

Jennet Thomas



SCHOOL OF CHANGE
2012 video installation

In September 2014, eight months before the general election, Jennet Thomas's film and sculptural installation *The Unspeakable Freedom Device* was due to be shown at the Grundy Art Gallery in Blackpool. As reported (Artnotes AM380), the local council under whose purview the Grundy falls postponed the exhibition on the grounds that it could be seen as an attempt to influence future election results in referencing the personality cult that has grown up around the memory of Margaret Thatcher. In response, Thomas drew attention to the film and surrounding furor with a tour of screenings and talks around the country. This pragmatic reaction is unsurprising given Thomas's long-standing dedication to finding ways of screening artists' films that, for one reason or another, cannot be shown elsewhere.

Thomas was a co-founder of, and still performs with, The Exploding Cinema, a collective whose aim from the early 1990s onwards was to screen artists' films that fell outside the remit of funding bodies and broadcast media. It was through this collective that Thomas came to filmmaking, after having trained as a painter. She describes how, buying a Super 8 camera at a car-boot sale, she went on to develop new work structured around performed monologues, with aspects of animation utilising the idiosyncrasies of the medium. This attraction to lo-fi, home-made visual effects is still evident in her work, and has developed into a sophisticated method that functions as both a political gesture and a poetic device, resulting in works that circumvent accusations of amateurishness by their deeply considered and affecting associations.

Described by Thomas as an aesthetics of sufficiency, her eschewing of mainstream industrial production models in her films means that the audience is not alienated from the process and cannot consume the work passively as spectacle. In line with this, she also works with a mixture of professional actors and volunteers, and through choosing to include performers in her films who have a personal link to the chosen setting, she relinquishes a level of control, opening out the performance to potential eccentricities.

With this in mind, there is a tension in Thomas's work between control and collaboration whereby, in order to complete her elaborate works, she must necessarily draw on the skills of others. Not completely comfortable with the term collaborative, Thomas prefers to see these aspects of her work as representing collective endeavour, citing the pragmatic beginnings of these relationships that have come to enrich the making and presentation of the work. Since 2000, as the settings and stage direction for her film works increased in complexity, Thomas began customarily working with filmmaker Paul Tarragó, who plays an important role in supervising camerawork and lighting. Beginning with *SCHOOL OF CHANGE*, 2012, Thomas has also worked closely with Leo Chadburn to develop soundtracks that are coherent with the logic of the films.

All Suffering SOON TO
END 2010
video installation



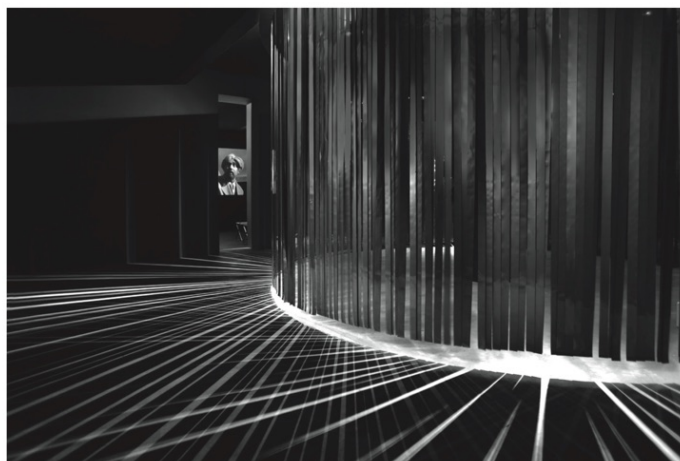
In her work in film over the past 15 years, Thomas has focused intensely on aspects of everyday existence that jar with our blinkered view of reality, exposing transgression and philistinism. For example, in *SHARONY!*, 2000, Thomas takes the relationship between two young girls and a doll they find as the starting-point for an exploration of the potential dangers attending female puberty and sexual awakening, as their toy 'grows up' into an inflatable sex doll inside a dolls' house wallpapered with pornography. She is skilled in creating worlds and characters that are clearly outlandish, but in their symbolic relation to the everyday they prick the viewer's sense of detachment from the narrative. The discomfiting sense of familiarity within Thomas's absurdist worlds, fluctuating between shared everyday experiences, deeply personal memories and sweeping political enunciation, confounds a straightforward reading.

The set design and visuals within Thomas's recent works often reference the sci-fi television series of her youth, such as *The Survivors* and *The Stone Tape*, and in her artistic use of this retro-futuristic aesthetic she subverts the reactionary nostalgia that is prevalent within current mass culture. Thomas also exploits the tendency of viewers to automatically try to fill a gap in understanding with existing knowledge by including imagery that could have a plethora of possible connotations. For example, in *SCHOOL OF CHANGE* she approaches the commodification of education and questions around new kinds of productivity with a looped film set in her old high school, a pre-fab building that was duplicated around the country. Connotations of a dystopian near-future jostle with the recently obsolete technology of mini-disc players and damaged QR codes in an inescapable narrative that evokes the pressure of perpetual, meaningless production.

Another technique that has become typical in Thomas's recent work is her use of colour, whereby the installations that have accompanied her films since the commissioning of *All Suffering SOON TO END!*, 2010, by Matt's Gallery, mirror the garish palette of her films. Characters are painted and dressed in a particular shade or pattern, giving them an uncanny, carnivalesque appearance that lurches beyond funny to fearful. In *The Unspeakable Freedom Device* colour has become one of the main focuses of the film, with an RGB scheme and verbal and visual references to 'eternal blue' connoting not only the idea of democracy lapsing into cultism, specifically here the residuum of Thatcher's memory, but also the shades of technology on standby.

The Unspeakable Freedom Device also features a blue-painted man who, acting as a salesman and motivational speaker, promotes the virtues of 'upgrading' to eternal blue. The colour of this character is reminiscent of that of another who appears in *Because of The War*, 2005. Thomas cites this earlier work as the first time that she consciously began to work with colour as a theme. In each the choice of colour is important; in *Because of the War*, yellow – as a colour of both madness and joy – enhances the disconcerting effect of the skewed reality that Thomas has created, whereas in *All Suffering SOON TO END!* the bright green and purple of the hectoring door-to-door religion salespeople represent shades typical of fictional power in the form of folkloric characters and comic-book heroes.

Thomas's most recent film and installation further develops the themes that have infused her previous work, featuring characters who are trapped by what the viewer understands to



*All Suffering
SOON TO END*
2010 video
installation

*The Unspeakable
Freedom Device*
2015
video installation

be ideology and illusion, a subject that was dealt with directly in *All Suffering SOON TO END*. The motif of a mysterious, alchemical device that is featured in *SCHOOL OF CHANGE* also reappears in recent work, taking a more central role and referring on the one hand to overreliance on smartphones and computers, known in vernacular and technical terms as devices, and on the other hand to a deeper anxiety that congeals around the increasingly impenetrable facade of technology.

These aspects were eloquently discussed at the recent symposium accompanying the eventual opening of *The Unspeakable Freedom Device* in Blackpool and the dialogues and discussions that surround Thomas's work are important in understanding its functioning. Thomas cites the found object as an important mechanism within her practice, particularly the way in which unexpected meanings are generated. Through her installations, this reciprocal exchange of meaning is opened to the viewer who, free to draw their own associations, can be confident only that these initial responses will morph and refract as the imagery and narratives created by Thomas nestle uncomfortably within already ingrained memories. ■

The Unspeakable Freedom Device will be screened at Matt's Gallery, London 21 November and the artist's book is published by Book Works, 2015, £12.

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