a writer and curator based in Norwich.

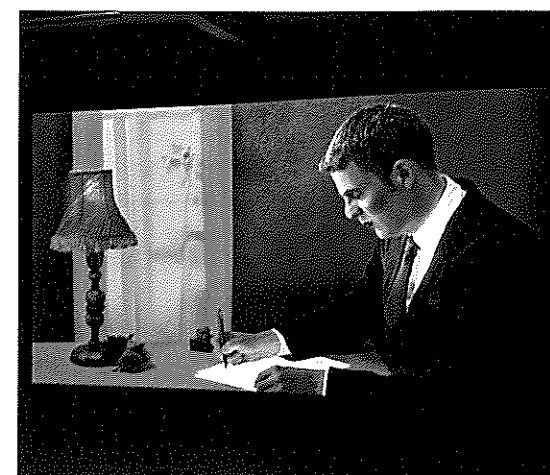
Rachel Reupke: *Letter of Complaint*

Cubitt London 22 January to 1 March

On entering the screening space, the first thing one encounters after the bench and the large projection is a well-modulated, soothing but mildly aggrieved voice that plays over a closely framed shot of a letter writer seated at a desk, in the act of penning the titular letter. The set-up is in the style of an advertisement from the halcyon era of paper-and-ink correspondence, that is to say, sometime between the birth of mass advertising in the 1890s and the arrival in the mid 20th century of the personal typewriter – which is to say, from an era when letter-writing shifted status for the majority of people from an instrumental task to a leisure-time activity. In the wake of the emerging consumer society, letter-writing went from being an aristocratic hobby to an accessible, and accessorisable, luxury for the mainstream. That is, the letter-writer confronts us as *modish*, and thereby, perhaps, to follow Walter Benjamin, has the jarring potential of all that is *outmoded*.

With cutaways to covetable antique writing implements alternating with lingering shots of their pensive users and restrained moody tableaux of clouds, *Letter of Complaint* evokes a sense of diffident anxiety, as the voiced complaints drift over the images until the film loops back. Each character is framed individually in a self-contained sequence. Two are pictured in colour, and one in high-contrast black and white, though the visual codes of silent cinema link all three. Close-ups of hands and faces lost in thought over unmarked stationery accompany a reading of three specific causes for complaint: a bus which fails to stop for two middle-aged ladies who risked their lives to catch it, a soldier who has not been granted leave by his superior for an inordinately long time, and a disappointed visitor to a leisure centre.

The film recognisably belongs to the itinerary Rachel Reupke has been charting over the past several years, from *10 Seconds or Greater*, 2009, to 2013's *Wine and Spirits*. She presents allegories of subjectivity as a product and byproduct of commodity relations: a product insofar as she uses stock images representing ideal types



of people interacting with objects (no less than the unpeopled social relations among towels and kitchen tables), and a byproduct insofar as the real-life dominance of the object world casts all human interactions into an awkward zone.

The clamour of objects in the generic taxonomies of stock photography lend a ghastly loquacity to the speechless dinner dates and hangouts of the two earlier films. In *Letter of Complaint*, however, the artist's mordant gaze pivots to inspect another set of standardised forms which humans are driven to fill with the singularity of subjective misery: the literary and also the behavioural conventions of the complaint letter. Here she unnervingly taps into the modality of bleak personhood which itself forms a kind of 'stock image' in British culture, from *Diary of a Nobody* to the writers of the 'Dear Sir' letters in *Monty Python* sketches. The genre celebrates tragicomic nonentities whose propensity to observe from below gives them a view of social and emotional truths accessible from only that spot, as well as being a source of comic gold due to the distortions equally unavoidable from that uncomfortable position. The letter of complaint can even be said to embody a specifically British approach to seeking redress for social injustice – meek, individualised and punctilious. While the darker, resentment-tinged inflections of the psychology of the letter-writer do not appear in this film, they are not far away, as the wan demeanours of the letter writers evince a fantasy of injury done to an innocent citizen which can only be remedied by the composition of a civilised letter of complaint. The tone of the letters veers between the officiously amiable to the wounded and then desperate, while their phrasing is carefully worded to suggest the unfixity in time of the idiom of complaint. The mixture of the recent past and a timeless present in the film script, together with its aesthetics, evoke a strange undecidable mood where the moral petulance of the written complaint is at once the last bulwark of resistance and inconceivable as a serious form of protest. This may be due to the way the letter-writers are portrayed as survivors of bygone era of glamour – a glamour which equally describes their post-*Downton Abbey* style and their insistence on remonstrating with the powers that be as if it mattered. The contemporary subject is shown to be an accretion of more or less contingent mediations of a marketable past, up to and including their most tremulous refusals. At this level, any letter of complaint is addressed to customer care. And yet, and yet ... these complaints are so reasonable. ■

Letter of Complaint is at Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 6 March to 12 April.

MARINA VISHMIDT is a writer and critic based in London.

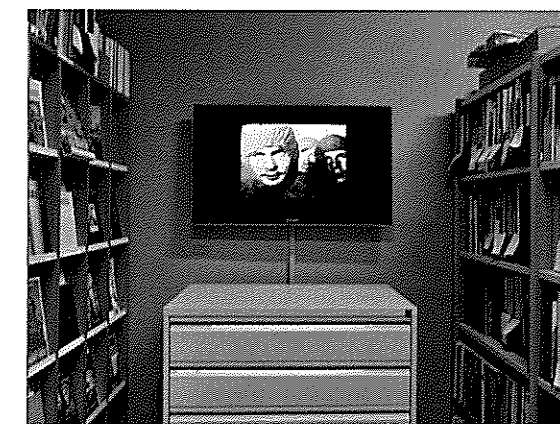
Park Chan-kyong and Lina Selander

Iniva London 14 January to 21 March

Rachel Reupke
Letter of Complaint
2015 video

This pairing of two very different but tangentially related exhibitions emerges from the European curatorial research project Practice International, initiated by Utrecht's Casco, Iaspis in Stockholm and Iniva itself. Taking as its starting point the current model of postcolonial global hyper-mobility that tends to flatten out differences between art worlds in different countries and even on different continents, the curators and artists involved present alternative modes of operation which maintain something of a local character while simultaneously negotiating their relationships to a wider international network. Stepping outside established commercial channels of dealers and art fairs also seems to be important, and indeed Park Chan-kyong's extensive archive of catalogues, essays, poems and source material, on show alongside video works and paintings here, was an implicit challenge to any reductive commodification of his practice. Publications in Korean and English supply background context, and it is possible to read detailed criticism of particular works alongside copious information on other South Korean artists, festivals, exhibitions and traditions. In short, there is enough material on display to make you realise immediately how little you know.

The central piece is the documentary-style video *Sindoan*, 2007. Throughout the 20th century, religious groups of all persuasions from shamanism to Protestantism settled in a small area on the sacred Gyeryong Mountain in the middle of South Korea. Park brings together archive films, documentary photography and first-hand accounts of persecution at the hands of modernising authorities who broke up communities, destroyed icons and ultimately established a national park on the mountain in the 1970s. There is a wonderful collection



Lina Selander
Anteroom of the Real
2011 video

Park Chan-kyong
Pa-Cyong (Last-Sutra-Recitation) 2015
installation view



MAAIKE SCHOOREL 14 MARCH – 12 APRIL 2015
MAUREEN PALEY, 21 Herald Street, London E2 6JT +44 (0)20 7729 4112 info@maureenpaley.com www.maureenpaley.com

of tattered black-and-white group photographs of the multifarious religious groups lined up in ceremonial outfits, each skirt, apron or headdress signifying allegiance to some particular sect, appearing alien to my contemporary European eyes. Straight documentary footage of traditional shamanist ceremonies to release spirits after a death bring home the idea that at least some of these practices continue into modern life.

In other works, Park concocts a more international stew of relationships, and these connections perhaps help us to imagine the modern South Korean context more realistically. The automated slideshow *Power Passage*, 2004, for instance, juxtaposes images and clips from science-fiction films of the 1960s and 1970s to suggest that fictitious events prefigured, or even perhaps laid the political groundwork for, real events to come. The 1969 film *Marooned* depicted a stranded US astronaut being rescued by a heroic Soviet spaceship, six years before the Apollo Soyuz Test Project saw a similar real-life docking. Computer drawings of hidden passages between North and South Korea are played off against astronauts gliding through hi-tech tunnels in space. Park builds similar confusions in *small art history 1*, 2015, a micro-exhibition of historic and more modern artworks shown in reproduction with handwritten annotations. We get examples of 19th- and 20th-century developments in Korean landscape painting, an icon painting of the mythical first shaman *Bari*, a Barnett Newman scanned from a catalogue and a terrifying photo of a prone man possibly about to be killed in 1950, his imploring eyes meeting the camera lens. Ed Ruscha's *LA County Museum on Fire*, 1965/68, is used to illustrate the burning down of Sungeymun Gate in 2008, and Ruscha's birth date is noted as the year 2481 in the Buddhist calendar.

Upstairs at Iniva the Swedish artist Lina Selander takes a similar set of elements but makes something of an altogether different tone. Her raw materials are found history and fragments from the archive, and she too edits together allusive semi-documentary films. But where Park Chan-kyong gives you an overload of stories and factual information, Selander works predominantly with a slow accumulation of enigmatic images. *Silphium*, 2014, starts with the story of a valuable contraceptive plant cultivated by the Romans, worth its weight in silver but consumed to extinction and surviving now only in the design on ancient coins. Images of tree trunks, eye-like knots, spectacles and an operating theatre give way to a laboratory housing instruments wrapped in protective foil and blankets. 'I am never sure if I invent or dream,' muses the voiceover, and after a while it starts to seem more like a hypnotherapy session than anything else. Selander says that she thinks of her work as 'a form about form, a vortex that generates content'. But, in this

context at least, such formal concerns might translate as the standard lingua franca of a globalised art world, and any particular sense of why we should be interested is lost. ■

MARK WILSHER is an artist based in Hackney.

Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou: Code Noir

Jack Bell Gallery London 16 January to 14 February

The Code Noir, as decreed by Louis XIV in 1685, was intended to reinforce French colonial power and regulate the sugar industry. It set out the conditions of slavery in the empire, and restricted the activities of the colonies' non-slaves. Many of its provisions read as cruel to us: they are, but were set out to restrict worse excesses. So, for example, Article XLII states that 'masters may, when they believe that their slaves so deserve, chain them and have them beaten with rods or straps. They shall be forbidden, however, from torturing them or mutilating any limb, at the risk of having the slaves confiscated.'

That, then, is the backdrop for 'Code Noir', a new series of photographs by Leonce Raphael Agbodjelou. It is the latest in his Citizens of Porto-Novo project, which focuses on the people of Benin's capital city. Agbodjelou (born 1965) lives and works there, where he trained with his photographer father Joseph Moise Agbodjelou (1912-2000) and now runs the studio which he opened in 1960. This heritage ties Leonce Raphael in to both the history of Porto-Novo, the main port of French Dahomey from which over 12 million slaves were shipped between the 16th and the 19th century, and the tradition of studio photography most famously practised in nearby Mali by Seydou Keita (1921-2001), Hamidou Maiga (born 1932) and Malick Sidibe (born 1935). That influence is clear enough in Agbodjelou's individual photographs, which add striking subjects and extravagant colour to the classic monochrome portrait aesthetic, and so resemble the work of South African Pieter Hugo as much as that of those West African forebears. In the 'Vodou' series from 2012, Agbodjelou reclaims the photographic documentation of Egungun masqueraders, central to the Yoruba tribe's culture, from the white anthropological gaze. The individuals, though, elude us, as they disappear inside their all-over ceremonial dress against a backdrop of mud huts which emphasises the timeless and collective nature of the tradition. The 'Musclemen' series, also from 2012, sets the impressive torsos of would-be-professional

bodybuilders against a riot of competing patterns on the men's trousers (it is a local fashion to cut them to order from printed cotton) and textile-draped stage sets. They hold bouquets of artificial flowers – appropriated from the more commercial style of portrait shot – to point up the issues of sexual identity and objectification.

Four of the seven new 'Code Noir' triptychs are exhibited in the modest space of contemporary African specialist Jack Bell. Works by four of the gallery's artists were included in Charles Saatchi's recent survey 'Pangaea: New Art from Africa and Latin America'. This included Agbodjelou's previous triptych series, 'Demoiselles de Porto-Novo', 2012, which depicts local women, naked save for masks, in a grand 19th-century mansion that was commissioned by Agbodjelou's grandfather, so acknowledging Agbodjelou's personal role in bringing the time periods together.

'Code Noir', likewise, spans eras and agencies with sufficient nuance to do more than merely celebrate black identity and lambast the colonial legacy. Ex-slaves who returned to Porto-Novo utilised their experience and toughness to become successful business people, and Agbodjelou weaves the local community of descendants of slaves into the natural anti-binarism of the triptych format. Most show, life-sized in the central panel, a resident holding a portrait of a slave ancestor, so that the display of personal histories alludes to Agbodjelou's own as the son of a portrait photographer. Either side of the central panel are views of Porto-Novo now, concentrating on places where the history of slavery was enacted – a basketball court, a fishing village and an empty passageway mark the site of a former child slave market, a slave export dock and the road of no return respectively – or memorials linked to the history of slavery. The viewer is kept on the move between past and present, survival and loss, personal and political. Emotionally, the figures seem to recognise the backstories of suffering while celebrating the positives which emerged from it – a balance echoing the positive intent behind the injustices of the Code Noir. Perhaps there is a whiff of Derek Parfit's bewildering yet fascinating argument in *Reasons and Persons* of 1984 that we owe no duty to future individuals to, for example, protect the environment from damaging pollutants – because if we do so it won't be those individuals who benefit but differently characterised ones whose genetic make-up is affected by the changed circumstances.

This show, then, takes forward what is emerging as a persuasive project. True, it could be argued that neither Agbodjelou's approach to documenting his community nor his layering of times and viewpoints are notably original in isolation, yet their visually powerful combination in the distinctive context of Porto-Novo carries a compelling charge. ■

PAUL CAREY-KENT is a writer and curator based in Southampton.

London Round-up

Southard Reid • Vitrine • Bosse & Baum

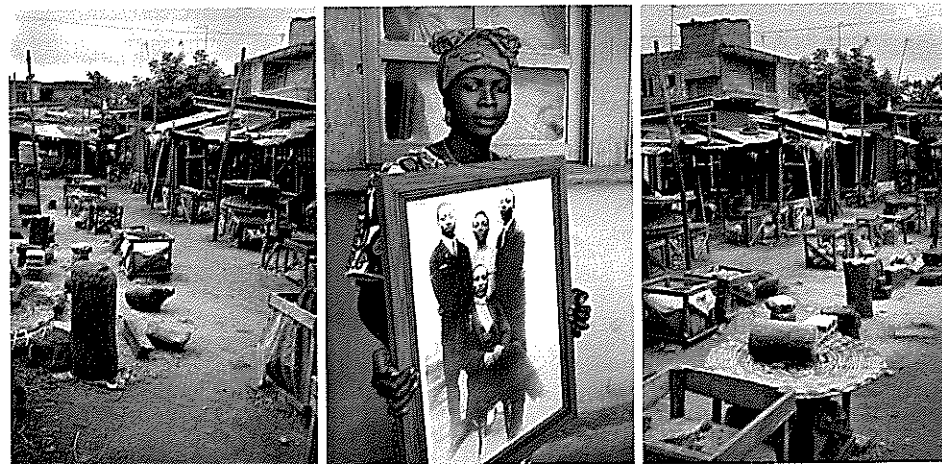
One of my favourite bodies of work when I was an undergraduate student in photography was Candida Höfer's zoo series from 1991. The series, shot with Höfer's typical technical elegance and depiction of socially utilitarian architecture leaning ever so slightly towards beautification, comprises large-format images of animals in their zoo enclosures. Ultimately, it was the bleakness of these images that drew me in; such graceful images, such refined colours, yet such totally miserable animals.

Years later, standing in front of a large black-and-white photographic print of an empty zoo enclosure in a small commercial gallery space in London (the print that is, not the zoo enclosure, which is actually in Warsaw), things are looking even bleaker. Joanna's Piotrowska's exhibition 'Hester' comprises a series of photographs and a sound piece, occupying two floors at the positively tiny Southard Reid.

The print is grim. I mean, it is dark; the enclosure would look serviceable enough were it not empty, but its vacancy denotes some sort of unspoken tragedy. The image is hung sort of low, even accounting for my above-average height, and this makes me feel like I'm looking at the thing, not a photograph of the thing. It also makes me feel claustrophobic, like I'm going to be sleeping on that grubby mattress of straw tonight. I always felt, looking at Höfer's images, that there was something degrading about the animals' entrapment in itself, and that this was worse than any specific element of their circumstances – looking at this image, I'm feeling panicky and short of air.

This emphasis on claustrophobia is pervasive throughout Piotrowska's concise selection of photographs – enclosed interiors, doors and stairwells, and the small gallery itself. There are images of people, but there is no eye contact. In one image the artist reclines and stares upwards, blankly glaring out of shot. Her neck is supported by another person's hand and, as is familiar in Piotrowska's previous works, there is some faintly familiar sense of intimacy here, but it is sort of estranged or not quite remembered. There is some enigmatic relationship between the subjects, but as an onlooker you feel slightly excluded. The same can be said of the relationships between the various images themselves, that there is a sort of gloomy game of Cluedo underway: doors, ornate walls, a zoo enclosure, someone's knuckles – what does it all mean? What is most disconcerting is that while I look into Piotrowska's *XXXIII / Frowst*, 2014, (Piotrowska with her intimate neck support) and wonder what I'm witnessing exactly, I am totally disorientated by the falsity of the pose; it can't possibly be occurring for any reason other than the production of this image. As if pre-empting the nauseating disorientation of her audience, Piotrowska has installed a quiet (frankly, barely audible) recording of her reciting meditative exercises in the first-floor gallery space. So low are the tones, however, that I can't help but feel that these images are having some sort of surreal conversation about me under their breath.

Next I'm in an ice-cold Bermondsey Square, my gloveless hands adhering to the metal of my handlebars and I'm walking my bike backwards away from Vitrine Gallery's window space, frozen breath rising from my mouth, eyes transfixed by an expansive red hot sunset. I'm trying to get back far enough to take in all 16 metres of Michael John Whelan's installation *Only In*, 2014, while remaining close enough to feel some of the warmth. *Only In* is a single image appropriated from a 1984 magazine advert for US automotive manufacturer Jeep. The piece takes its title from Jeep's slogan 'Only in a Jeep' which, over the years, has captioned advertising imagery of attractive Jeep owners undertaking a variety of all-American outdoor activities. The specific image employed by Whelan depicts a Jeep parked atop the crest of a grassy hill looking out across an endless vista of hills, mountains and forest all aglow with the fire of the iconic American sunset – the colours of the Wild West. Silhouetted in the foreground is a young man, standing in the open-topped vehicle, leaning against the Jeep's roll bar behind him, his hand resting on it. Raised out of the vehicle such as he is, the figure becomes like that of a man on a horse, surveying the land that lies in front of him. The image is a top-shelf advert of its time, a bastion of capitalism, and an image so sympathetic to American insecurities, so loaded with carefully considered meanings and



Leonce Raphael
Agbodjelou
*Untitled Triptych (Code
Noir)* 2014