SITUATIONS
PAPERS

A commissioned response to Kathleen Herbert's *Grande Spagna*, 2005

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Kathleen Herbert
Grande Spagna, 2005
Huller Warehouse, Bristol, UK

This video installation presents a series of details recorded on a three-day voyage by the artists from Antwerp to Bristol, abroad a cargo ship. Accompanied by a crew of 28 and a cargo of 5000 cars, Herbert gained a rare insight into the realities of contemporary seafaring.

The artist combined her observations on the voyage with research at the seafarers' Mission at Royal Portbury Docks in Avonmouth, a vast industrialised area some distance from Bristol City Centre. The resulting work describes the solitude, monotony and sense of disorientation for seafarers often far away from home, signed up for four to six months with only the time between tides in port.

Sited in Bristol's Floating Harbour, the Huller Warehouse is one of the last industrialised buildings in the area to remain untouched by redevelopment. Around it, other warehouses have been transformed into chic flats or restaurants, mirroring a process that has taken place in all of the old industrial centres across Britain. The bustle and hectic activity of dock life has long vanished and with it, the exotic promise of sea travel. Even the gulls seem less urgent.

Inside the warehouse, Kathleen Herbert's *Grande Spagna* (2005) occupies the ground floor which still bears all the traces and scars of busier times. A pillar of black DVD players audit the situation, coloured LEDs and digital signals blink calmly, maintaining order and choreographing the small screens planted around the space. Speakers broadcast a low thrum of engines as monitors flicker to life or fade to black.

The series of fragmented details that comprise *Grande Spagna* were recorded during a three-day voyage from Antwerp to Bristol on a cargo ship carrying a crew of 28 and 5000 cars. At first sight, the vessel appears abandoned, a latter-day Mary Celeste. Tables are unoccupied, corridors are empty, cargo bays deserted. At last, in one scene, a few solitary crewmen appear to raise a flag but the overwhelming sense of desolation remains.

Gradually we realise that this is the reality of seafaring today. Risk and disturbance are reduced to a minimum to protect the cargo. Computerisation and high technology enable the ship to function with a skeleton crew who maintain the systems. On an ideal voyage nothing at all occurs. This is a form of transport designed and dominated by accountancy. The maintenance of monotony ensures the best possible financial result. Movement is restricted to the faintest flicker of screens or strip lighting. The trembling of a cardboard cereal box on a galley table is the most visible sign of greater energy and excitement but that is the upper limit of the Richter scale in this controlled environment.

Tidiness too is endemic. Corridors are immaculate. Table tennis bats are carefully

returned to their wall hangings and on the cargo deck an unearthly array of identical cars are perfectly parked to avoid any potential damage. On such a voyage banality is the ambition.

Grande Spagna, however, doesn't simply document this banality. Herbert's images often offer hints of alternative dimensions that might counter the deadening implications of the ship's systems. The crewmen raising a flag may be undramatic but in their actions they repeat an age old ritual that connects them to a more vibrant seafaring culture. The flag is a potent artefact that defies the reductive logic of contemporary cargo transport. Likewise, a trembling image of Mary and Jesus beside a radio telephone fractures the surface of machinic efficiency. It opens a fissure that allows faith, belief, hopes, and superstitions to flood into this closed down world. Human needs and the unruly sprawl of illogical, chaotic histories are all alluded to in this one simple, ephemeral image.

And, if these images defy the rule of monotony, then the detail of a lifeboat outside a porthole window is even more subversive. The image Herbert has framed is almost abstract. Light, colours and reflections all merge to create – at first glance – a deep, painterly sunset. Gradually, however, the image flips into the figurative realm and reveals a static dockside scene below the lifeboat – orange sodium lights illuminating a stark wasteland of concrete and cars.

The perceptual illusion that animates this image overturns the dominant mood of banality. Figuratively we may be confronted by another soulless tableau but the more abstract shock of colour and composition contradicts all the signifiers of monotony. This particular detail of the voyage opens the interpretation of the entire piece as we begin to glimpse a more playful reading of the ship's environment. The juxtaposition of the porthole, the lifeboat and the dockscene is framed theatrically. It is knowing in its ambiguity as it suggests a sublime sunset only to leave us with the reflection of sodium lights. Similarly, the shots of a tantalisingly half-open door and long empty corridors emphasise the labyrinthine qualities of the vessel but they also bring us to another painterly image of a red door.

These fragments highlight the artist's presence in the work. We become aware of her acute eye for detail, of the precise selection of each image. Their oblique allusion to a more orthodox sense of artistic composition also brings them into the orbit of art history. The stillness of all the elements of *Grande Spagna*, and their persistent focus on the undramatic and the everyday, recall the calm, non-eventful painting of Dutch 17th century artists such as Vermeer and De Hooch. Materiality and surface replace action and narrative. The blue and red table tennis bats or the never-ending expanse of cars and ventilation pipes do not transcend their situation to become an allegory or metaphor. Instead, the viewer is confronted with a materialistic world where the object or commodity is the point. Herbert documents a landscape designed to protect and deliver the object to the retailer. The sheer weight of material detail in these images, though, resists any attempt to interpret them as a straightforward critique of a deathly consumer society.

It would be easy to read the desolate landscape of the ship simply as a sign of the banalisation of society. The various screens of *Grande Spagna* do present a series of quasi still life images and this could easily be construed as a funereal reading of the modern world. The presentation of a sequence of fragments might also signal the rupture of consciousness in a materialist landscape.

These readings miss an important aspect of this exhibition. The various scenes and details presented by Herbert are meticulously arranged in a specific space and any experience of the piece inevitably draws the viewer into a consideration of the site as well as the fragments. The use of sound and the awareness of sightlines across the warehouse floor as screens flicker into life prompt us to see the building as a more primitive ancestor of the systems that dominate the cargo ship. Even the warehouse windows offer us a perspective on a larger trade system beyond in Bristol that not only created the city itself but continues to evolve today in a less tangible form. And, in the darkest corner of the space, the pillar of DVD players and sync units remind us that our movements around the room are choreographed by its decisions and that we are a vital element within this system,

completing the work as we move from screen to screen.

In *Cosmopolis* (2003), the novelist Don DeLillo invents a billionaire who crosses New York in a limousine, all the time studying the financial market figures on computers in his car. DeLillo uses the character to meditate on the new, increasingly intangible world of trade systems and data:

He looked past Chin toward streams of numbers running in opposite directions. He understood how much it meant to him, the roll and flip of data on a screen. He studied the figural diagrams that brought organic patterns into play, birdwing and chambered shell. It was shallow thinking to maintain that numbers and charts were the cold compression of unruly human energies, every sort of yearning and midnight sweat reduced to lucid units in the financial markets. In fact data itself was soulful and glowing, a dynamic aspect of the life process. This was the eloquence of alphabets and numeric systems, now fully realized in electronic form, in the zero-oneness of the world, the digital imperative that defined every breath of the planet's living billions. Here was the heave of the biosphere. Our bodies and oceans were here, knowable and whole.

The system Herbert documents in *Grande Spagna* is an element within this world. And the system she creates within the viewing space is yet another. The banalities recorded on the ship and the small miraculous moments reflect the vast system that now holds the world together – a fragile, almost invisible network of logical elements that underpin the vast chaotic sprawl of human civilization across the globe.

The most intimate revelation within this work, then, is the degree to which we now work in tandem with machines, relying on their rational grace to sustain tenuous and vital links in this global system. This is an increasingly close relationship and it may not be as soulless as it at first seems. In a key text entitled 'Ascribing Mental Qualities to Machines' (1979), the computer scientist John McCarthy discusses the possibility of machines having beliefs, arguing for example, that thermostats operate on a simple system of belief – "When the thermostat believes the room is too cold or too hot, it sends a message saying so to the furnace." So far, he continues, we have not constructed more complex machines –"the machines mankind has so far found it useful to construct rarely have beliefs about beliefs, although such beliefs will be needed by computer programs that reason about what knowledge they lack and where to get it." As our complex global system grows, however, and we find ourselves cocooned in systems of data then we may begin to evolve more responsive machines. *Grande Spagna* hints at this evolution as we move around the warehouse constantly aware of Kathleen Herbert's selection of detail and equally aware of the DVD players' contribution to our experience.

Biography

Francis Mckee is a writer and curator based in Glasgow. He is the director of the Centre of Contemporary Art, Glasgow and director of the Glasgow International.