

Films

Monika Oeschler: Sometimes I Dream

Phoebe Davies: The Sprawl

Monika Oeschler's three-minute animation *Sometimes I Dream*, 2021, is the second commission in Beaconsfield's online series *Beacon_Transitions*. The first, a commission by Simon Tysko in collaboration with AD Crawforth, superimposed images of livestream public and social events onto CCTV footage from Beaconsfield's nine security cameras, arranged in an onscreen grid. Oeschler's short equally addresses the online screen as a format that acts as a portal to an external world beyond it that in turn uncannily resonates with the experience of being seated in front of it looking in and/or looking on. *Beacon_Transitions* is supported by Arts Council England's Covid-19 Emergency Response Funding and *Sometimes I Dream* both formalises and allegorises the 'bunker mentality' generated by governmental injunctions to 'stay home' as a defence strategy against the 'war' on the current pandemic. Using photographs of an actual civic bunker, a remnant of the Second World War, the animation's motion parodies the zooming-in and lateral swerves, here all to the left, of computer game space: in-shot screen wipes and dissolves to gridded barriers in open doorways allude to the invisible mesh structures that delimit movement in game space, an illusion fantastically explored by Harun Farocki in his series 'Parallel I-IV', 2012-14, and which this animation brought to mind. Oeschler's images were shot in the Pallas High Bunker, constructed in Berlin during the Second World War using forced Soviet labour. It was originally intended to serve as a telecommunications office but was reconfigured into a civil protection bunker in the late 1980s with a capacity to shelter 4,800 people. More recently, such Cold War relics have become desirable real estate for wealthy clients, no doubt indulging their paranoid fantasies of fortress retreats in case of global disaster.

The allegorical dimension of the work is inspired by Franz Kafka's unfinished short story *The Burrow*. The voice-over narration by David Crawforth, a director of Beaconsfield, conjures a fictional narrator as the circumnavigator of this labyrinthine, yet claustrophobically rendered space. His poetic ramblings portray a neurotic character obsessed with blocking all the entrances and exits of his habitat. Intermittently



Phoebe Davies, *The Sprawl*, 2020, video

overlaying his acoustic pacing, another voice (perhaps his, but digitally altered), one akin to that used in Hito Steyerl's *How Not to Be Seen...*, 2013, bellows out instructional soundbites echoing pandemic news headlines: 'destroy foreign cells', 'multispreaders are hijacking the system', 'activate anti-bodies'. The Big Brother pronouncements mirror the carceral space of the image.

Although I am not immune to the paranoia produced by governmental dictates on the 'war' on Covid-19, which, since Oeschler made the work, have transmogrified into the securing of national borders, it makes me feel uneasy. In contrast, *Sometimes I Dream* made me recall alternative discourses on immunology proffered by anthropologists such as Emily Martin in the 1990s that proposed more symbiotic relations between humans and viruses. Oeschler's protagonist's final words, 'sometimes I dream it is impregnable', poignantly allude to how the paranoid structure of defence can never provide enough fortification against 'foreign' intruders. As opposed to a language of war and defence, medical anthropologist David Napier asserts that assimilation is as important to healthy immune responses as the elimination of foreign bodies, assimilation here being thought of in relation to a regenerative view of immunity which involves an environmental adaptation to viruses. Vaccines are key to this and, while the decision to take them is rightly personal, as Eula Biss so cogently argued in *On Immunity*, their effects are social and collective.

The conjunction of risk and fortification involved in the body's capacity to heal emerges in Phoebe Davies's *The Sprawl*. The 30-minute film is one of three pieces of work from Davies's solo exhibition 'Points of Rupture' at Site Gallery, but during the exhibition's Covid closure the film was streamed on the gallery website. Taking its title from a defensive wrestling move to prevent the body being taken down to the mat, *The Sprawl* at first seems to be what has become a *sine qua non* of artists' film, ie the combining of research – here into community sports settings, athletic methodologies, coaching and rehabilitation – and documentary modes of observation. Editing is key to this, the film proceeding by elegantly choreographed phrases that portray young and teenage girls' mat wrestling in a club outside Oslo. The girls, some as young as four, are shown engaging in group exercise workshops as well as wrestling in intensely competitive duos. Knees get a particular bashing, many exercises involving hammering them on the mat. As someone who suffers from knee joint wear and tear, I felt these sounds resounding in my body and could only think about how they will pay for this later in life. In fact, some of them are already beginning to pay for it, one older girl having to wear an orthopaedic knee brace as part of her rehabilitation from a severe wrestling injury, the tale of which she recounts matter-of-factly to camera. Paradoxically, the drive towards bodily resilience exposes the body's vulnerability, the building of muscle strength favouring some body parts and not others in the girls' drive to win.

Yet not only are the principles of bodily autonomy and resilience dependent on a behind-the-scenes co-operation and camaraderie, but, halfway in, the film's observational modality steps into the terrain of the kinds of documentaries who love their subjects. Both trainers, Ine, a twice world wrestling champion, and Naser, a professional wrestler from Iran, recount their wrestling career histories to camera, their



Monika Oeschler, *Sometimes I Dream*, 2021, video

performances interspersed with photographs of them. Naser's migration story remains implied, especially in his assertion that the club is a family in which he does not feel his difference as he does outside this space. Using a photo album as a mediator, Ine recounts how her father, a professional wrestler, was killed in a car accident in which his brother was driving, the trainer's uncle becoming her mentor when she began to show interest in the sport. Ine's physical strength seemed to contain her tears in a way that allowed for an intimate distance between her and the viewer, testifying to the trust Davies must have established with her subjects to extract such a performance. I found this sharing of grief incredibly moving and wondered whether this was partly due to my proximity to my computer screen; would I have felt the same intimacy in the gallery installation space? Not merely confessional, Ine's story conveyed that the physicality of contact sport is equally a psychic space in which trauma can be worked through to build a resilient body that encompasses vulnerability. For girls, whose bodily comportment is so often constrained, throwing the body into actions that are deemed unbecoming is undoubtedly liberating. While it hurts to look at their aggressive mangling of one another, at other times their poses exude a sublated erotics which Davies refers to as 'romantic'. (Interestingly, Oeschler's early film installation work also featured young girls in sports-related group work.)

Reviewing both works in the context of yet another lockdown prompts me to consider the formal potential of online access to moving-image artwork. While the stringent poetics of Oeschler's animation self-reflexively and smartly addresses that interface, *The Sprawl*, intended for the darkness of installation space, seems to have gained an unforeseen intimacy that goes beyond mere access.

Monika Oeschler's *Sometimes I Dream* is currently accessible at beaconsfield.ltd.uk and Phoebe Davies's *The Sprawl* was accessible from 3 December to 28 February at sitegallery.org.

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