

# Charlotte Prodger: microsphaeric howard hughes heaven movie

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*Charlotte Prodger, microsphaeric howard hughes heaven movie, 2014. Performance view, 'GENERATION: 25 Years of Contemporary Art in Scotland', Tramway, Glasgow, 2014. Photograph: Martin Clark. All images courtesy the artist and Kendall Koppe, Glasgow*

Charlotte Prodger's *microsphaeric howard hughes heaven movie* (2014) begins with the sound of a meditation chime. A television monitor, DVD player and a portable stereo are each wheeled onto the stage of the dark studio theatre on custom-made stainless steel trolleys by two people, one of whom is the artist. Both are casually dressed. The artist is wearing a white T-shirt bearing an image of a movie camera with the words 'Panavision London' on the back. She has white Nike trainers on. Both cube TV and boombox, fetishised on their metal altars, are presented as though they are ceremonial objects. The monitor is placed stage left whilst the boombox is positioned stage right. A 16mm projector has already been installed a little distance away from the boombox. Audio narratives are played through the studio theatre's inbuilt speakers. A large projection screen is centre stage.

“In this video you can see my bf and me in the same kind of nike classics (sizes eur 45 and eur 42). can you read the messages?? :-P”

The artist opens a DVD case, switches the equipment on and inserts the disc into the player to animate the monitor. Both performers leave and for the remaining eighteen minutes of the performance the different eras of technological equipment become the protagonists of the piece.

Sound and image alternate between the cube monitor, boombox, studio theatre sound system, film projector and static projection screen. The visual elements include a video of 16mm film being split by hand, strobe lighting illuminating the boombox and low-res footage of someone in a field running away from, and then towards, a boombox which is playing techno, while at the same time recording the scene on a mobile phone. We do not see the video's author, we can only glimpse a shadow as it falls on the Sharp GF-777 and hear the person's movement across the grass. Recorded spoken word punctuates the moving images and gathers excerpts from four narratives. The first three are read by the artist: she describes a YouTube video of a man chipping at a black rock to make a biface tool; then reads the part of a girl explaining how she adapts to the acute noise of the club where she works; and finally tells of being on a night flight and drifting in the darkness between consciousness and unconsciousness, a story that concludes with a stewardess asking her to pull down her blind as it will soon be light outside. In the last

audio file, a male voice reads a caption from the comments section of a YouTube video: ‘In this video you can see my bf and me in the same kind of nike classics (sizes eur 45 and eur 42). can you read the messages?? :-P’, and then reads a description by Prodger of the video, recounting the movements of two men in matching trainers as they play a careful dance of exchanging them and walking backwards off screen.<sup>1</sup>



Charlotte Prodger, *microsphaeric howard hughes heaven movie*, 2014, detail (still from video)

My attempt here to summarise *microsphaeric howard hughes heaven movie* in a linear way is not representative of the disjointed memories I have of the experience of the live performance at Tramway, Glasgow last September.<sup>2</sup> Returning to the stalls of the studio theatre, my eye is drawn to the detail of the set – the tiny green light of the DVD player looking like the flickering light of the aeroplane. I only become aware that we have been sat in darkness when the light from the projector begins to cast a strobing white light. I become conscious of time as each narrative refers to it: ‘one year

ago’, ‘two years ago’, ‘117 minutes’, ‘day 302’, ‘the final 50 seconds’. The technology described in the voiceovers and used in the performance creates strange overlaps and loops. Technological advancement runs contrarily: the artist describes a digital video of a man creating a Palaeolithic tool, his anachronistic activity shared through early twenty-first century technologies. Shifts also occur between the reality of an object and its trace: the boombox on the stage is also in the film. The artist appears on stage at the beginning of the performance, but it is the recording of her voice that is with us the longest. I become alert to the receptivity of my body. When a beat is played at optimum volume in the final section of film, I feel it in my gut.

This concern with interactions between the body and technology is scored and underscored throughout the performance. The video of someone hand-splitting a 16mm film shows digits methodically at work – one hand holds the small circular device whilst the other carefully pulls the clear film through. The man flints the stone; Prodger begins this section reading out a comment posted online underneath the video:

*I have no idea what you're constructing, but that thing you're working on and your tools are so beautiful that I'll just go ahead and watch all the videos – Innuya 1 year ago.*

The narrative is followed by a quote from Bernard Stiegler's *Technics and Time* (1994), likewise read by the artist and played through the studio theatre speakers:

*We didn't begin in the brain but in the feet. It was only when we stood up that hands and feet were freed from grasping. So language developed: another prosthesis. Erect posture determines a new system of relations. The freeing of the hand during locomotion is also that of the face from its grasping functions. The hand will necessarily call for tools, moveable organs; the tools of the hand will necessarily call for the language of the face. Tools for the hand, language of the face, these are the twin poles of the same apparatus.<sup>3</sup>*

Brain-feet-hands-face-tools-language. Stiegler follows the trajectory of human evolution, tracing the

development of the body as symbiotic with that of technology. A subsequent reading of the context of this excerpt makes the connection more explicit, with Stiegler stating, ‘the human invents himself in the technical by inventing the tool’.<sup>4</sup> He also refers directly to the biface – the first technology that humans see themselves within: ‘Flint is the first reflective memory, the first mirror’.<sup>5</sup> The artist herself bringing on the equipment before turning it over to the machines, the links suggested between hands and tools, the shifts of attention prompting physical awareness on the part of the viewer: the performance plays and replays Stiegler’s proposition.

The tone of Prodger’s voice changes with the different narratives she reads. In the first, she is a distanced observer, describing the action of the man as he analyses how he flints the rock. When playing the girl in the nightclub Prodger is more informal. Later, as she describes being on a plane at night, the pace shifts, and trance-like she lists a sequence of eighty phrases, objects and images running through her mind:

*I put on my Beyerdynamic DT700 headphones, Buckeye logo, love in Harvard, Logitech 1 x 700, lord of illusion [...] Ohio state, ferret homes, microsphaeric, howard hughes, heaven movie, patio hauler.*<sup>6</sup>

Prodger’s most recent film *Stonemollan Trail* (2015) obliquely explores Nancy Holt’s *Sun Tunnels* (1973–76) among other overlapping sources. Installed in the Great Basin Desert, Utah, these are four concrete tubes pierced by holes denoting the formation of four celestial constellations. Holt’s contemporaneous statement on the work aligns her pragmatic approach to materials with that of Prodger:

*The four concrete tunnels are laid out on the desert in an open X configuration eighty-six feet long on the diagonal. Each tunnel is eighteen feet long, and has an outside diameter of nine feet and two-and-a-half inches and an inside diameter of eight feet with a wall of thickness of seven-and-a-quarter inches. A rectangle drawn around the outside of the tunnels would measure sixty-eight-and-a-half feet by fifty-three feet.*<sup>7</sup>

Upon arrival at *microsphaeric howard hughes heaven movie* the audience was given a sheet of paper with a caption and fifteen-entry list detailing the makes of equipment used, and references for the video and sound files included in the performance.

Holt’s *Sun Tunnels* are animated by specific light conditions: during the sunrise and sunset on winter and summer solstices, the sun is exactly centred through the tunnels, creating concentric circles of cement and light. Lucy Lippard has suggested that Holt ‘tapped a lyrical vein within steadfastly “objective” forms’.<sup>8</sup> This lyrical vein also runs through Prodger’s work. Sensorially the flickering white light of the 16mm projector feels like the blinding rays of a bright sun. The personal nature of the content used for much of the voice-overs in Prodger’s work also engenders an intimacy with the audience, as they narrate the experience of a flight, a nightclub or the swapping of shoes under a table.

Like Prodger, Holt has also used first-person spoken word to articulate the relationship between the body and technology. In Richard Serra and Holt’s *Boomerang* (1974), Serra films Holt as she speaks in a studio set-up and simultaneously hears her own electronically delayed words as feedback. She describes the experience as it happens: ‘The light hits me and reflects off me into the camera. The words leave me and are reflected into my ear and your ear.’ This video was made for public broadcast, adding to the dislocation between the ‘live’ experience on television and the real-time action in the studio. Holt concludes: ‘The time in this isolated capsule of television experience is cut off from time as we usually experience it.’<sup>9</sup> When the *microsphaeric howard hughes heaven movie* ends, when the increasingly frenetic bombardment of sound and light stops, the audience are disorientated and continue to sit in a similar trance to the traveller on the plane. Like the stewardess in her story, the artist recognises what is happening and has to tell us the experience is finished so we can go out into the night.

Charlotte Prodger's *Stonemollan Trail* (2015) will be screened on Monday 23 February as part of 'Crossing the Line', Glasgow Film Festival 2015. Prodger is also presenting a double bill of films directed by Nancy Holt at the CCA Glasgow on Sunday 22 February, followed by a conversation with Isla Leaver-Yap. For more information, visit the Glasgow Film Festival website:  
[http://www.glasgowfilm.org/festival/glasgow\\_film\\_awards](http://www.glasgowfilm.org/festival/glasgow_film_awards)

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## Footnotes

1. This YouTube video was appropriated by Prodger and used in :-\* (2012), an installation consisting of two Hantarex monitors and a boombox. The other monitor featured a video posted by the same user (Nikeclassics) in which he cuts a trainer in half with a knife.  
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2. Charlotte Prodger's *microsphaeric howard hughes heaven movie* (2014) was performed as part of 'GENERATION: 25 Years of Contemporary Art in Scotland' at Tramway, Glasgow on 19 September 2014 and then at Murray Guy, New York on 26 September 2014 for the launch of Isla Leaver-Yap (ed.), *The Happy Hypocrite*, issue 7, 2014. See <http://www.tramway.org/events/Pages/Charlotte-Prodger.aspx> and <https://www.bookworks.org.uk/node/1819> ↑
3. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time* (1994, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins), Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1998, p.141. ↑
4. *Ibid.* ↑
5. *Ibid.*, p.142.  
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6. 'I put on my Beyerdynamic DT700 headphones' are Prodger's words, but the list that follows is lifted directly from the internet – a tag cloud Prodger encountered when undertaking a google search for Genelec speakers. ↑
7. Nancy Holt, 'Sun Tunnels', *Artforum*, vol.15, no.8, April 1977, available at <http://artforum.com/inprintarchive/id=35992>. ↑
8. Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*, New York: New Press, 1983, p.106. ↑
9. Richard Serra and Nancy Holt, *Boomerang*, 1974. Serra tapes Holt as she talks and hears her own words played back to her after they have been delayed electronically. Originally broadcast over Amarillo, Texas public television. Available at <http://youtu.be/8z32JTnRrHc> ↑

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## Comments