

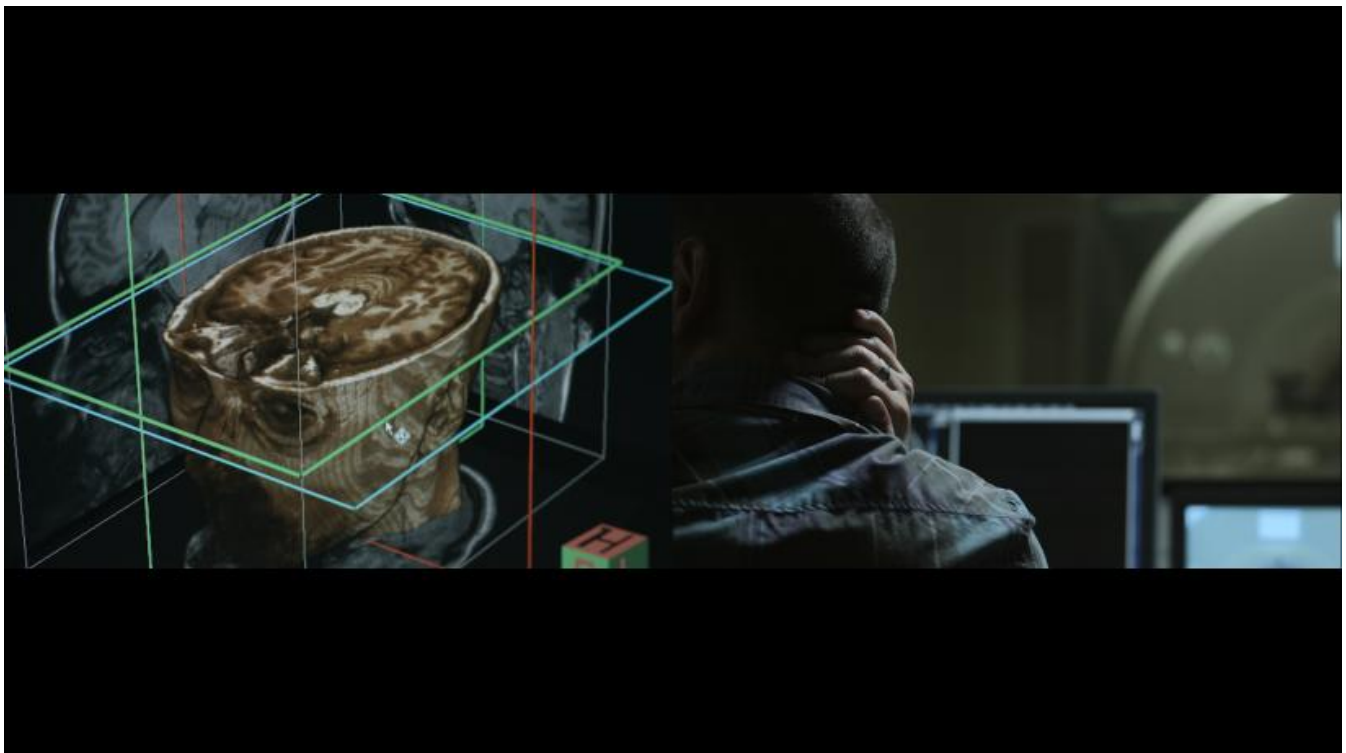
this is vision

Contemporary Art Magazine



South London Gallery, 65-67 Peckham Rd, London SE5 8UH

Ilona Sagar: Correspondence O



Title : Still from Correspondence o, Ilona Sagar 2017.

Website : <http://www.southlondongallery.org/>



TWITTER



FACEBOOK



Ilona Sagar: Correspondence O

South London Gallery

13 December 2017 - 25 February 2018

Review by Matthew Turner

Like conducting an autopsy of her own subject matter, Ilona Sagar projects her film ‘Correspondence O’ on to a split screen, cut down the middle and opened out. The rest of the room is dark like an operating theatre after hours with its monitors left running, which continue to project the sterile blues and desaturated tones most often associated with hospitals.

‘Bring your fingers to your chest’. Constructed like a medical examination, ‘Correspondence O’ is cut through with reassuring yet, over time, dogmatic instructions; ‘Take a deep breath, And turn your neck to the right’, which are the syncopations within the overall rhythm that seem to follow the unheard beats of a steady heart rate monitor or an examined breath.

The film charts the history of The Peckham Health Centre and its subsequent conversion to a privately owned gated community. Perhaps, the ‘correspondence’ – and its cyclical ‘O’ – is that our bodies and minds are similarly being recycled into gated communities; with all the negative connotations this denotes. This is mirrored by the film’s protagonists, a group of young boys and a female, whose status modulates from authority to vulnerability throughout the collapsed and deconstructed narrative.

Most of the visual sequences take place in the building purpose-built for the ‘Peckham Experiment’, which was designed in the modernist style by Sir Owen Williams and became a perfect embodiment of modernism’s obsession with perfecting the human body. The experiment explored ideas of collective wellbeing through self-organisation, local empowerment and social connection. The building then, with its flexible partitions, porous spaces and floor-to-ceiling windows, acted as an optical device enabling biologists to observe and gaze at the local community as they took part in physical exercise and other activities.

Although the experiment aimed to improve the health of working class people, it also cycled back around as a covert form of control, as the voiceover obliquely suggests: ‘Recurrent failure to control the behaviour.’ In his book ‘The Birth of the Clinic’, Michel Foucault delineates the idea of the ‘medical gaze’ to denote the dehumanising effect of intense medical observation which separates a patient’s body from a patient’s identity. In entering this field of knowledge and observation, the body also becomes malleable for manipulation. The body then, became an objectified asset, an optimised ‘living currency’.

‘From the surface of the body to the distribution of property,’ states the voiceover next, reminding the viewer of the building’s current incarnation as a privately owned gated community. A gated community, although it seems like the owner’s decision to stay gated, is actually a form of control in itself – which is not formed by being examined by doctors and political figures – but one where we gaze on ourselves. This is symptomatic of how our own contemporary bodies exist in the world.

Gated communities seem like a logical way to keep crime out. But the gates are purely psychological – anyone can jump the fence. Instead they offer a sense of order when the

world outside becomes increasingly chaotic. We do the same when looking and recording our bodies in massive amounts of numerical detail. Using apps we track our sleep patterns, heart rate throughout the day, number of steps taken and when we are not looking at phones, we think about germs along with good and bad bacteria. An unacknowledged fear of what's going on outside our bodies manifests itself as paranoia of our bodies' insides, that will only worsen as the NHS becomes privatised and health becomes ever more egocentric.

One of the major threads that runs through the film echoes this way in which we see our bodies. A person undergoes an MRI scan and there is a 3D scan of the health centre itself, which is also, like a 3D MRI scan, cut into axial bodily planes. Setting up a symbiosis between the objective and constructed nature of the building and the similar artifice of the body.

We similarly scan ourselves using our personal hand-held devices in place of specialised medical machinery. This is exacerbated further by our need to reconnect with our physical selves when all our actions become increasingly immaterial. But in doing so we reduce ourselves to numbers, to poor collages of discrete capital data blocks, and this, easily accessible, makes us susceptible to manipulation. We control ourselves; just how those in gated communities isolate themselves to keep their own anxieties in instead of keeping others out. The medical gaze once looked out on to the population, but now, we use it on ourselves, and transform ourselves into micro gated communities.

Published on 31 January 2018

Related Articles



[Loris Greaud: The Unplayed Notes](#)



Cyprien Gaillard: Where Nature Runs Riot



Franz West: The Ego and the Id



Kunsthalle Wien



EXHIBITIONS/
AWARDS/
EVENTS

JERWOODVISUALARTS

JERWOODVISUALARTS.ORG

LARMAGAZINE
contemporary art
magazine app

WYSING ARTS CENTRE

Buenos Tiempos, Int.

Art
MONTHLY

TERREMOTO
CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE AMERICAS

[Home](#) [About](#) [Broadcasts](#) [Contact](#) [Advertise](#)