

This essay accompanies the exhibition *2008 / 2009* by Nina Könnemann
February 25 to March 21, 2009

Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

Here

by Stuart Tulloch

There is nowhere else like Blackpool: a seaside town on the northwest coast of England that specializes in providing entertainment to the British working-class. I haven't travelled the world but I know, and others tell me, it is a unique place. It grew steadily during the nineteenth century when sea-bathing became a fashionable practice for the wealthy in pursuit of good-health. And later, with the development of the railways, Blackpool became a popular destination for the northern mill workers. The town's success placed it at the centre of twentieth-century British popular culture.

That was Blackpool's zenith. The town has now declined and its relevance has faded. But Blackpool continues to provide a genuine brand of Britishness supported by the nation's obsession with alcohol. The town remains a place to escape from the day-job and the

grind of everyday life. Adjoining the central promenade, in amongst the amusement arcades and fast-food stalls are fancy-good shops, selling all sorts of paraphernalia for the weekend away: sex-toys, buckets and spades, and paracetamol are often found together in the same shop. There you will find an assortment of wigs, masks, and adornments. Blackpool is at the cutting edge of the year's 'must have' fancy dress items. I remember the kilt with exposed plastic buttocks, the Viking helmet with pigtails, plastic breasts and inflatable phalluses, a sheep that could be tied around your waist, and a hat for children made of modelling balloons. In 2008 we were introduced to the Traffic Cone hat. There are two types: one blank and one with a printed message, which include "Where's the Pub?" and "Twat in a Hat."

Nina Könnemann and I sat talking about this hat during one of her visits to Blackpool. We wondered:



Nina Könnemann, video still from *unrise*, 2002



Nina Könnemann, video still from *Cone*, 2008

where else in the world do people wear traffic cone hats? Is there anywhere else where it is not out of the ordinary to walk through the town centre wearing this? When I met with her again a week later, she told me she had bought a traffic cone hat and had an idea for a new work.

Unlike other works Könnemann has made — for which she remains visible as an observer to the people she is filming — in *Cone* (2008) she attempts to be part of the crowd and places herself in amongst the proceedings rather than on the periphery. Her path through the crowd is directed by her close pursuit of someone wearing a traffic cone hat, changing direction when encountering another cone. What is not obvious

when viewing the work is that the camera is concealed within a traffic cone hat worn by the artist.

As in her previous works, such as *unrise* (2002), which was filmed in a Berlin U-Bahn station in the hours after a parade, *Cone* details events that occur on the edge of social order, where acceptable forms of behaviour slip to be replaced with new sets of rules. In ‘*Cone*’ most of the people who move in and out of the camera frame are members of a group, each with its own dress code. With her concealed camera Könnemann provides an embedded point of view. We witness groups of men and women dressed in the bright — high-visibility — jackets, surgeon scrubs, and a uniform of smart casual wear moving from bar to bar with a genuine sense of enjoyment and pleasure. The clothing and the camaraderie serve as a vehicle for escape and exhibitionism.

These crowds are an average weekend sight in Blackpool. It is not extraordinary to find groups of men and women, young and old, parading the streets of Blackpool in fancy dress. Nor is it extraordinary to see Dorothy, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion eating their fast-food dinner in the window of a restaurant, or spot Superman and Captain America using a bank machine on a Saturday afternoon. I remember being heckled one weekend for wearing a red wool hat. A group of lads shouted out, “Oi, with the hat. Get a life.” This brought home that the lines in Blackpool separating the outsider and the insider, the participant and the observer, are clearly drawn. A retaliatory, “Oi, with the Viking helmet and plastic breasts. Get a life!” would make little sense, as it would further mark me as an outsider.

Könnemann underscores the idea of inclusion and exclusion in *Cone* by following the hat as it drifts from one crowd to the next. Twice the film cuts from the streets of Blackpool to another city centre and then back again. The camera remains focused on the hat but the crowd is noticeably different in its behaviour and style. Removed from Blackpool, the hat becomes conspicuous. In this way, Könnemann makes the opposing feelings of belonging and alienation visible.

Könnemann describes her *Basketball Towel* (2008) as an extension of some of this idea that objects provide us with a sense of belonging and a sense



Nina Könnemann, installation view of *Basketball Towel* (prototype), 2008

of place. *Basketball Towel* can be seen as a prototype souvenir that was derived from the traffic cone hat and a towel that Könnemann discovered being worn in Madagascar. Whilst travelling across Madagascar the artist frequently encountered people wearing a neon-pink coloured towel as a headscarf. Könnemann's hybrid towel combines the qualities and appeal of the Blackpool hat and Madagascan towel by means of its design and purpose. She has produced an object that can be sold in Blackpool as a novelty beach towel and be worn as a headscarf in Madagascar. It is emblazoned with the iconic design of the American basketball and is a prototype from which the artist plans to produce an edition, manufactured in China. Thus *Basketball Towel* operates as a symbol of globalization, one that is as familiar and relevant to the northwest of England as it is to Madagascar. The purpose of producing an object to sell in Blackpool and Madagascar is to draw parallels between two locations. Könnemann perceives this as an effective way to show how the two locations are "in their own way asynchronous in relation to mainstream zeitgeist." Having relevance in Blackpool and Madagascar, *Basketball Towel* underlines how these two separate locations manage to maintain a sense of place and uniqueness despite globalization.

Early Morning Lessons (2004) and *Laughing Sailor* (2008) together form part of another strand of Könnemann's work, one in which she uses photography and animation to document the popular obsession for fantasy and its illusionary devices. *Early Morning Lessons* is an animated film that was created from photographs taken with a spring wound camera. Shot in a small straw and wood hut, the film focuses on the structure's walls, floor, and ceiling. The irregularities of the hut's construction are replicated into the film's jilts and jolts. The camera moves systematically through the hut: up a wall, across into a corner, back and down the wall, across the floor to the other side of the hut, and so on. The artist describes her original intention for the film to have the flow of moving through a three-dimensional architectural model. The film features only the walls, floor and ceiling of the hut and begins at a considered pace, carefully detailing the space. And although the action never leaves the hut, one gets the sensation of flight. What we are presented with is an unfamiliar

space in which we are contained and isolated. In other words, the film leads us to perceive other horizons — we become detached from the immediate setting of the hut to negotiate wider vistas in which we move, climb and fall through; we find ourselves simultaneously removed from reality, but unable to escape its groundings.

Laughing Sailor was produced using a computer 3D software programme to imitate the movement of an antique automaton — the type of figure that can still be found in arcades or in the occasional scary movie. Encased in a glass vitrine, the sailor automaton rolls from side to side in fits of hysterical laughter whenever money is inserted. Könnemann's animation replicates this to and thro movement as perceived from within



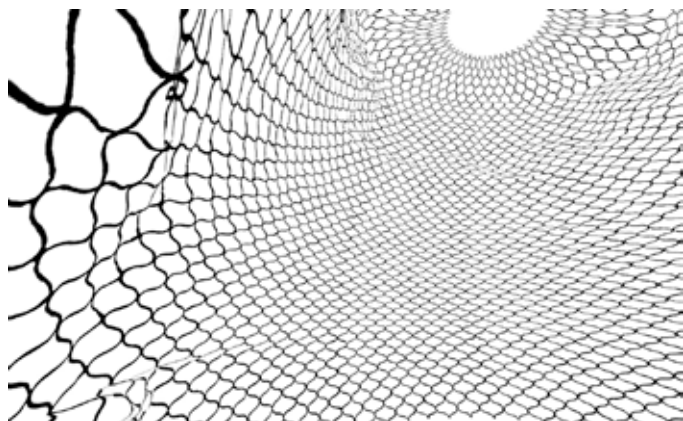
Nina Könnemann, video stills from *Early Morning Lessons*, 2004

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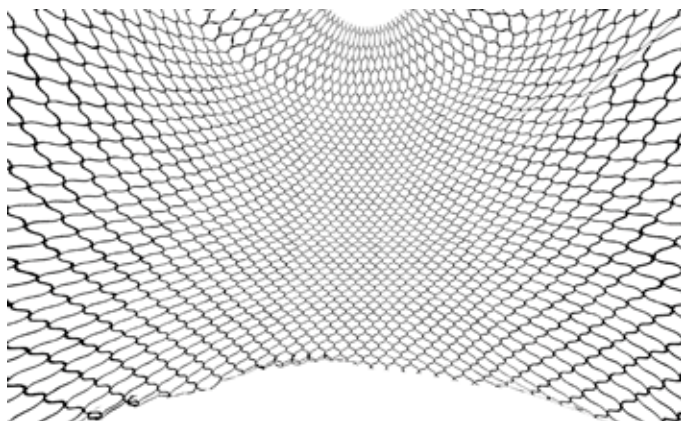
the automaton's torso. Projected onto a large concave screen, the work references panoramic painting and dioramas — the precursors to cinema — along with widescreen cinema and virtual technologies and how they immerse viewers in adrenalin pumping experiences far removed from the world of the everyday.

Automatons are now considered a thing of nostalgia and by using it Könnemann delineates how curios and amusements follow a course of obsolescence. What was hot or high definition for one generation becomes cold

and low-tech for the next. The thirst for the fantastic or artificial will never be quenched. Technological innovations in cinema and televisual entertainment are sold with the sales pitch that 'seeing is believing,' but they remain an illusion, as each innovation is superseded by the next and our visual perception is further and further stretched. What remains real — what remains constant — and ties Könnemann's work together, is the desire for escape and all the irregularities and malfunctions that brings.



Nina Könnemann, video stills from *Laughing Sailor*, 2008



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Based in Berlin, Nina Könnemann's work has been widely screened and exhibited and is gaining international visibility. Recent and upcoming solo exhibition venues include Grazer Kunstverein, Austria (2007), White Space, Zurich (2008), and Portikus, Frankfurt (2009). Her work was included in the group exhibitions *40 Jahre Videokunst*, ZKM, Karlsruhe (2006) and *Von Abts bis Zmijewski*, Pinakothek der Moderne München (2007).

ABOUT THE WRITER

Stuart Tulloch is the curator of Grundy Art Gallery Blackpool. He previously worked at Hayward Gallery, London, where he was involved with the organization of the exhibition *Facts of Life: Contemporary Japanese Art* and the retrospectives of Panamarenko and Malcolm Morley.

Programmed by Oliver Husain, Nina Könnemann 2008/2009 is a co-presentation coinciding with Cinematheque Ontario's focus on recent German cinema, *STATES OF LONGING: Films from the Berlin School*, taking place from February 20 through March 14, 2009. www.cinemathequeontario.ca

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