

Aware of Something Nearby: Una Knox at Or Gallery

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Una Knox. From "4 and a Half Feet to the Left, Behind Me"

Or Gallery April 14 – May 19, 2012

Una Knox's current solo exhibition, *4 and a Half Feet to the Left, Behind Me*, at the Or Gallery features several works that are highly self-aware, particularly the titular video, wherein an archivist in London, Steve Woodhouse, wanders the hallways and backrooms of a museum's storage facility. The video is accompanied by a voice-over, in which Woodhouse provides detail into his work as an archivist and the effect of déjà vu resulting from his temporal lobe epilepsy. The effect of *Four and a Half Feet to the Left, Behind Me* is one of Hitchcockian meta-cinema; a film about the cinematic experience. Many of Hitchcock's films, such as *Rear Window* (1954), are concerned with voyeurs and voyeurism. A critic once told French filmmaker François Truffaut that he (Truffaut) loved *Rear Window* because as a stranger to New York he knew nothing about Greenwich Village. To this Truffaut replied that, "*Rear Window* is not a film about Greenwich Village, it is a film about the cinema."^[1] *4 and a Half Feet*, similarly, isn't so much a video about a museum/archivist as it is a video about cinema. Its interest is not in the fact that the viewer is a stranger to the nether-regions of a museum, but in how the viewer relates to cinematic language employed.

Woodhouse's voice-over provides a doubling function to the video. The use of haunting and repetitive language creates a self-referential and uncanny echo to Knox's cinematography. When he comments on the strange sensation of always having somebody following him "4 and a half feet to the left, behind me," he's not only reflecting on his own experience, but also on the presence of Knox's camera. He is aware that nothing is really following him, "it's just a point in space after all," and though the cinematic view allows us to enter the space of a scene as a character (a strategy Sergei Eisenstein pioneered, breaking from the notion of cinema as filmed stage play as most of today's sitcoms are still produced), we do so as "just a point in space." Like Slavoj Žižek notes, the fantasy of cinema we partake in is of being reduced to a pure gaze, i.e., the act of looking, objectified.^[2] The cinematic/intellectual pleasure of watching *4 and a Half Feet to the Left...* (the fun in it for film buffs) is in being made aware of these effects as they are occurring.



Una Knox, "4 and a Half Feet to the Left, Behind Me". Installation Detail.

Being a professional actor, Woodhouse also doubles himself, aware that he is "performing" Steve Woodhouse for Knox's camera (a condition that reality television desperately tries to disavow through convenient editing). In one portion of the video, Woodhouse discusses a series of photographs from the mid-nineteenth century, revealing the construction of a new wing of the museum, each devoid of people save for one man, recurring in every image, wearing a suit and top hat, haunting the images as if a ghost. Of course Woodhouse himself fulfills this role in *4 and a Half Feet*, recurring in every shot in the same blue shirt, tie, and slacks, surveying each space perfunctorily much like the top-hatted man who is presumed to be the foreman in the photographs. Similarly, Knox positions Woodhouse as the foreman of the back halls of the museum's archives. These halls shown in Knox's video provide a visual framework to express concepts detailed in the voice-over. When Woodhouse walks down a corridor containing compartmentalized stacks of material, his real time self notes that one is "1968," another "brand new," yet another being "never used." All the while his overdubbed voice describes how his hallucinatory déjà vu could be anything random, even pieces of thoughts. Isn't this exactly what is contained on the shelves he passes? Again, I am reminded of Hitchcock and a film like *Vertigo* (1958). Motifs are repeated (and repeated) in both films, even in similar locations. Both feature repeat ascents of stair-wells to the top of a tower, as well as repeated views down the abyss of a stairwell, producing an appreciable feeling of, well, vertigo. In both instances a trauma is voiced, *Vertigo's* of losing several partners to falls, and *4 and a Half Feet's* to the tiredness, headaches, seizures and hallucinations produced by Woodhouse's rare form of epilepsy.



Alfred Hitchcock, still from "Vertigo", 1958.

Other works in the exhibition produce a similar doubling. In the three prints titled *Never Odd or Even*, Knox transforms visitors to a gallery into bright neon spectres in space. In these prints, Knox highlights the "overdetermined" status of a space such as a museum or gallery. Never just someplace that houses objects, the museum, much like the object in it, is given value by the visitors who, like a single colour in a tri-chromatic space, haunt its halls. The text accompanying the exhibition describes the effect as being as if the visitors were a glitch. Perhaps they could also be described as a supplement to the space. A gallery isn't much of a gallery without visitors to make it one; though not officially part of the space, they necessitate it, like one of the three chroma (e.g., cyan) comprising Knox's prints. *4 and a Half Feet to the Left, Behind Me* isn't necessarily an exhibit about visitors, though it is about what they visit and how they see (or don't see) it.



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[1] Truffaut, Francois. Hitchcock/Truffaut. Rev. ed. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983. pg. 11.

[2] Žižek, Slavoj. "The Seven Veils of Fantasy." Key Concepts of Lacanian Psychoanalysis. Ed. Dany Nobus. New York: Other Press, 1999. 190-218. pg. 193.

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