

Between the Plane and the Horizon Dalziel + Scullion

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The notion of 'other' may be understood through that which it is not. The functional extension of this is that we use 'other' to describe the parameters of what and where we are. The video *Another Place*, by Matthew Dalziel + Louise Scullion, depicts a place and its population. The questions quickly arise: what is this other place and, more fundamentally, what is the place from which we look?

The contemporary image of society is characterised as that which abides within the modern city. Both the commentator and audience longingly look out from this place of concrete and congestion – onto the rural, that most distant other place. An urban centre of the world now exists through substantial reference points that remain unaltered throughout the globe. Not simply the commodification of place by Gap, McDonalds, etc., but, rather, a more complex language of the urban which keeps us comfortably at home. And thus, as globalized world inhabitants, Londoners may feel more at home in Hong Kong than they do in West Wales. Yet, even when theorists such as the architect Steven Holl claim that, "a global movement electronically connects all places in a continuous time-place fusion", there still exists an undeniable persistence of geography; isolation remains a reality. Dalziel + Scullion's work exists between these new "time-place" fusions and the remnants of space.

Through a single screen video projection, a series of eight portraits depicts a cross section of the population of an undisclosed place. The people represent a range of ages and, both individually and as a group, are at once recognisable and

distant. The video is slowed to a fifth of normal speed which gives this place its own distinct time-scale. Each individual is portrayed through a tight crop that shows only their head and shoulders. Their presence dominates the frame, extenuating our lack of access to their locale. Yet, behind them – their backs turned to it – we can glimpse the sea, sand dunes, the side of a corrugated iron building. A melancholy haunts their countenance as they look out from the screen, holding our eye for longer than is expected or comfortable. Between their recorded place and our place as a viewer, our gaze is reflected and becomes complicated.

Portraiture has always been a highly coded activity. Images of strangers from forgotten pasts are understandable only through engagement with sociological and artistic conventions. To a casual onlooker the sitter's identity is approximated through visual signification within the painting. These conventions of portraiture describe a person's standing and position through a covert language. *Another Place* similarly retains distance through lack of information and the separation of the medium. The enigmatic presence of each individual is heightened by certain details occasionally articulating their person: one man wears a camouflage jacket; another young man has a weather-beaten suntan; an older woman's face is marked with deep lines. Such details invite speculation upon the individual and their role within this other community. But these details serve as mere punctuation and leave much to the imagination. David Hume famously proclaimed that men's souls are mirrors to one another,

his conception of sympathy giving rise to the social construction of self; here it seems rather more complicated. Their dispassioned stares fail to betray an emotive response and so a blank canvas is afforded the spectator. In this case, Hume's mirror functions only one way. They reflect us and become hosts to our construction of this other. But video allows this only in a single direction. It is as if we are looking through a one-way glass; we can see them but they cannot look upon us. The inability to reciprocate the Humean sympathy effects a further isolation upon this population. The price we pay for access is distance. While these individuals exist as mirrors to ourselves, we cannot reflect their presence back to them.

Dalziel + Scullion are well versed in the articulation of these other places. In previous work they have utilised the uncanny architectural structures that proliferate the North East of Scotland, an area famously rich in wildlife and the infrastructures of the North Sea oil industry and the military. And it is to this place that Dalziel + Scullion chose to come and work. Their presence as incomers and interlocutors to this location renders *Another Place*, in part, an anthropological study. Moreover, their decision to work in such a comparatively isolated part of Britain can be thought to relate to the work of the early photographers of indigenous populations around the world; for example, the Victorian photographers who travelled into the 'darkest' jungles and 'wildest' lands, returning with images of far off other places and peoples. In this practice, image is central to civilization. The image is not merely taken but created. Its extraction and re-presentation makes the image function as a shaper and marker of world knowledge and self-knowledge. The image serves to define not only that which it depicts but also the observer. It shows what the observer is not; it presents the other. A strategy to this effect is implicated in Edward S. Curtis' (1868-1952) photographs. His work, presented as documentation of over 80 native North American tribes, resulted in the publication of a twenty-volume book. Not only did it effectively show the native populations as being alien and so define an outer extent to the idea of America, but it did this through fabrication. The staging is apparent in many of the images. Native Americans wield the wrong weaponry and pose before artificial backdrops. To look back upon such photographs one is very aware of their contrived nature. Documentation is, therefore, not how a thing is but a reflection of how we think that thing is. Perhaps then it is of no surprise that the presence of these photographers became mythologised, by their subjects, to the point where it was not simply their photograph that was being taken but also part of their soul. Not simply a fear of misrepresentation, but perhaps they too understood the implications of photography's corruption of the Humean mirror. The realisation that, by blocking sympathy, social resonance cannot occur and one is therefore left detached.

And yet, *Another Place* shares Curtis' sense of the artificial and dramatic. The portraits are often filmed before scenic coastlines, complete with cliffs and crashing waves, those types of locations that we recognise as the places where city dwellers

travel to for weekend walks, to take the air and enjoy the view. But this population turns its back to it; they need not gaze upon these vistas. These are the people of this land and their existence is embedded within. Their connection to the land is clear: a child unselfconsciously wears a wet suit, a young man's tan is evidence of his external lifestyle. This is not scenery to them but their place. Yet, it was the artists' decision to video their subjects before such settings, and this articulates a knowingness of the sequentiality of images. Images exist as a continuum and are dependent upon one another: from the creating of the video image through the spectator's visual to mental image, to the infinite rebounding of the image on the conscious and sub-conscious. At each point, image can be comprehended and contextualised in a plurality of ways. Truth and image are perhaps at best only nodding acquaintances. The obvious setting of the video acknowledges the both real and metaphorical distance that we are from the subjects and therefore the potential that exists for the compounding of errors that the video's compression of distance creates.

While painting exists by holding an ever-present moment, video exists in a sphere of anticipation of the next instance. As we watch the video we await the next moment, perhaps hoping for a revelation upon the identities of these people and this place. Through slowing the video, Dalziel + Scullion have slowed time. While the old woman would typically be seen as an example of old age, the slow motion extends the time frame beyond the human. They create a decelerated world where instances persist and reverberate in indecipherable ways. A lazy wind appears to pass through rather than around the occupants of this place, long hair is magically held horizontally aloft for too long; waves roll in and break sluggishly as if the sea has somehow become substantially more viscous. In this microscopic time the vastness of universe time is moved towards. To see a wave slowly strike the rocky coast makes one aware of the sublime time-scales that are required for the forming of the landscape. The geographical time is a mere instance in the geological, and in comparison human time is inconsequential. Modern living acknowledges the fleeting nature of our existence by trying to cram ever more into each instance. Yet while multi-tasking and WAP technology succeeds in emphasising the limit of time, Dalziel + Scullion's slowing of the video gives us an unbounded sense of time. While time in the urban environment is something plastic which is to be moulded to allow us to achieve the most in our day, the people of this other place function in a world that has an appreciation of the inalterability of time. As sure as night follows day, the people of this land acknowledge the changing light and seasons. These greater time-scales reinforce a different realisation of the human place in the world.

These individuals are at once entranced and entrancing. Throughout the video their gaze breaks off only to look beyond the frame into their world, a place we are kept from. And yet we can attempt this journey through imagination, and to do so allows us a speculation on the metaphysics and implications of people and place.