Beginning the present in the past

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is irredeemable.
What might have been an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden.

The work of Ms&Mr is grounded in an unassailable web of personal resources. Although rooted within video practice it purposely eludes genre, skirting between biographical memoir, montage, pastiche, commercial media and personal ad hoc documentary. To call the work surreal is perhaps too generic, although an immeasurable air of mystery lurks within it. The work 808.838 / *grandfather paradox* is a summation of some five years of collaborative work based on a technique that involves the furtive, uncanny insertion of new images into pre-existent family archival footage; a rewriting or reorientation of the past and an entry into one another’s pathology. With Ms&Mr collaboration is an understatement: it is devotional, carnal, interrogative, and discursively inquisitive like any close relationship. What we see is not simply a finished work of art per se, rather it is the record of an ongoing obsession about obsession, in which artistic self-interrogation has taken a fateful, and maybe confusing, turn into the fold of the other. Self-reflection is made multiple and strange. For Ms&Mr psychic pathology is not so much a problem but a lugubrious game in which humour and poetic gloom play dividing but persistent roles.

Ms&Mr was conceived not quite so much as a collaborative team, but as a soldered new unity. Most of their work is a reflexive stance on a series of logically impossible concepts that begins with the paradoxical premise embedded in their own artistic identity: a new birth of themselves, by themselves. At first this formulation may seem unnecessarily cryptic or indulgent, until one understands the extent to which the work of Ms&Mr meditates on the way that close interpersonal relationships challenge the construct of the closed self. To state this in a different way, Ms&Mr is a construct born from the oblivion of love; the oblivion of love is an estrangement of the self that instates a new, other self that is yet more sharply defined – devoured yet enlarged and more alive. Their video work is an exploration of the syntax of autobiographical reworkings, reimaginings following the creation of this new self. Deepening the paradox, this new self is in itself double, as indicated in the copula of the ampersand (&). In short ‘Ms&Mr’ the entity, the creation, the formulation, is an idea of being which is one of an endlessly reverberating echo-chamber, the room of mirrors engendered by any subjective formation, which is by identification with the other. Authorship, once removed from a set of reductive facts (the married couple Richard and Stephanie, born here, live there, etc., etc.), is, within their work, taken to be an interminable problem, a subject of argument, especially given their inclination toward reorienting the paths of personal origin.

The old adage that we examine the past according to the present assumes an elaborate speculative texture when placed in their hands. The spectral memory of film is refashioned and rewritten through the introduction of foreign phantoms; the presence of the loved one suddenly appears in a past before the loved one was ever known, or loved. Love is thereby shown to have a presiding structure. Like history written by the victors, the presence of the loved one rescues the past into a passage of inevitability, into a series of trials that converge into a single and inevitably fated point: the loved one’s face. The primary task within the ‘career’ of love, therefore, is to ensure the vitality of this face and the tenability of this autobiographical teleology.

In his discussion of the sexuality amongst the characters in Proust, Gilles Deleuze suggests a productive typology of the heterogeneity of human sexuality that subverts the homo-hetero binary. Here the subject seeks out an object of desire that is already multiple; a man may seek out the man in woman, or the woman may seek out the man in another woman, hence a union of the sexes that is based on partial objects, that is, choices according to psychological dispositions as opposed to essentialist metaphors of life and reproduction.1 Ms&Mr, the third party, the creation, is thus to be understood as more than an alias or nom de plume. Rather, it is a generative circuit in which such permutations can play themselves out. In one instance it is a mechanism of personal investigation, and in another it is a method of broader social research, carried out from the inside, and, we must admit, rather obliquely.

It is the sometimes outlandish, intriguing inscrutability of Ms&Mr’s best works that ally them to science fiction, a very specific science fiction in fact, one belonging to the period of film noir and the birth of television, roughly 1940–60. While I said that their work eluded genre, what they draw from science fiction is its liberal licence with just about anything. Theirs is a world of disorienting effects and
unaccountable diversions that add up to an atmosphere that is as endearing as it is eerie. As in films before the development of digital technology, the flights from reality have a tactility whose periodic clumsiness jolts us continually out of our suspension of disbelief. But we go along with it anyway, since it is an aesthetic of pantomime rather than intricate simulation. We are never quite there. Whereas hi-res graphics offer us an image of constructed certainty, the disbelief occasioned by models, backdrops or jarring layering draws us into an encounter where things might be taken if we allowed our mind to wander, or our conviction to falter.

The ‘Grandfather Paradox’ is the anecdotal name for the basic problem of causality in time travel: if you were to go back in time and kill your grandfather before he met your grandmother, you would sever the chain of conception thus negating your presence which, in turn, would mean that the grandfather would be alive after all to ensure that fate ran its course, and ensuring that you would indeed be alive. It is a perverted logic (since it is already built on an imaginary hypothesis) that seems to point to its own impossibility. When René Barjavel in his 1943 novel Le Voyageur Imprudent. The title of this book points to scientific fiction’s rootedness in the journey, either within time, or across space; the genre is defined according to the imponderability of the limits of each. Ms&Mr make free reference to the outlawish and the ineffable in this installation which is part arcane underworld and part lo-tech country fair sideshow. Until now their work has been limited to single and double screen arrangements whose elaborate temporal deceptions take place within the frame. In 808.838 / grandfather paradox, video and light have been married to sculptural objects and shaped surfaces, and, arranged in a way as to suggest a series of narratives that converge and diverge in irregular oscillation, analogous to the meeting and parting of human subjects in everyday life. If there could be said to be a centrepiece to the installation it would have to have been a sequence involving a portly elderly man, already distant from us because of the blurry low-resolution of the image and the tenuous outline. Encircling him was a figure in a dark overcoat and a hat – Richard nova Milne – that at one point seeks to resuscitate the elderly man who does not react. Like a moving collage, the two figures seem to float aimlessly in a kind of gently throbbing vortex. It is purposely a travesty, and there is no effort to hide the lumpen nature of the effects. But if it is purposely absurd, it is not inconsequential. There is a moving urgency to this scene brought about by the intensity of the actor. The short loop gives the idea that he too is locked inexorably within time, a reflexive statement on the closed circuit, and the eternal return of the video loop itself. Entrapment – or what we might call ‘video entrapment’ a more sinister version of the Deleuzian ‘image crystal’ in his second book on cinema – is something that Ms&Mr have come to take possession of within their work, as it is something they have found haunts their work. When Richard enters an image from Stephanie’s past or vice versa, the narrative element that flows from such an intervention is that one is coming to ‘save’ the other – as in any elaborate reinvention of history caused by the experience of love – except to find him or herself frozen within a past whose possibilities of recasting are not as great as were first thought.

The allusion to time traveller, dead father or grandfather is all well taken – and this is about as literal as the exhibition gets. There is a largish rocket ship-shape in the corner of the room supporting flashing, stirring projections of what seem to be vaguely rocket ship things (although it is actually super 8 family footage). And then there is another sequence adjacent to the grandson-grandfather drama of an infant’s head looming from a darkly abstracted ground. At one point hands appear at the edge of the image and disappear again. What link in the causal chain is this? It doesn’t matter; its spectral presence is what counts. As one’s eyes travelled through the darkened space, the images on the rocket ship changed and flashed as if it were about to launch, or crash. At other parts of the space were a shattered shape, like blasted crystal (kryptonite?), and a totemic doll, both illuminated by projections of undecipherable goings-on. Under a spotlight on a stand was a basketball-like globe like some small-scale remnant of some unknown planet. Here and there suspended against the pylons were filament cords falling in aimless spaghetti on the floor. They did not symbolise much, only to maintain the overall air of the strange and un anticipat ed.

There are still artists today who take up the task of latter-day mystics, who revisit a time when art was not a discrete cultural activity but a mystical one, where it was vain to separate music, objects, images or writing. Alchemy and art were one and the same. For all were meant to be in the service of incantation whose sole purpose was to invoke higher powers that could assist in higher knowledge, in the transformation of matter, and in divulging the secrets of mortality. To practice art was therefore not to make objects but to indulge in an act of describing truths and to distil the vital forces of life’s essences. In this regard, an important reference point for Ms&Mr is the obscure Russian mystic Nikolai Fyodorov who expounded in an essay, ‘Philosophy of the Common Task’, that surmounting mortality could be achieved through what he named a ‘Religion of Resuscitative Resurrection’. Fyodorov claimed that if we could embark on cosmic expeditions and recover particles belonging to our ancestors, we would be able to reconstitute them, thus setting in train a whole resuscitated ancestor line back to the origins of humankind.

Such theories ask for a great deal of credulity on the part of the hearer, but what fascinates is the lengths that the imagination will go to try to overstep itself, to challenge the boundaries of life and understanding. No-one is suggesting that Ms&Mr are overly earnest about fanciful theories either, however it has become increasingly clear to them that the contradictions that art can enshrine, in a way that dialectics cannot, have the power to surprise the artists well beyond the expectations of their artistic intent. Most of their
work is a stimulating mixture of levity and melancholy, their aesthetic a capsule of altered images that gropes toward the realm of the possibly regained.

As 808.838 / grandfather paradox amply illustrates, art for Ms&Mr is an alchemy whose outcomes are always different from the aims. Their work is therefore integral to their relationship, not just in some empirical sense, but it is an intricate reproductive organism and a lens by which they communicate, a form of psychic penetration. It is a tool used to pry open that door to the rose-garden, with all the mythic and erotic connotations that that may imply.

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