



ARGOS CENTRE FOR ART AND MEDIA ARGOSMAGAZINE N°01 JAN - MAR 2011

# SHELLY SILVER

## HERE, HIS 這裡, 他的

25.01–02.04.2011

Ⓜ L'oeuvre de Shelly Silver (°1957) rapproche les territoires contestés entre public et privé, entre récit et documentaire et, sans cesse davantage au cours des dernières années, entre l'observateur et l'observé. Sa nouvelle installation *here, his* 這裡, 他的 se concentre sur le lieu où elle réside depuis 24 ans maintenant : Chinatown, NYC, un petit quartier insulaire qui porte les traces et se ressent des coups de boutoir de l'histoire – guerres, révolutions, traités entre nations, marchands de sommeil, discrimination.

Son protagoniste-et-comparsa fictionnel est un homme revenu récemment à Chinatown, un endroit qu'il a quitté dès qu'il a pu et où il y est retourné pour s'occuper de sa mère malade. L'homme est un cinéaste et pendant qu'il attend cette fin inéluctable, il occupe son temps – cette béance impossible qui consiste à attendre la mort de quelqu'un – en observant, en filmant.

L'observation est pour cet homme un passe-temps étonnamment actif. A mesure qu'il observe, il se souvient et reconstruit en la permutant, en la reséquençant, une histoire par laquelle il s'est senti lésé, un monde dont il s'est senti mis à l'écart. L'attente modèle et déforme le temps. Elle ouvre la vision sur certaines choses – des choses impossibles.

Nous entrons dans l'intimité de l'homme, ou c'est du moins ce qu'il souhaite : nous séduire, nous amener vers lui. Nous allons attendre avec lui. Il se sert du « présent » de ses images pour manipuler le passé et l'avenir. L'histoire et le temps, il ne doit pas seulement les changer pour lui, mais pour nous. Il est lui-même une ruse, un artifice (c'est lui qui nous l'affirme). Une ruse, un artifice pour nous garder ici près de lui, à observer. A observer ce qu'il observe.

« *My eye in your eye. My tongue in your mouth.* »  
[« Mon œil se glisse dans le vôtre. Ma langue se glisse dans votre bouche. »]

Silver construit une salle d'attente abstraite qui englobe l'espace tant intérieur qu'extérieur. Le film s'envisage et se donne comme un phénomène spatial, qui invite – ou contraint – le spectateur d'entrer dans une approximation de son propre espace. Le spectateur navigue dans les minutes, les heures, les saisons et le lieu de l'attente de l'homme, incarnant sa relation à la mort, au désir, à l'histoire, au voyeurisme, au pouvoir, au plaisir et à la vie.

Ⓝ Het werk van Shelly Silver (°1957) overbrugt de omstreden gebieden tussen publiek en privé, vertelling en documentaire en – steeds vaker de laatste jaren – de kijker en wat bekeken wordt. Haar nieuwe installatie *here, his* 這裡, 他的 focust op de plek waar de kunstenaar nu sinds 24 jaar woont, Chinatown in New York City. De kleine wijk draagt de sporen van de geschiedenis: oorlogen, revoluties, verdragen tussen naties, huisjesmelkers en discriminatie.

In dit project is haar fictionele protagonist/ kompaan een man die onlangs naar Chinatown terugkeerde om voor zijn zieke moeder te zorgen. Zelf een filmmaker zijnde, wacht hij op het onafwendbare. Daartoe vult hij zijn tijd – die onmogelijke leegte waarin het wachten op iemands dood bestaat – met kijken en filmen.

Kijken is voor hem een verrassend actieve bezigheid. Al kijkend borrelen de herinneringen op en reconstrueert hij het verleden, wat hem toestaat een geschiedenis te herschikken waardoor hij zich tekortgedaan voelt, uitgesloten ook. Het wachten vormt en vervormt de tijd. Bijgevolg wordt het mogelijk dingen te zien – onmogelijke dingen.

Wij worden meer vertrouwd met de man, komen dichterbij hem, voelen ons met hem verwant – of dat is tenminste wat hij zou willen. Hij wil ons verleiden, ons naar hem toe trekken, ons strikken. We wachten samen met hem. Hij gebruikt het 'heden' van zijn beelden om het verleden en de toekomst te manipuleren. Hij moet manipuleren, draaien, verdraaien – niet alleen voor zichzelf maar ook voor ons. Hij bedriegt ons – dat zegt hij zelf – om bij hem te blijven, kijkend naar wat hij kijkt.

*“My eye in your eye. My tongue in your mouth.”*

Silver construeert een abstracte wachtzaal, die zowel de uiterlijke als de innerlijke ruimte omsluit. De film is dus ruimtelijk opgevat, nodigt de kijker uit – of gebiedt hem – een benadering van zijn eigen ruimte te betreden. De kijker navigeert in de minuten, uren, seizoenen en de plaats waar deze man wacht. Hij belichaamt zijn verhouding met de dood, begeerte, geschiedenis, voyeurisme, macht, plezier en met het leven.



Ⓝ The work of Shelly Silver (°1957) bridges the contested territories between public and private, narrative and documentary, and increasingly in recent years, the watcher and the watched. For her new installation *here, his* 這裡, 他的 she centres on the place where she's been living for the last 24 years, Chinatown, NYC, a small insular neighbourhood slapped by history – wars, revolutions, pacts between nations, slumlords, discrimination.

Her fictional protagonist/ cohort in this enterprise is a man who has recently returned to Chinatown, a place that he fled from as soon as he possibly could, to take care of his ailing mother. The man is a filmmaker, and as he waits for the inevitable, he fills this time, the impossible void of waiting for someone to die, with watching, with filming.

Watching, for him, is a surprisingly active pursuit. As he watches he remembers and rebuilds, permutating a history he felt damaged by, a world he felt pushed from. Waiting shapes and twists time. It is possible to see things – impossible things.

We become intimate with this man, or at least that is what he wants. To seduce – to draw us near. We will wait with him. He uses 'the present' of his images to manipulate past and future. He must not only change it for himself, he must change it for us. He is a ruse (he tells us so). A ruse to keep us here with him, watching. Watching what he watches.

*“My eye in your eye. My tongue in your mouth.”*

Silver constructs an abstract waiting room, encompassing both external and internal space. The film is envisioned spatially, inviting/ coercing the viewer to enter into an approximation of his space. The viewer navigates in the minutes, hours, seasons and place of this man's waiting, embodying his relationship to death, desire, history, voyeurism, power, pleasure and life.



### OPENING NIGHT

22.01.2011 18.00-22.00

## THE TIME OF US

Inhabitation as documentary practice in Shelly Silver's *here, his*



Large red roses on beige background

Tiger skin pattern

White peonies and lilies and coconut palm trees on pale pink

Beige ornaments on red

White stripes on blue

Meadow flowers in pink, blue, yellow, orange on off white

Plain red

White sheep, small hearts in light rose

Two elegant ladies in purple dresses, one with a feathery stole, both with Hand bags, lipstick, and eye catching red hats adorned with more feathers and flowers, framed by more red hats on purple, white fluffy cat with red crown, purple tea pot with red lid

White duvet, now without linen

Trolley filled with belongings underneath

*Exercise: Look for what is most regular and the difference in that regularity.<sup>1</sup>*

活動：尋找最固定的和規律中的差別。



*here, his* is a committed exercise in looking. It is an exercise translated into a poetic fictional story, which takes its viewers on an exploration. An exploration of looking's latent potential for the expansion of time to encounter a space, for the making of worlds and being part of the singular and collective worlds we create and importantly, for the reclamation of ownership through our looks. *here, his* probes that by looking, and filming, we cannot other than take, freeze and spy, but it proposes that it might be worth our time to indulge in looking around us so that we may relate and participate. *We must look.*



*here, his*, the multi-screen installation, framed as a waiting room, asks for our time and challenges the passivity associated with waiting as a stage of delay. Rather, it is a place for concentration and for time taking place. It is a waiting room to host the countless stories that we pass by often; the story behind the lit up window, the child glaring into the void, the face on the immigration card, the man selling umbrellas on the sidewalk, the demolition site, the women in the laundromat, the family in the found photograph, or indeed the stories of a man called Michael who covers his loaded trolley with the purple-lady-patterned linen, or a duvet without linen - we will encounter him repeatedly and he will be the only one given a name. A waiting room for you and me and all of them, and for what is between us. *We must wait.*

Shelly Silver 'walks the camera' in her neighbourhood, Chinatown in Manhattan. She takes the camera for a stroll, at different times of the day, through different seasons, incessantly re-engaging with Chinatown's public sphere and the habitual agility of its street corners, its shop window displays, its overt and less overt signs of life, its residents and their possible entanglements with Chinatown's histories and futures, wars and celebrations, precarious labour conditions and rising real estate prices, immigration restrictions and economic strongholds. Among those there is one particular voice that Shelly Silver has selected to be our guide. He is determined to take his time.

**Let's start again.  
It's his time. Here and now. He addresses us, directly,  
and lets us in on his story. It's his pleasure:**

*Open your eyes.  
睜開你的眼睛*

He introduces himself as an older Chinese man and he speaks in Mandarin. His voice is a settled gentle one. He teases us, flirts with us, and we with him. He shares intimate and urgent secrets with us. We learn that he is someone who escaped from his family but has now decided to come back, someone who never felt welcome and now enters anyway, someone who felt despised and now tries to reconcile, someone coming face to face with aging and mortality; his own and his ailing mother's. His visual opacity brings him even closer to us as we listen to him. We never learn his name but we are in his mind and we look with him. His words, supported through Chinese and English subtitles, carefully correspond to the immediacy of the moment of watching. For some of us who do not understand him without reading subtitles, the seductive sound of his voice creates a particular resonance and a sonic continuity throughout the space of *here, his*. While we wander and pause within the installation space, we will most likely always hear

his voice next to the soundscapes of Chinatown and associate his voice with this urban space. While our field of vision remains within Chinatown's public sphere, we listen in on his private space. He shares with us his stream of memories and thoughts, while he indulges in exploring Chinatown's fragments, textures, matter, traces left and missing, through his own camera. There are traces of dog paws in the grey asphalt of the pavement but not of the old man who jumped from the 5th floor of the building on Henry Street, Chinatown.

*People get tired of living.  
人們厭倦了生活*

APPROXIMATIONS

Our protagonist re-traces minor and larger histories criss-crossing in a neighbourhood, and a community, which was, and maybe still is, too narrow and too claustrophobic for him to belong, by way of his language (neither English nor Cantonese), his sexuality, his being and choosing otherwise. Yet he chooses to follow the call of his mother who never accepted him. Coming back is a challenge and an opportunity for him, for us. He is seeking a way in.

The snow comes as a surprise. The residents are wearing thick coats and protect themselves with warm woollen caps. Boys are playing with snowballs. We glare at the density of the snowflakes. We can hear its light landing on the roof and we can feel the chill.

*I've come home to take care of you. To see you through this final illness to the other side.  
我回家来照顾你。陪你走完这疾病的最后一段旅程直至你到达黄泉的另一边*

Prompted by old photographs, he tells us of his negotiations with a neighbourhood he had left long ago and of which he never felt a part. The kinds of images available to weave himself into an all too easily forgotten history, are frontal and representational black



and white portraits, of individuals and families. Those kinds of records of faces, those images as documents and evidence, for citizenship, for community or family membership, seem initially to stand in contrast to his own search for a different kind of acknowledgement of people and matter passing by, yet they are what remains and they now offer a path for reconstructing and making worlds anew. Surely he himself will never be a candidate for a *Who's Who of the Chinese in New York*, a book published in 1918, which proudly presents men in suits, with ties and shiny combed hair. How will his image remain?

He invests himself and his desires in selected photographs. He approaches them step-by-step, considering fragments first and only then the image as a whole, unleashing their probable and improbable stories. They are supposedly objects of the past but he treats them as utterly important for thinking the now, for by recasting history we can alter the future. He deals with them tenderly, devoting time to people's location, to the sadness of their looks and to what they might have missed in their lives still in front of them when posing for the photograph. He expands his fabrications and desires generously towards others, endowing the girl in traditional Chinese dress, standing on a roof in New York in 1902, with abundant possibilities for her future career.



*Improbability is probability's nemesis and secret lover. Mine too.  
不可能性是可能性的仇敌和秘密的恋人*

Him losing his mother's picture and having to replace it with someone else's, is loaded with emotions of attachment and anger towards she who rejected him. But, it also reveals our longing for images that remain and the felt duty to take care of those we were able to collect. We learn that our protagonist's mother journeyed from Peking to New York, at a time of still strict ethnicity specific immigration laws. We sense her son's admiration of her adventurous life as an immigrant woman and garment worker. Could her life have taken another shape had she not been a woman, had she been born or migrated into a more welcoming world? What remains of a struggle when someone dies? Not even an image? We might be reminded of her when

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we see elderly Chinese women self evidently inhabiting the public spaces of Chinatown on a sunny afternoon, playing cards, chatting and laughing. What will remain of them? Who is protecting their image and place in history?

His favourite photograph is one of a family. It is a peculiarly ambivalent family photograph though. First we see hands, hands holding, hands and arms gently placed on top of each other, a thread made of holding. Once we are given access to the complete image, we see a couple sitting in the middle of a family portrait surrounded by a simple ornamental backdrop likely to be provided in a photo studio. The parents are surrounded by children of different ages, some of those possibly grand children. Most of the children smile at the photographer, they must have been instructed to do so. The adults are more hesitant, their minds seem somewhere else. Most apparently, we see that faces had been cut out and are now arranged again, making the photograph into a collage. Her head and the collars of her flowery dress remain awkwardly put together. Together and apart, a collage of a family, an incomplete union? Many questions arise as there is no evidence detailing the events that led to the need for the extremity of this collage. Did they have to depart? Did they know what would be their futures? He might be in this picture, still accepted as the innocent little boy.

*No one leaves their country for no reason.  
没有人无由地离开他们的国家。*

A lot rests on our protagonist's tenuous *being with* this photograph. Through puzzling together a family photograph he might rehearse possibilities of what it could mean to be part of a family, at a time when he returns to his city and to a mother who rejected him and who now needs his care. How to carry out one's being in the world? How to exist together in making precious worlds? *We must take part.* We must desire.

*The sheer desire to be together.  
纯粹的渴望为要在一起*



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WHAT DOES THE PORCELAIN CAT WHISPER?

- Raindrops on a textured windowsill
- Feet in flip flops appearing out from under a roof
- Slow movement of curtain fringes
- One half of a white porcelain cat, witty expression, at the edge of the frame
- Light bulb under doorframe
- Fragment of a wall with paper notes, paper snippets with telephone numbers
- The gasping mouth of an almost dead fish
- Eyes excised from a photograph
- Face of a man half visible from behind a wall
- Head of patient white man with funny hat, gravel around his mouth, carved into the façade of a house
- Installation in front of a Chinese supermarket, cardboard boxes and wooden crates carefully piled up

Our protagonist approaches the neighbourhood of his childhood, he experiments with ways of being in the midst of it and being part of it. He might imagine at which street corner he would stand now had he never left.

He engages with the matter of the city to take account of himself. His scrutiny can thus not be for the aim of authentic description or capturing but for taking account of his possible relation to it. He wonders why he was never before aware of those peculiar minutiae and so he studies their very details. His clear choices for framing and thus creating quite particular images of this space, privilege the possibilities that lie dormant in the mere texture and materiality of what surrounds him, and now us as viewers. A fragment like the left corner of a door frame is often not linked to the entire object or only once we have engaged with it otherwise, as detail and fragment. There are only a few moments where we follow the process of a zoom and if so, it is a zooming out rather than in, from close to further away. From close, maybe too close, to taking one's space? It is not a look seeking transparency but one filled with desire to relate.

*An affinity, an energy. A camera is a device for the accumulation of this energy.  
一親和力, 能量。我的相機是一個積累能量的設備。*

The look that he shares with us could also be described as directed from a position within, from someone standing on the side of the road, watching

people waiting for the bus, briefly following a child curious about the camera, a cat roaming her territory, or a plastic yellow monkey king hanging outside a shop. He seems to communicate with people and things in a similar manner, they are often at his height and they are shown to us as equal to each other. If the world is indeed radiating energy then clearly our protagonist is seeking to connect with it through his gaze. His desire for connection is hereby not predetermined but his longing to exist in-relation unfolds without hierarchy.

In Walter Benjamin's sincere interrogation of the 'language of things' he asks, "To whom does the lamp communicate itself?". He does not speak in symbols or recount a fable but he asks us to account for the very materiality of the lamp. He claims for the lamp to exist as "language lamp, the lamp in communication, the lamp in expression".<sup>2</sup> While Benjamin continues to query how man communicates himself through naming things, our protagonist gives expression to things, and to himself, by seeking the very materiality of the lamp, its being not through but in texture. *here, his* hereby seduces us as viewers to relate to, and communicate with, the many qualities of matter that comprise an urban space as they speak of its experiences of perpetual decay and renewal, and thus of forced evacuations, gentrification, hierarchies of space and access. The pleasure and pain of living and sensing organisms undergoing change.

While, and if, we trustingly concentrate on this exploration, we as viewers of his images, also must listen carefully, for our narrator vigilantly chooses a way of telling. By looking, listening, and reading - the narrator's voice is translated and presented to us as subtitles in English and Chinese - we notice that there are gaps in the voice as he leaves us to read in silence. We might then listen to the sound of the city, left to our own devices and our own time. But soon he addresses us again, clearly and vehemently, through bold statements of enlarged white Chinese letters on black. His voice, the narration shown as text, simultaneously in English and Chinese, might of course be a practical necessity for addressing the multiple viewers, but the slight rupture and thus incongruousness makes us aware that they are not mere translations of each other, not mere translations from Chinese into English, from voice into text, but singular translations between matter, looking and language. Different ways of relating to this particular neighbourhood, to the energy latently present in the material studied, to which we might want to add our own.

Together with our narrator's relentless look, this subtle displacement of listening and looking makes us aware of our bodies' various abilities to relate and be affected. Our sensual registers are addressed through



varied tones. We are confronted with the fragility and momentary quality of our encounters with him and with what he shows us. We become interpellated in the secrets of this aging gay man; at times we become his secret lover. We are complicit in the complex exchange of looks and complicit in the shifting constellations of watching and being watched, telling and listening in. *We must listen.*

*The delicious possibility (not yet a reality) of commingling with the outside.*  
与外面世界交融, 虽不现实, 但其可能性是那样诱人。

#### RECLAMATIONS

Our protagonist has not been the only one with a camera in this neighbourhood. Residents perform for the recording of Chinese cultural events. Film crews come in for a day and block a street corner with cumbersome equipment. The previously mentioned expansion of space through our watching seems to suddenly shrink as it becomes a mere backdrop and décor in a film set, a stage for someone's fantasy, desire and economic power. Chinatown ages; Chinatown hosts a familiar and harsh struggle over real estate speculation, housing markets, spaces for living and commingling.

*Confucius once said: A phenomenon is recognized at the moment of its extinction.*

*When a neighborhood becomes a film set it is poised to disappear.*

孔子曾经说过: 一种现象只有到了它消失的时候才被人认识。

当一个邻里成为电影拍摄场地, 它就要消失了。

We as participating viewers understand now that by addressing ambiguities towards his mother and his old neighbourhood our protagonist exercises a challenge, which has much wider reverberations than his own personal story. By probing his own position vis-à-vis his mother, a community and a neighbourhood and by looking closely, he opens it out to itself, he opens out Chinatown's very own vulnerability to itself, vulnerabilities through histories and present tense of struggles over space, power and ownership, creating signs of life and death, energy and fatigue. He seems to probe our relations to those urgencies as well.

Without easy and morally charged conclusions *here, his* puts forward webs of constellations, which address the often grotesque incongruousness of inhabiting and owning. It does so by exercising the expansive and relational look described. What is thus proposed is inhabitation as a documentary practice. The inhabitation of a place through slowly watching, by

taking one's time, develops into a conceptual, forceful and necessary filming practice, which continues to desire relations with the energetic excess of places and their material. A way of being by looking which recognises the care and ownership present in the different patterns and textures of the linen with which the man called Michael covers his street cart. *We must remember him.*

One aim of our endeavouring looks might thus be to hear a place talking back, to listen to how movement is happening within it, how we can take account of it and enhance it if we dare to give it some time and attention. This careful yet decisive process of watching indulges in the game of pretending that we collectively own when we look, and that by owning and sharing we make public, we relate and we care. Capitalism hardly ever looks, it has no time for waiting, it does not see as it must appropriate, describe and re-present; it owns without inhabiting. *We must wait longer.*

Our narrator watches in order to recuperate not with a sense of nostalgia for something he was himself not part of, but with a quest for having a say in how the already no longer and the not yet might possibly become. If it is indeed feasible that in the sharing of our time and the exchange of our looks, in seeking energy, texture, sense and pleasure, there will be a multiplication of signs of life reclaiming their place – then this would make here, his a pleasurable and urgent political space. *We must reclaim.*

Afternoon, maybe

The rain has settled in

It brings with it a slight chill

Sweet Spring restaurant, Catherine Street, no 25

Name and phone number (766-1777) in coloured neon lights

A few customers inside

Outside, in front of the large window

One man stands under the narrow roof

Another man, part of Woody Allen's film crew, is next to him

Both wait, look

One very gently pulls the other closer to him

Now both are protected from the rain

Nicole Wolf lives in London and Berlin. Her research, writing, teaching and curatorial practice focuses on documentary practice and its multiple relations to political, artistic and cinematographic realms, with a particular interest in South-Asia. She teaches at Goldsmiths, University of London.



(1) All direct quotations are part of the voice over narration of *here, his*.  
(2) Benjamin, Walter, 'On Language as such and on the language of man', in: *Selected Writings Volume I. 1913-1926*, Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, Harvard (eds.), University Press, 1996. P. 62-74. Cf. 63ff. See also: Steyerl, Hito 2008. *Die Farbe der Wahrheit*. Wien: Turia&Kant. By interrogating Walter Benjamin's 'language of things', Steyerl makes a brilliant argument for documentary images as non-presentational.