

# Materiality of Time



**William Raban**

Professor of Film, London College of Communication

University of the Arts London  
Professorial Platform



Arriflex 3 35mm camera with time-lapse motor and 500mm lens mounted on Moy geared head in position at Flat 123, Balfron Tower, London E14

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Professorial Platform lecture

Introduced by Natalie Brett, Pro Vice Chancellor London College of Communication and William Fowler, Curator of Artists' Moving Image, BFI National Archive

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## Biography

William Raban is one of the foremost British artists and experimental filmmakers of the last forty years, known for his landscape, performance and multi-screen films of the 1970s. Raban's landscape interests, were framed in the 80s towards a more historical and socio-political context: the history of London and the Thames. Raban's poetic films of the 90s and onward have pursued similar goals through different means. Reminiscent of Humphrey Jennings' wartime films, his work looks at the island of Britain and its people, in the context of the global economy and the effects of urban change.

Raban has exhibited widely in both art and film contexts. His films have been shown theatrically and on television. Shows include MoMA NY, Tate Britain and Tate Modern, BFI Southbank, Centre Georges Pompidou Paris, Musee d'Art Modern Strasbourg, Musée des Beaux Art Brussels and Mercosul Biennial in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Raban's short films will be presented in a 3 programme retrospective at the Oberhausen International Short Film Festival from 30 April to 05 May 2015.

## Selected filmography

*72-82*, HD, DCP, 2014  
*Time and the Wave*, HD, 2013  
*The Houseless Shadow*, HD, 2011  
*About Now MMX*, 35mm, 2010  
*4'22"*, 35mm, 2008  
*Continental Drift*, 35mm, 2005  
*Civil Disobedience*, 35mm, 2004  
*MM*, 16mm, 2002  
*Firestation*, 16mm, 2000  
*Beating the Bridges*, SD digital, 1998  
*Confessions*, SD digital, 1997  
*Rights of Passage*, SD digital, 1997  
*Island Race*, 16mm and HD digital, 1996  
*A 13*, 16mm and SD digital, 1994  
*Sundial*, 16mm and SD digital, 1992  
*From 60 Degrees North*, 16mm, 1991 co-dir.  
Begonia Tamarit  
*Thames Film*, 16mm and DCP, 1986  
*A Picture Of Graving Dock*,  
HD digital, 1982  
*Black & Silver*, 16mm, 1981  
co-dir. Marilyn Raban  
*Wave Formations*, 5 screen 16mm, 1978  
*Autumn Scenes*, 16mm and  
HD digital, 1978  
*Thames Barrier*, 16mm and  
SD digital, 1977  
*Surface Tension*, 2 screen 16mm, 1976  
*Moonshine*, 2 screen 16mm, 1975  
*After Eight*, 16mm, 1975  
*Sunset Strips*, 16mm, 1975  
*At One*, 16mm, 1974  
*Time Stepping*, 16mm and  
HD digital, 1974  
*Breath*, 16mm, 1974

*Take Measure*, 16mm, 1973  
35mm version, 2008  
*Angles of Incidence*, 2 screen  
16mm, 1973  
*Diagonal*, 3 screen 16mm, 1973  
*2' 45"*, 16mm, 1973  
*Broadwalk*, 16mm, 1972  
*Colours of This Time*, 16mm, 1972  
*River Yar*, 2 screen, 16mm, 1972  
co-dir. Chris Welsby  
*View*, 16mm, 1970  
*Basement Window*, 8mm, 1970

## Installations

*Duchamp's Dissent* 3 screen HD, premiered  
at Tate Modern Tanks, 2012  
*Continental Drift* HD premiered at Roland  
Levinsky Gallery, Plymouth, 2008  
*South Foreland* 2 screen HD installation  
premiered at Box Gallery, Ostende, 2007  
*After Duchamp* 3 screen 16mm, premiered at  
291 Gallery, London, 2003  
*Wave Formation* 16mm 5 screen, premiered  
Documenta 6, Kassel, Germany 1977  
*Pink Trousers* 16mm 4 screen, premiered  
Acme Gallery, London, 1976  
*Moonshine* 6 screen, 16mm, premiered  
Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, 1976





22.01.10 Opening scene of *About Now MMX*. People attend the private view of exhibition to conclude the 4 month artist's residency in Balfron Tower.

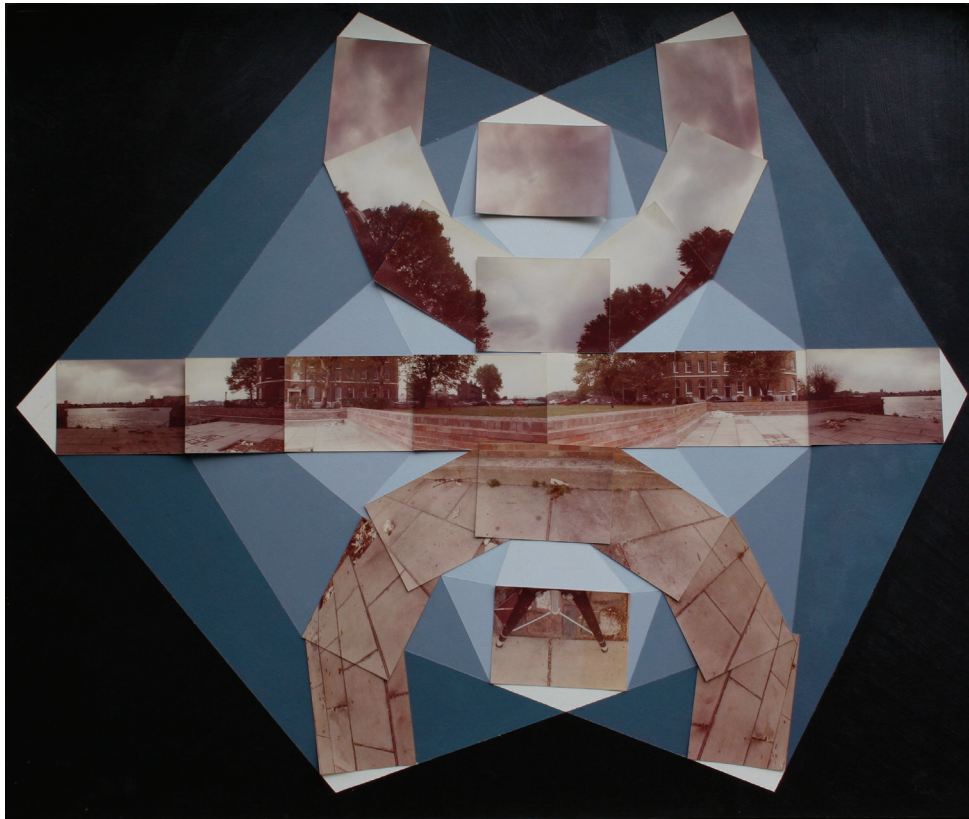
## Materiality of Time

In autumn 2008, I was thinking how the current economic recession would impact upon the city of London. The free market had clearly been to blame for having conjured illusory wealth on ill-secured credit, and appeared incapable of restoring itself without massive state intervention. The global scale of the collapse of major financial institutions seemed to herald the death throes of capitalism making the 'now' of the film's title particularly prescient. I thought that this would be a good time to document the effects of recession and to see how it played out on the London skyline. I was intrigued that 'recession' was both a term for economic decline and a description for the ways in which perspective flattens 3-dimensional space onto a two dimensional surface. The idea for the film began with this dual meaning of the word, thus *Recession* became the film's working title.

The film was shot entirely from the 21st floor of Ernő Goldfinger's brutalist Balfron Tower (1963) in east London between October 2009 and February 2010. All my previous east London films had been filmed at street level and from the high vantage point from near the top of the Balfron Tower, I was challenged by the aerial viewpoint that evoked WH Auden's line: "As the hawk sees it or the helmeted airman".

The more I thought about how to shoot the film, it became increasingly clear that part of what I was doing was to create a cinematic map that would reveal connections between the various architectural, transport and social networks constituting the city of London. I enjoy the way that ideas inevitably change over time and of course, the initial concept becomes transformed through the processes used in the specific medium. Paul Klee famously described "drawing as taking a line for a walk". I think that making a film becomes a similar process of taking an idea for a walk. The only certainty is that the outcome will be uncertain. Halfway through the filming, I changed the working title for the film from *Recession* to *About Now MMX* because it seemed that the film was fundamentally to do with time and ideas about what constitutes the 'now' in the





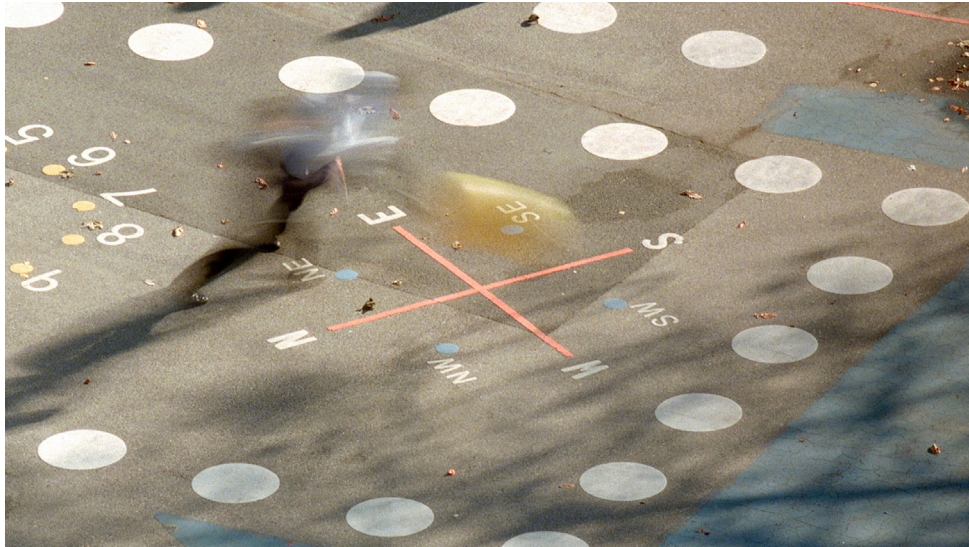
*After Mercator*, 1979. Photographs and acrylic on hardboard (91 × 76 cm).  
Pier Head, Wapping, London E1.

film's title. 'MMX' is of course, the year of the film's production expressed in Roman numerals.

I saw the process of reducing the aerial field of view from the Balfron Tower onto the surface of the screen as analogous to the way in which a two-dimensional map of the Earth is achieved by means of Mercator projection. I was revisiting ideas that I had explored in the photographic artwork *After Mercator* (1979). The film can thus be understood as a cinematic map. Indeed, the cartographic aspects of *About Now MMX* extend a lifelong passion for maps, nautical charts and ocean navigation. Maps, both historical and contemporary, played an important part in *Thames Film* (1986) where they were mainly used as locating devices. In *Continental Drift* (2005) charts are used to signal shipping lanes and danger zones in the English Channel. In *About Now MMX*, it is the process of *mapping* itself that is the chief concern. The mapping is achieved by sequences of horizontal and vertical tracking movements filmed mostly through a 500mm telephoto lens with the camera filming at the time-lapse rate of 1 frame every 2 seconds.

The camera was mounted on a geared head with two wheels controlling panning (horizontal) and tilting (vertical) movements. This device is normally associated with mainstream film production as the preferred means for generating smooth camera tracking movements. This camera mount was essential to enable me to 'animate' the camera movements one frame at a time. I chose to work the geared head by hand rather than computer, knowing this would give a slight 'roughness' to the movements rather than a *glissando* effect in order to create a sense of an embodied camera – showing the audience that it is a person and not a machine moving the camera. In making this decision, I thought about Michael Snow's magisterial epic *La Region Centrale* (1971) where the camera was moved through space by means of a computer. As a consequence, the film feels that it is driven by an alien motivating source that is disconnected from both the filmmaker and the filmmaking process.

Diagonal camera movements were inappropriate because the layout of the city is largely constructed of grid patterns of latitude and longitude thus consistent with the idea of mapping the city. I was also thinking about Mondrian and paintings



22.10.09 Boy running with ball Culloden School playground.

such as *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1943) where he similarly rejected the diagonal in favour of just vertical and horizontal lines to represent the dynamism of New York city.

'Natural' landscape is a recurring feature in *About Now MMX*. The framings of the reed beds in the tidal waters of Bow Creek were selected partly because they reference the film *View* (1970), which I made whilst a student at Saint Martin's. There are other and more potentially 'natural' images in the film. The successive shots of the enlarged moonrises and moonsets are one example. The repeated sunsets towards the end of the film are another. The sun passes diagonally across the frame and as it does so, it disappears into a dense bank of smog hanging over the horizon. Filming in time-lapse through a powerful telephoto lens enhances the material presence of air pollution on the London skyline. These shots of the sunsets draw attention to ecological issues and environmentalism by showing the way in which the city is enveloped by pollution (an urban phenomenon that threatens the natural environment). The shots of the full moon mark the months of shooting. The film starts with several ascents of the moon, and towards the end of the film, there are numerous lunar descents falling away towards the western skyline. Both the sun and moon track a diagonal pathway across the static frame. They are the only diagonal movements in the film and counter the strictly observed horizontal panning and vertical tilting dynamics of the camera.

The speed of camera movement varies according to whether a wide angle or telephoto lens was being used. There was also deliberate variation in the speed such as for example, the 'zip pans' between two large banners erected on the roof of a block of flats. The first image reads: CAPITALISM and the camera moves in a fast zip pan to reveal the second banner: IS THE CRISIS. This is an obvious example of meaning being constructed through camera movement. Another instance is of office workers in the FSA (Financial Services Authority) building connected by a fast series of zip pans to workers at Barclays bank a few blocks away in the Canary Wharf complex. The FSA was investigating Barclays Bank at that time. Variation in the speed of camera movement was the principle means by which the rhythmic pace was controlled; a strategy that was augmented by





19.11.09 Brownfield Street, London E14. The 500mm lens telephoto condenses space so that it appears that perspective is reversed with the vanishing point not on the horizon but behind the camera.

David Cunningham's percussive soundtrack.

*About Now MMX* is assembled in chronicle form, so that all the shots are seen in the order in which they were filmed, except for the opening shot of the private view in the Balfron Tower that reveals the camera installed in the room from which the film was exposed. I decided to edit the shots in the film this way in order to reveal the development and variation in the day-to-day camera movements. Even in its mute form, before working with David Cunningham on the soundtrack, I thought of the film very much as a composition or musical score that was a sequential progression from beginning to end. I realized that the context in which I was working related directly to the extensive history of the city symphonic form as Michael Chanan observes on his blog site *The Putney Debater*:

*About Now MMX* is a city film which harks back more, I think, to Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a City* (1927) than Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). Vertov's city is an optimistic Communist ideal of life and vivacity. Ruttmann portrays the modern capitalist metropolis where life is neurotically driven by over – and under – consumption, and a film which various reviewers of the time criticized for the inhumanity and abstraction of its portrayal of modern life. Raban's film is hardly optimistic, but he's created here a new cognitive screen-map of what our gut instincts already tell us about the dehumanisation of the rapacious capitalism of the early 21st century, strangely beautiful for such an unsettling portrayal.

Apart from the opening shot of the private view and several shots of people in the immediate foreground of Balfron Tower, all the shots in *About Now MMX* are landscape shots. Given that they were all filmed entirely from the windows of one flat in the tower block, there is huge variation in the topography. The Balfron Tower is on the Brownfield Estate, which dominates the surrounding foreground. In 2009, it was one of the most destitute areas of London. Straight ahead and beyond Chrisp Street market, is the City of London and in the far distance at night, planes can be seen landing at Heathrow. To the southwest, is the Canary Wharf complex. To the northwest, the rise of Hampstead Heath meets the sky.





01.12.09 All Saints Church, Poplar, London E14 against the backdrop of the Canary Wharf complex.

From the back of the flat in the immediate foreground, is the northern approach to the Blackwall Tunnel. Bow Creek's tidal waters flow through banks of reeds in the middle foreground and planes take off from London City Airport away to the southeast. These different areas are interconnected with each other by means of the time-lapsed camera movements. I wanted to reveal the stark contrasts in the view of this cityscape as can be seen in the series of tilts down from tightly framed shots of the Gherkin in the city of London to the social housing on the Brownfield estate in the immediate foreground. Within a matter of a few short seconds, one of the wealthiest areas of Europe within the 'golden mile' is set in stark contrast with one of the most impoverished.

These examples of using camera movements to link particular ideas, are part of the larger project to determine the extent to which it is possible to construct political meaning by image and sound alone without dependence upon commentary or text. This had been the methodology that I had developed in *Sundial* (1992) *A13* (1994) *Island Race* (1996) and *MM* (2002).

Reductively, *About Now MMX* can be seen as the accumulation of the 39,350 still frames that were exposed over a period of 3 months. Each one of those frames can be understood as the present moment from that time of filming – all the frames going before, are locked into a past tense and all those yet to be exposed are mere speculations about a future time that hasn't yet happened. I like the idea that using film as a means for recording time, the single frame that lasts for 1/50 second when it is projected, can be seen as the trace of NOW – an instant that took place in that moment of time. If NOW is to be a given a duration, in film terms, it seems reasonable to suggest that NOW = 1/50 second. That is the length of time that one still frame stays on the screen which is long enough to be experienced yet too short to be reflected upon.

This way of thinking about time and specifically the paradox of the present as a time that cannot be reflected upon until it has become past, seems consistent with the idea of thinking about the passage of time as the movement within a wave. In a wave the individual particles of water remain static – in the same way that the single frames in a film are static. Just as the wave appears to move forwards across the sea surface, so the projected succession of individual frames in a film create an



08.12.09 Clock Tower, Christ Church, Oxford, London E14; designed by Frederick Gibberd in 1951 for the Festival of Britain.

illusion of movement. I investigated this idea further in *Time and the Wave* (2013).

A large part of my practice from the early structural films made in the 1970s to films such as *About Now MMX*, treat time in a fragmentary way that is to do with the reducibility of the linear filmstrip down to the single frame. *About Now MMX* happens to be the last film I made using analogue film techniques. All subsequent productions have been made digitally. The digital productions such as *The Houseless Shadow* (2011), *Time and the Wave* (2013), and *72-82* (2014) all seem to allude to a conception of continual time. So too do several of the films made in the 80s and 90s such as *Thames Film* for example. With *Thames Film*, I am thinking specifically of the way in which archive images are used and the intention to match historical engravings, photographs and film with the contemporary view filmed between 1984 and 1986. It establishes a sense of the evolution of time. The method of dealing with time is stated directly on the film soundtrack about 45 minutes into the film: "On this journey time is exposed: the past and present form one continuous pattern of unfolding experience." The place that archive serves in *Thames Film* is not dissimilar to the use of the *Night Walks* essay by Charles Dickens in *The Houseless Shadow*. Here, I wanted to see what would happen if I let the soundtrack of Dickens's words run counter to the contemporary views of the London landmarks he had described 150 years earlier. The frisson that is created between picture and sound (past and present) has been favourably mentioned by various reviewers and thus suggests that *The Houseless Shadow* clearly communicates a sense of continuous time.

In terms of using film to materialise time, I have identified two distinct strands in my work. I have described the processes that are at work in *About Now MMX* that make this film an example of fragmentary time with a lineage that goes back to some of the initial structural film experiments from the 1970s. Whereas, I have also explored ways of materialising time in *Thames Film*, *Island Race*, *The Houseless Shadow*, *Time and the Wave* and most recently *72-82*, that seem to be more about continuous time. Nevertheless, the obsession with materiality of time remains a singularly consistent aspect of my entire body of practice.

— William Raban, January 2015





Photo collage westward panorama (155 × 110 cm) used to calculate lens focal lengths required to achieve particular framings and for the planning of camera movements. Filming in fog or at night, some key architectural features within the frame were invisible. In these situations, the maps enabled the time-lapsed camera movements to be navigated with precision



## A conversation between David Cunningham and William Raban

Sound has always been a major element in my work, even in the 70s when I was doing everything alone. Those early soundtracks sometimes used tape loops to achieve phase effects (*Broadwalk* 1972) or printing a section of the picture onto the optical track to get a direct correspondence between picture and sound (*Surface Tension* 1976). David Cunningham has collaborated on soundtracks for 11 of my films over the last 20 years. This conversation a *Material Trace of Time* was recorded at David's studio in Fournier Street, London E1, January 2015.

WR The first film that we worked on together *Island Race* (1996) I had edited that in chronicle form with the exception of a few scenes...

DC 'chronicle' you mean like chronological?

WR chronological so that the order of events on screen is the same order as when they were filmed.

DC And I never realized that until *About Now* MMX. It is blindingly obvious in many ways and also a very essential part of the structure of the film.

WR Well, it is a bit like the old idea of editing in-camera. If you edit in-camera shooting a long piece and you don't make any cuts then everything comes out in the order in which it was shot.

DC To what extent did you edit in-camera?

WR A lot but of course I was topping and tailing shots to get rid of flash frames and there were many of those because that camera (Arri 3) was not specifically designed for time-lapse.

DC You didn't think of leaving the flash frames in?

WR Well, some of them are left in like indexical traces of the shooting (the way I see them). So there are ghost images of light that was fogging through the viewfinder of the camera that I just left in.

DC Really we are talking about a whole territory here (you may hate my description) which is 'post structural'. It is taking the ideas, the vocabulary of structural film and moving it a level further. It is applied rather than pure. I think of Philip Glass's music as a good example of what happened. Glass started out doing very pure systems pieces and just took that vocabulary and started writing operas over the top of his original process work. The self-referential nature of that vocabulary was kind of left behind though you haven't abandoned that – not so completely and to some extent neither have I. I always get worried with your work, when I am working on your stuff. Am I decorating it? I am not illustrating but I am perhaps decorating or prettifying.



10.12.09 Tower Bridge with Big Ben in the background. The 500mm lens compresses the space between these two London landmarks.

DC Materiality of time applies more to you than me in terms of the films because in particular, *About Now MMX* – huge chunks of it are time-lapse and that's one thing you can't do with sound. Well you could but it wouldn't be coherent. The viewer recognizes something like sped up time but with sound or music it would be a faster tempo or a higher pitch or something like that.

WR In *About Now MMX* I think you did drop the speed of some of those recordings of Paul Burwell<sup>1</sup> quite substantially

DC Not just Paul – quite a lot of the material – the atmos as well. There is a characteristic sound of the ventilation shaft in the Balfour Tower that you recorded and that's slowed down when it is used in the film. You can hear a police siren running slow. I was worried that it was all going to get a bit creepy and scary but you assured me that a bit of a threat was appropriate.

WR Yes, the film is meant to be disturbing and an added threat to the sound further destabilizes the viewer from their comfort zone.

DC Working with this supposedly sped up thing rather than try and find a way to speed up the sound, I just thought go the opposite way – better if I slow things down. For me, that idea comes around through a) desperation and b) not wanting to do what Phillip Glass

did in *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982) – that very fast music with the time-lapse films and c) might have been doing something like make a list and do the last thing on the list. Do exactly the opposite – slow sound down to go with sped up imagery because you have to do something. Naturalistic sound is somehow not appropriate or normalizes it or is just too illustrative. It needed to have something treated. It just so happened, particularly with the Paul Burwell sequences that they worked very well slowed down and that's also tied in with really wanting to use this material of Paul for the film because he had died and we were I think both missing him and his contribution and because I had good unused recordings. Anne Bean had played me a very late recording of Paul (one of his last recordings) where he had been working in some studio in New York (I had never had the chance to record Paul in the studio, I thought he hated studios) but this was him working with some young musicians who were really electronically treating his drums and mangling and mashing it up quite drastically. Anne said Paul loved this and I thought well, if he was up for it, this is a good way to take it – slow the drums down.

WR You talked about slowing sound down in *About Now MMX* as a contrast to the speeded up image and one of the things we haven't talked about is that you chose to run the sound backwards at certain times.



01.01.10 Midnight fireworks New Year's eve 2010.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Dean Burwell (1949–2007) was co-founder of London Musicians' Collective and one of the founders of Bow Gamelan Ensemble. He was a musician and artist who made performances from percussion and fire.

DC There is no sound in the film actually running backwards that you can hear but what I would do is flip it backwards and put a delay on it and then flip the sound the right way round again and flip the delay backwards. So I am actually using the backwards aspect of it to structure what the drums are doing.

WR is that like reversing attack and decay or decaying the attack?

DC No, it is not that. The coherence of the actual sound is not interfered with - it has been reversed but then it has been put back but the process around it remains reversed so basically instead of having a process of dying away like a repeat echo - the repeat echo builds up from nothing which gives what could be a tempo. The tempo being that of the repeat delay but it is pre delay rather than post delay. So the treatments are backwards like the processes are backwards but the actual sound is the right way round and because of that you can actually use it to structure the sound in a way. I think that is the important element - it is rhythmically structured using what would otherwise be 'an effect' becomes a really integral part of what I would call a musical structure for want of a better description.

WR And going back to what you did with Paul on the drum, there's a sequence which I think is just before the fireworks where it sounds to my ears as though you have changed the note of Paul's drum into sound that sounds like a very deep bass guitar.

DC Yes, it was all coming off just a stereo recording but I was able to isolate a particular bass drum or tom and put a flanger on it to

give it a recognisable pitch. What I didn't want to do was play along with Paul. He did have as much internal integrity as possible in a sense so it is still a coherent part of his performance but it is just basically part of the mutilation process - the mash up or whatever the fashionable term is.

If we go back to the thing of time as material, the only way I find to approach it seriously, is some quite didactic work and the music that only really addresses the issue of time coherently for me would be early Steve Reich work with the tape loops and so on. Sometimes that vocabulary of repetition works as well - it distorts time in a way. I sat through a Phillip Glass concert in 1976 and when I came out, I was astonished to find it had been 5 hours long. Really, time actually flew by which is strange. That music has the opposite effect on some people, they more generally leave the room but repetition does strange things to perception of time. Repetition isolates a bit of time and examines it but I find it quite difficult to deal with that materiality thing without being quite didactic about what you are doing and I think it is different for film.

WR Possibly what I am doing is conflating 2 things. Materiality of the *medium* is one thing In relation to structural film whereas materiality of *time* as something extracted from that idea becomes much more debatable.

DC Though in a sense, if you address time, you address pitch hence you address pitch and the soundtrack of *About Now MMX*, that re pitching thing becomes quite relevant in a way. Though what the viewer sees or hears it is not that clear because there is an awful lot going on both sonically and in terms of the picture.



03.01.10 Waning Moon descent.



WR Back to what you were saying about materiality of time or the problem of materiality of time as a concept.. I read stuff that I wrote in the early 1970s about the films I was making and I am horrified to see that I used the term 'real time' to distinguish between film shot at 24fps from time-lapse where it happens in the same film like *View* (1970) or *River Yar* (1972) and so maybe trying to think in terms of the materiality of time, is an attempt to destabilize any notion of 'real' in terms of time.

DC 'Real time' is an expression I use a lot, still. But the context I use it in is the context of gallery installations with sound because actually with my guitar playing that I almost have to point out that I am not using recordings, so all activity happens in real time even though I am using all sorts of processes – delays or whatever...

WR so real time... more in the sense of the present moment: now?

DC With guitar playing very much so because that's essentially improvised, so that's very relevant. With my installation work, the spectator in the gallery with the sound that is happening, generated to some extent perhaps by that spectator, you have to say "yes" that's real time that's in the present moment and what is curious about it is if you try and record that, it just sounds like someone making noises in a room with a bit of feedback. It is not coherent as a recording but if it is happening in the situation, in the moment, then it is perfectly coherent. It is curious that I have tried to make for myself a situation that is impossible to record meaningfully. I can't

resolve that at all. I am quite happy with it but it is just that people ask me to document it and that is a problem.

WR It is interesting because from the way you describe working in the live environment with an installation, sounds very similar to the idea of the audience becoming active spectators rather than passive consumers.

DC It is the Duchamp element. Spectators have always got to work a bit. It is a dynamic within any work that interests me. It is why I am really not interested in a lot of film for precisely that reason: it doesn't engage like that though I got asked by a magazine once for my top 10 films and one of them is Tony Conrad's *Flicker* (1965) for precisely that engagement. Mind you, I have got Laurel and Hardy in there as well...

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Musician and artist David Cunningham's first significant success came with The Flying Lizards' record *Money*, an international hit in 1979. Since then his work has ranged from pop music to gallery installations, including work for television, film, contemporary dance, and many collaborations with visual artists. As record producer he has engaged with an eclectic range of people and music including This Heat, Michael Nyman, Martin Creed, Palais Schaumburg, Ute Lemper and many others.

Cunningham's gallery installations have been exhibited at Tate Britain, Biennale of Sydney, ICC Tokyo and Ikon Birmingham. These installation works magnify the sound of a room, a music delineated by the architectural characteristics of the space.



07.01.10 Brownfield estate, Poplar, London E14 with Christ Church Market in the background.



08.01.10 Children with teacher in Culloden School playground.

## Cinematic Map

William Raban's *About Now MMX* is a contemporary portrait of London. Filmed using a telephoto lens from Ernő Goldfinger's Balfron Tower, the work is a montage of mostly time-lapse sequences observing what Raban calls the 'social contrasts and urban shifts' of the city. The nearby Canary Wharf towers are ever-present, mirrored in the distant buildings of The City of London and inter-cut with shots of markets, rooftops, pedestrians and passages of the moon's transit through the night sky. Recorded in horizontal and vertical camera movements and with a soundtrack by David Cunningham, the film explores a modern urban existence through the formal tensions of the camera's frame and the enframing space of the city.

Commenting on the film, Raban notes a double meaning of the term 'recession', creating an interrelation between the represented 'content' or subject of the film (the image of the city) and the representational 'form' of the film (i.e. the camera, frame, projector or filmstrip). While his first reference locates the work in a context of economic 'recession', the second use is more intriguing, being in pictorial terms the translation of a three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional plane. Put otherwise, this 'recession' of perspectival depth is the way in which many forms of pictorial representation since the Renaissance – painting, photography, cinema, television – flatten the visible world onto a canvas or screen.

These comparable terms for recession establish social space and film space together as currencies in an economy of meanings. In this way we can locate Raban's images within a history of the avant-garde in which the city has been a site for critical reflection. Engaging with the formal constructs of the cinematic apparatus – the practical means and technology of representation – poses a challenge to our day-to-day encounters and relationships to the city; the aesthetic experiences created by and through the film aim to question given systems of meaning.

In Raban's practice, these systems are worked through with film as a material process, questioning the mediated and often uncertain nature of





29.01.10 Aberfeldy Estate, Poplar, London E14.

photographic representation, and continually seeking to establish an experience in which the viewer plays an active, reflexive role. *About Now MMX* is the latest in a body of Raban's works spanning forty-years that have focused on London and the River Thames, such as *Sundial* (1992), *A13* (1994), *Island Race* (1996) or *MM* (2002). With thematic links to the art-historical landscape tradition in England (J.M.W. Turner, John Ruskin or John Constable for instance) the underlying formal concerns of his works also relate to the dynamic modernist paintings of Fernand Léger and Piet Mondrian, and the 'city symphony' films of Dziga Vertov and Walther Ruttmann in the early 20th Century.

The Renaissance features in two very interesting ways in *About Now MMX*, both of which relate to the rationalisation of pictorial and architectural space and a means of mapping or positioning a view of the urban landscape. Stephen Heath, amongst other film scholars, has argued that certain codes and conventions of mainstream cinema have an historical relation to Renaissance perspective, with the organisation of shots and screen space creating an ideal view. In this view, film space is systematised and unified, with codes and conventions of representation naturalised and constructed according to specific determinants.

In architectural terms, one might return to the Renaissance image of the 'ideal city' which represents a range of values and ideals about spatial relations and representations. Writers such as Denis Cosgrove have explored the relationships between Renaissance perspective images, landscape and the socio-economic systems that organise architectural space. In other studies, writers such as Henri Lefebvre or W.J.T. Mitchell have also argued that the representational space of the landscape – and its depiction in pictures – is ordered in certain ways to signify a unified whole; buildings project power or wealth, institutional planning organises areas and vantages, and infrastructures and boundaries delineate order. These ideas activate the ongoing processes of space and place, and our constantly shifting relationships to both rural and urban landscapes.

The use of time-lapse in the film – capturing images in varying intermittencies – and the slightly juddering pans and tilts of the camera on the hand-operated tripod mechanism constantly re-punctuate the differences





29.01.10 Office workers at Barclays Bank, Canary Wharf, 1 Churchill Place, London E14.

between individual photograms as they move through the projector at twenty-four frames per second. Ordinarily, this cinematic flow of time passes with the differences between frames effaced in a smooth continuum. Raban's approach foregrounds the illusory flow, with the repeatable logic of the machine interjected by mark-making linear movements of the camera, and the material surface and rectilinear shapes of the images fractured into subtle interplays of form.

Other sequences of the film return to closely cropped shots of office buildings, latticing the film frame with windows and zones of activity. Here we are drawn reflexively to the multi-levelled functions of the pictorial frame and associations to the windows of perspectival painting in the Renaissance writings of both Leon Battista Alberti and Leonardo da Vinci. We are reminded here too of the act of looking, being as we are in an impossible omniscient position, watching people doubly enframed within the office block and film frame. Within this sequence, as with others, the fundamental splits between movement and stasis relate the mechanical reproducibility of the camera with the circadian rhythms of the metropolis.

Raban's film could be read as a dialectic of the city and its image, an argument between how it is and how it might be re-imagined. By shifting between the material space of urbanism and the architecture of the film frame, *About Now MMX* aims for a more reflexive viewing experience, fracturing the spatial relations of the city into an activity of movement and dynamism. Raban's film is a critical reappraisal of urban space, our relationships to place and the promise that film might hold for a transformative relation to the city.

— Gareth Polmeer

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30.01.10 Balfour Tower forecourt on St Leonard's Road, Poplar, London E14.

## Professorial Platforms series

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