

## *Flash in the Metropolitan*

*Moira Jeffrey*

Asked by LUX Scotland, to propose a single example of artists' film for a hypothetical Lux Scotland collection, I've chosen as a proposition something very short. At 3 minutes and 25 seconds, I'm painfully aware that the brevity of the work of art and the length of my commentary is getting the cultural value in inverse proportions.

I'm not so much proposing a film for a collection, I'm choosing a film that is about collections, and it's as much as a stepping off point for those wider discussions about collections, and a LUX Scotland collection, as it is an actual proposition that I would like LUX to consider.

*Flash in the Metropolitan* was made by the artists Lucy Skaer and Rosalind Nashashibi, working together as

Nashashibi Skaer in 2006. It was commissioned by Spike Island, Bristol for British Art Show 6 and is set in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Here is how the Met, which facilitated the making of the film and subsequently acquired it in 2010, describes it:

*"In 2006 the Metropolitan Museum was approached by a British arts organization who had commissioned the artists Rosalind Nashashibi and Lucy Skaer, who work independently but also make films collaboratively, to make a new short feature under their auspices. They had an unusual request: they wanted to make a film in the Metropolitan but in the middle of the night. Under the cover of darkness and armed with a flash strobe, a 16mm film camera, and some track on which to move it, the artists glided through the museum, flashing their source of illumination at discreet intervals on free-standing objects and those in cases. As a result, the way in which the works of art are usually presented falls away, and the objects—often ritual or devotional in their original function—become eerily enlivened and animated, almost like characters in a new ritual of unknown intent."*

Firstly, I have asked for *Flash* to be shown in 16mm film. I know it exists in other formats. A collection implies dissemination as well as care and custody. Is it possible to build a moving image collection that really cares about format and is able to provide the necessary support for it? A collection that recognises that whilst we rewrite, transcribe or re-author cultural artefacts according to

our contemporary needs, knowledge and desires, that moving image is not only a fluid intellectual material to be poured into a vessel of our own choosing, but sometimes an intransigent, delicate, vulnerable, stubborn and culturally-specific object.

This is not just a blunt fact about material. The complex implication of this knowledge, in its widest sense, is also the very nature of *Flash*'s art and its artfulness.

Secondly this is not a film of now. It's a film I've seen only rarely, once or twice since I attended its opening night in a dark, claustrophobic, former bonded warehouse in Bristol. I would want Lux to build a collection that allows us to revisit works that have fallen out of view, or out of circulation, and that means works that are a decade or five years old as much as it means the films of four or five decades ago. Historical works accrue cultural value by their glamorous distance from the present or from a reverse engineering of their meaning. We make the past "anticipate" the present we inhabit. The near past is a difficult terrain to map or see.

Does *Flash* itself need help to find a place in the canon? I think not, it's in important public collections including that of the Metropolitan and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art and of course the Lux collection. Is its significance settled? Is it sufficiently seen or circulated? Has it found its place in the discourse? Absolutely not. I think of it as a key work of the decade in which it was made and I don't see that reflected in its cultural place anywhere.

So thirdly, and somewhat paradoxically, I would argue that collecting requires intellectual not just material investment, **a commitment to making anew.** To re-seeing and rethinking existing cultural objects.

But fourthly, I want us to think really hard of the risk of *Flash's* presence in the collection as much as the risks of its absence. If it is plucked out of the category of artists' film and repositioned in the category of artists' film from Scotland, or by a slippage which I think we should be very careful to avoid, artists' film that is somehow Scottish is that a loss or a gain? And if it is either, whose loss and whose gain. For *Flash* does the idea of Lux Scotland Collection provide context or a closing down?

To the film itself:

*Flash* is an ambivalent love/hate letter to the United States of America. It is a film about the conflicted relationship between moving image and the photograph. It is a transgressive film: made voyeuristically and stealthily at night. It is a film about the transformative power of film. It's a film that suggests these artists' deeply ambivalent feeling for the museum, for the Met as a global resource, for New York as a place of cultural authority. It's a film about the riches of the museum, the museum's potential, and its limitations.

But above all, since the very first night I saw it I have felt very strongly that this is a film about wider surveillance and violence. In part I think it relates to the intrinsic

violence of the photographic image. Although I can't speak for the artists' intentions I always think of it in relation to other art works by Lucy Skaer in which elements of the source material include historical artefacts under glass which seem to have been fractured by the reflected flash of the artist's camera.

The camera like the museum destroys objects as much as we continue to believe it reveals them to us. Thus *Flash* might be a film about the colonial brutality of museum collections. The museum like the camera destroys history as much as we continue to believe it preserves it for us.

*Flash* is always written about in relation to time. The vast time that the objects in the film represent, they are from the museum's Near Eastern, African and Oceanic collections, is set against the brief time of their illumination. The film concerns the **reanimation of ghosts**. It is about the death of ritual objects and the creation of ghosts too: about how skewed our view of cultures can become through the acquisition of things, through histories of abrupt and violent acquaintance. In the film, we see the consequences of time. The loss and estrangement involved in the museum is held in rhythmic equilibrium with the imperatives of preservation and nurture of objects. We see the dangers and pleasures of visibility.

*Flash* uses strobe lighting. We know from well-documented scientific accounts that strobes cause visual hallucinations. Sitting on a bus travelling through trees on

the sunlit Riviera in December 1959, the artist and poet Brion Gysin discovered the hallucinogenic properties of rhythmic flickering light that led him and to create his own strobe *The Dream Machine*. The strobe found its transgressive place in psychedelic, and later dance, culture.

The strobe is a transformational technology that relates to some of the earliest forms of cinema's **black magic**: the zoetrope, and the thaumatrope. The flicker of the strobe stops time, it observes and categorises the unobservable. It slows time, for example on the dance floor. Under certain circumstances, in relation to rotating images, it can seem to reverse time.

If *Flash* might at times equate the colonising, categorising eye of the camera and that of the collection it might also deal with neo-colonial realities of its era. The film was made in 2006 and, in my view, it is a film made firmly from within, and about, the Bush era. I think it's a film about the legacy of the invasion of Iraq in 2003, about Britain and America's long and disastrous histories of intervention in the Middle East and the Gulf. About shock and awe. And, for our own purposes, about the need to investigate the complex impulse to collect, preserve, and celebrate cultural artefacts at times of conflict.

And I think the notion of aerial photography is lurking amongst all these tracking shots. *Flash* is a film made in the still of night, that paradoxically evokes bombardment. A few years later the artists made *Our Magnolia*, a film that borrows its name from Paul Nash's 1944 painting in

which an unfurling flower denotes the war time threat from the air. The most powerful moment in that film is the rhythmic, indeed stroboscopic, weeping of a woman grieving in the destroyed and looted Museum of Iraq in Baghdad.

When I think of the relationship between art, photography and history through Flash I think of death. Roger Fenton and **all those bones** on the battlefield of Crimea. I think of the aerial photographs of the charnel house of the western front that Marcel Duchamp obliquely evoked in *Dust Breeding*, his "aerial" picture of *The Large Glass*. I think of Andre Breton's work as a medic, in the catastrophe of the first war and attached to a pilot training school in Poitiers during the second: the view from the air and its influence in shaping post war surrealism. Or of Edward Steichen in 1917, directing the aerial photographic unit of the US Army and in 1941 portraying aerial bombardment and its consequences as commander of the Naval Aviation Photographic Unit in 1941. Of the artist and designer Isamu Noguchi, trapped in a Japanese-American internment camp at Poston in the Arizona desert, who conceived of an artwork that was never made: an outdoor sculpture in which an entire landscape would be shaped by bombardment.

So when I see *Flash* I think of the flash bomb as well as the flashbulb. The inventor of the modern strobe, the MIT scientist Harold Edgerton, worked largely in engineering applications but developed an enormous strobe for aerial surveillance images that superseded the flash bomb and could penetrate as far as a mile. It was on the basis of

reconnaissance using this new technology that the D-Day landings were timed.

The strobe has a kinship with other more recent penetrative military technologies such as the drone. It sees what we can't and tells us what we didn't know. I think *Flash in the Metropolitan* might do that too.

*This text was written for a presentation by the writer as part of the event Towards a Scottish Collection of Artists' Moving Image at CCA in January 2017 and was accompanied by a screening of the art work. Thanks to Nicole Yip and LUX Scotland for the invitation and to LUX collection for the screening of the work.*

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