

INTO THE LIGHT
Peter Bonnell +Julie Marsh

In her video works *The Sportsman* (2004), *full circle* (2006) and *Living Thing* (2007) Julie Marsh examines the various ways in which ordinary people spend their leisure time. Often using a camera mounted on a tripod that revolves in a smooth and unblinking 360-degree sweep, her works focus on re-creating a very definite sense of place and atmosphere. For example, *The Sportsman*, filmed in a city-centre Birmingham pub successfully immerses the viewer in the sights and sounds of a real and touchable environment. As the 8-minute film unfolds we become familiar with a host of characters that frequent the pub, all too briefly living vicariously through the lives we see on screen. However, Marsh's work is also concerned with how the viewer interacts with the filmed image, and the phenomenological aspects of the viewer within an installed space.

INTO THE LIGHT marks a subtle departure in Marsh's work. Rather than her usual focus on human subjects, INTO THE LIGHT features moths flitting from one light source to another. As one light is switched

off the moths are attracted to another and appear to pass through the camera lens and by extension virtually through the viewer. INTO THE LIGHT continues Marsh's experiments in placing the viewer within her work; it is a multi-channel video work that suggests a very personal and spiritual experience that is indicative of the kinetic movement that is inherent in all of Marsh's video works.

Recent projects and exhibitions by Julie Marsh during 2006 and 2007 include: a solo exhibition *full circle* in the main gallery, Phoenix Gallery, Brighton which was supported by research funding from the Arts Institute at Bournemouth; *Re-view*, a film based group exhibition exploring the term 'landscape' at the Study Gallery, Poole and *Re-view 2*, a select group exhibition which then travelled to Lighthouse, Poole. Julie has also exhibited as part of the MEETING PLACE: *Contemporary Art and the Museum Collection* at the Russell Cotes Art Gallery & Museum and text+work, Bournemouth. Julie Marsh is a Senior Lecturer in Lens Based Media at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth.

LIVING THINGS

There are a number of wonderfully candid moments in Julie Marsh's video works. At the conclusion of *Livin' Thing* (2007), filmed one evening during a lively dance class in Bournemouth, the moment the eponymous song fades out one female dancer flashes her partner a smile that relays a mixture of relief and happiness at having successfully survived the dance. In *The Sportsman* (2004), an engaging single channel video work filmed in a city-centre pub in Birmingham, one mini-vignette reveals an intimate encounter between two middle-aged men at the bar, who appear to lean inwards to each other, as if about to kiss. This being a tough inner city pub there is no physical contact, and instead the man to the right shouts an observation into the ear of his friend over the general roar of the pub. Another scene depicts a man absentmindedly adjusting his turban before yawning, passing a comment to someone sitting nearby and then returning to staring into space. The beauty of Marsh's films is that each person or character appears completely unaware that they are being observed; there are no self-conscious twitches here. Every action, tic or movement is utterly unaffected.

The apparent lack of awareness in Marsh's subjects is perhaps indicative of a modern Britain whose citizens are constantly being filmed,

monitored and watched. There are 4 million CCTV cameras scattered across the country equating to approximately one camera for every 14 citizens, inevitably leading to comments in the media as to a potential threat to civil liberties, and the consequences of Britain becoming a 'nanny state'. It would seem that wherever we go we can be sure that some part of our daily lives will be filmed and monitored, and that the prevalence of the camera lens means that we are slowly but surely becoming inured to watching and being watched.

Marsh's camera partially mimics that of a surveillance camera in *The Sportsman*. It slickly revolves in 360 degrees around a fixed point in space, seemingly perched atop a vandal proof lamp-post, and as if an anonymous controller has fallen asleep with his hand on the 'pan camera right' button. By utilising this 360 degree sweep Marsh's camera records every detail of the various characters, sounds and décor of *The Sportsman* - from the stack of sandwiches behind the bar wrapped in cling-film, to the fluorescent stickers advertising special offers, to the local football fans enjoying a pre-match drink. Compressed into 8 minutes, and employing judicious editing, an entire evening passes before the camera lens, mesmerising the viewer, transforming them into a voyeur. *The Sportsman* isn't in any

way a fabricated place; it is an unequivocally authentic character, as much a character as the many who frequent it. Featuring a severe looking landlady and customers of all shapes, sizes and racial backgrounds, *The Sportsman* is place where everyone, probably, knows your name. Nonetheless, it would be easy to misconstrue Marsh's intent here, as with all her work: a reading of the pub itself as a place is that it and the people who inhabit it convey a faint sense of being 'down at heel', merely working class. However, Marsh sidesteps any snobbery; she has not placed her camera there to invite the viewer to form an opinion about the people or the careworn nature of the pub. Her intent is not social critique or to pass judgement, but to evoke in the mind of the viewer a sense of place, and the role of the viewer within that place. In essence, the viewer can be considered in Marsh's films as becoming a metaphysical bridge between the gallery space and the place that is being recorded, effectively morphing them into temporarily becoming the camera.

Nevertheless, for this transformation of the viewer to succeed the question arises: to what extent are the people who inhabit Marsh's works aware they are being filmed? The artist claims that the regulars of *The Sportsman* quickly became used to her camera imperceptibly turning in their midst. This appears to be true

in the virtually unaffected manner in which the gaze of the camera is ignored. There are, however, a number of heart-stopping moments when someone looks directly into the lens, but in every instance any sense of awareness of being seen is quickly discarded as eyes refuse to focus and instead look beyond the camera. Without this conceit Marsh's work would fail: once the viewer is aware that they have been seen (in their metaphysical guise as camera) the spell is broken, and the relationship one builds up with the pub regulars, for we find ourselves fascinated by and very aware of their numerous tics, gestures, accents and personal narratives, becomes less significant, less personal. The artist has a predilection for recording people at leisure going about their daily lives; all the characters in her work, be it at a private view, eating in a canteen, drinking or dancing appear to do nothing more than enjoy themselves. The recurring motif here is that her characters remain blissfully unaware, therefore imbuing Marsh's work with a great deal of power that is missing in, for example, narrative or documentary based films.

Living Thing, Marsh's latest work, once again uses a revolving camera, this time placed in the middle of a dance floor during Thursday night modern jive class at the Bournemouth Pavilion. Similarly to *The Sportsman*, this

work suddenly comes alive with the advent of a song. The choice of ELO's *Living Thing* from the 1976 album *A New World Record* is particularly apt - the moment the song picks up pace, so do the numerous amateur dancers scattered throughout the subterranean Pavilion. Bathed in part inky darkness, and alternately with garish reds and greens of the disco lights, couples spin and wheel in and out of the unblinking eye of the restless camera lens. The dancers appear either unaware or unconcerned that they are being filmed - lending *Living Thing* an air of unaffected spontaneity. Further evidence to this can be seen in a companion piece to *Living Thing*, *full circle* (2006) produced a year earlier and installed at the Phoenix Arts Centre in Brighton in 2006.

Marsh's camera again revolves in 360 degrees around a fixed point, and is once more situated in the Bournemouth Pavilion, but in this instance featuring a number of elegant ballroom dancers gliding with great speed in and out of shot. These elderly couples, compared to the garish lighting in *Living Thing*, are bathed in a warm autumnal glow of the ballroom lights, symbolic perhaps of people in the twilight of their lives. *full circle* is particularly important in Marsh's practice, however, as it is her most successful attempt to physically include the viewer directly within the work. Her aim was not

only to create an empathic relationship between viewer and subject, but also a deliberate experiment to engender a sense of 'being there', of situating the viewer in the best place to fully interact with her film: at the very centre of the installed work.

The artist first attempted to immerse the gallery visitor within her work in *Garden* (2002) in which the viewer entered a cube-like structure. Synchronised video footage of a camera slowly pulling backwards over the flowerbeds, plants and grass of a garden was projected onto three sides of the structure and, as with the 360 degree turning of her camera in her later works, Marsh was able to almost hypnotise the viewer - eliciting a sense of tension as her camera appears to float backwards towards the ground. In contrast to *Garden*, the installation of *full circle* was an entirely more radical attempt to envelop the viewer. Her projector was placed within the centre of the space looking out towards a large circular screen that, powered by motors, revolved around a pillar projecting onto the screen and thereby successfully recreating the intensely kinetic movement of the ballroom dancers. Marsh succeeded in evoking in particular the sense of energy and movement in the ballroom with the installation of *full circle*. However, an interesting by-product of this is the heightening of the role of the viewer as voyeur,

as they are now metaphysically situated within the work, although remaining invisible. Indeed, this cloaking of the voyeur/ viewer sees them transformed one step further: into the role of an amateur anthropologist observing their subject virtually first-hand.

Canteen (2003) signifies another experiment by Marsh to make the metaphysical physical in her work, but in this case placing the viewer outside of the work rather than attempting to enclose them within it. *Canteen* is unusual in Marsh's practice in that it is wholly an installation - consisting of actual doors, devoid of any ostensible camera work and instead using sculptural objects, sound, light and projection to convey an image. This work was installed as part of the *Radioactive Show* in a disused X-Ray factory in Birmingham. The exhibition visitor was encouraged to touch the work, but ultimately and inexplicably they were barred from entering what could be perceived as a rightfully accessible environment. The doors leading to the 'canteen' are locked, making the experience one of intense frustration. People can be heard milling around and their shadows can be seen through two windows built into the doors; the clink of cutlery and the light in the glass windows suggests that the canteen is real, even an extension of the

exhibition space. Marsh employed a similar subterfuge in *Gallery 4* (2005), a work that was installed alongside *The Sportsman* at ArtSway during a solo exhibition in 2005. Subterfuge is the key with *Gallery 4*, as with *Canteen*. It is, however, an entirely benign ruse, as ArtSway has three gallery spaces, and Marsh decided to playfully manipulate the preconceptions of the gallery visitor to enact a subtle joke.

The viewer is invited to touch and then only look: they can feel the physicality of *Gallery 4*, as with *Canteen*, but cannot fully interact with it and are reduced to an outsider looking in, an observer taking mental notes. *Gallery 4* took the premise of *Canteen* one-step further, consisting of a white door complete with chrome handle and helpful '*Gallery 4*' sign underneath. The viewer was once again confronted with a locked door, but at head height was a small window through which could be seen another room - ArtSway's imaginary *Gallery 4*, depicted with the aid of a 15-inch LCD monitor built into the door. With the viewer summarily barred from entering they are once more forced to become voyeur, in this case studying people in the inaccessible gallery partaking in a private view, who can be seen milling about, making small talk and seemingly enjoying themselves. However, although both *Canteen* and *Gallery 4* convey an atmosphere of

a particular place, they are rigidly staged pieces and therefore lack the full spontaneity of *The Sportsman*, *full circle* and *Livin' Thing*.

Marsh, nevertheless, uses this staginess to great effect by eliciting a response that presents a work of art as a form of anthropological study. It would seem that the artist is anointing the viewer as an amateur anthropologist, inviting them to watch the occupants of *Gallery 4*, and to mentally record behaviour and habits. It could also be said that an anthropologist is essentially a voyeur, as in both instances observation is crucial. Furthermore, *Gallery 4*, and to a lesser extent *Canteen*, appear indicative of the artist attempting to conjure a definite and refined feeling of a physical, phenomenological sense of place. As the viewer interacts with the physical nature of both these works, they utilise their sense of perception and touch to locate themselves in relation to what are two-dimensional works, rather than just standing away from the screen and observing. The physical touching of the handle, and the moving of the arm and then the unmoving sensation of a locked door is indicative of an artist providing a partially interactive, site-specific work. There is a delicious irony here: as the viewer interacts with the work, other gallery visitors watch the futile attempt at opening

a locked door – and the amateur anthropologist becomes the subject of the next gallery visitor.

Marsh's video works, specifically *full circle* and *Livin' Thing*, could be construed as the culmination of intensive, 'kitchen sink' research filtered through inscrutable observation. The data or research that the artist captures with her camera (and through editing), even through the staged works such as *Gallery 4*, does indeed tell us a great deal about the lives people lead, although this data is severely restricted: as we are not party to the private lives of the people being filmed, just to an unfettered slice of one aspect of their public lives. Regardless of the quality of data, the anthropological and voyeuristic conclusion here is that the people featured in Marsh's work are thoroughly engaging with life. Perhaps witnessing people at their leisure is just as crucial, even more so, alongside anthropological surveys into the way we reproduce, find a partner, control others and generally order our society as a whole. Marsh does alight upon the latter concerns through her adoption of the characteristics of surveillance culture, but the enduring success, and inherent humanity, of her work is in the recording of the simple joy of a dance, or a quick half in your local. These actions are intrinsic to our very essence as human beings, with Marsh elevating them to

a new level of importance, deserving of our attention. Her video works are also indicative of a sensitive surveillance ethic, the artist effectively becoming a benign 'big brother' type of figure.

She expertly examines the role of the viewer as voyeur in her work, exploring the notion of how acceptable it is to watch people – considering the prevalence of the camera lens in modern society – and the sinister versus benign connotations applied to it. What Marsh's work is unequivocally not is documentary, and therefore it cannot be in any way deemed judgemental. A documentarian would feel the urge to add narration and an introduction and conclusion to a work such as *The Sportsman*. No matter how unbiased many documentary filmmakers claim to be, there is often a hidden agenda, a political slant, a view to be expressed. Marsh's overarching intent is not to offer up an opinion, or to compartmentalise the people who become characters in her video works, but ultimately to evoke a fleeting sense of the atmosphere of a particular place. Her work invites the viewer to live vicariously, to revel in the sheer enjoyment of ordinary people doing ordinary things in ordinary places.

Peter Bonnell
November 2007

PETER BONNELL

Curator, Exhibitions and Education
ArtSway

Peter Bonnell was born near Liverpool in 1973, and is Curator of Exhibitions and Education at ArtSway in the New Forest. He completed a BA in Fine Art at Liverpool John Moores University in 1995, and in 1996 began a three-year drawing fellowship as part of the *Drawlab* project based at St. Helens College. In 1998 Bonnell won first prize at the St. Helens Open with his painting *Teflon Don*, judged by Antony Gormley, and he has exhibited widely across the North West of England. In 1999 he was accepted on the MFA program at the University of Arkansas in the United States, taking up a scholarship as a graduate teaching assistant teaching basic art and design and upper-level drawing classes.

He graduated from the U of A in 2002 as part of the class of 2003, with an MFA in painting, with a minor in photography. On leaving the US, Bonnell was accepted on the MA Curating Contemporary Art at the Royal College of Art, graduating in 2004 as co-curator of *This much is certain*, exhibiting works by artists including Dexter Dalwood and Jeremy Deller. Whilst in the US Bonnell was the co-ordinator of the Anne Kittrell Gallery in Fayetteville, Arkansas. On graduating from the RCA, and taking up his post at ArtSway, Bonnell has curated numerous exhibitions including: *sugar-coated*; *Aggregate* by *Jamie Shovlin*; the screening programme *Multichannel* (with Helen Sloan of SCAN) and was co-curator (with Mark Segal) of *New Forest Pavilion* at the 2007 Venice Biennial.

JULIE MARSH

Senior Lecturer, Lens Based Media,
the Arts Institute at Bournemouth

Julie Marsh is a video artist / filmmaker, using video installation and sound to explore the phenomenon of sense perception as a language of the body. This leads to work that is highly engaging, taking into account the relationship between viewer and the specific place where the works are shown. Her installation work pushes the boundaries of traditional two-dimensional video by dragging her imagery into the three dimensional gallery space, involving the viewer within the environment depicted in her work. Julie Marsh is an effective observer of ordinary people, her camera is never critical or judgemental; the artist does not offer a documentary view, but rather a candid representation of lives simply being led.

Julie Marsh graduated from Exeter School of Art and Design in 2001, and completed her Masters Degree at Birmingham Institute of Art and Design in 2002. Next to her theoretical and practical research, she is currently a Senior Lecturer at the Arts Institute at Bournemouth. Recent exhibitions and projects include: *Re-view: exploration of the term landscape* at the Lighthouse, Poole in 2007.

She received research funding from the Arts Institute at Bournemouth for the development of an exhibition *full-circle* in the main gallery at Phoenix, Brighton in 2006. In 2005 she was the winner of ArtSway's annual Open competition and was awarded a solo show. In May 2005 she undertook a three month VIVID haus guest research residency in film and video on the hothaus programme.

