

This essay accompanies the exhibition *Extramission 6* by Lindsay Seers
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Lindsay Seers' *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*

by Michael Newman

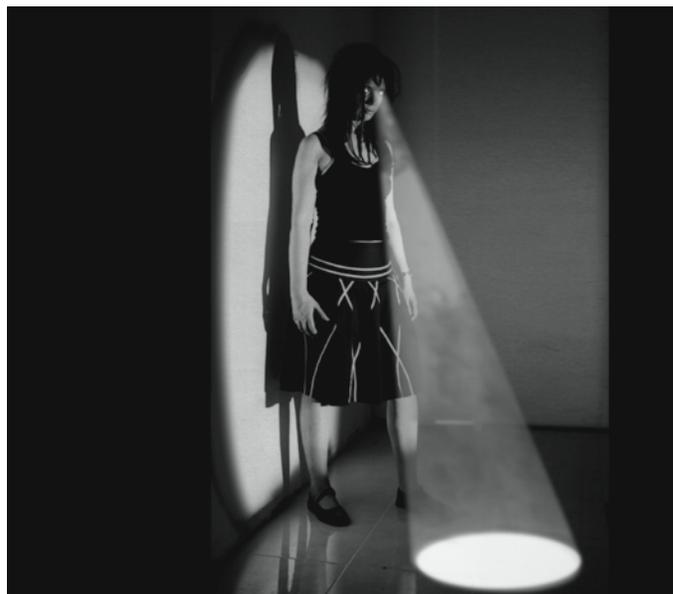
On first encounter, the visitor comes upon what looks like a large black, irregularly-shaped building within the gallery. Upon entering, he or she finds a place to sit, and watches a projected video that takes the form of a documentary about the strange life of Lindsay Seers - how she tried to turn herself into a camera by making exposures through her mouth, and how this may be connected to the fact that she had an eidetic—or photographic—memory as a child. We are told that, without speech until she was eight years old, her first utterance, upon seeing a photograph of herself, was: “Is that me?” An “expert” in the film speculates that because certain children have such vivid experiences of memory, they have no need to communicate. If, conversely, the advent of speech results in abstraction and the substitution of words for the vivid and immediate experience and memory of things, Seers turning herself into a camera is presented as if it were an attempt to recapture the fully present character of these

early memory images. The installation *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)* frames this way of using photography to suggest its quixotic character as a regard on time, and to propose a more generative approach to the relation of memory to duration.

As a child Seers was living on the island of Mauritius, to which she returns with her mother in the film. Unable to remember the house in which she lived, she instead presents photographic images of a number of possible houses, a conceit that, in turn, destabilizes other “memories” presented in the film. As with construction, coincidence plays a role, too: we are told that a photo was taken by a descendent of a plantation owner who brought one of the first commercial cameras produced by Daguerre to the island, thus linking the photograph on the occasion of which Seers first spoke with the one of the earliest forms of photography. Coincidence is a way in which past and present co-exist, as they do on the film.



Lindsay Seers, video still from *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*, 2009



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The film—and as we shall see, the installation—is concerned with Seers' transition from embodying a camera to a projector. A friend tells us of a model that Seers left behind in Rome—now lost except for a small photograph—which turns out to be of the “Black Maria”, the structure built by the Edison Company in 1894 which, covered in black tar-paper with an opening to catch the light, shot the first moving images. This invites us to speculate on the prosthetic mechanism that Seers wears on her head during the documentary footage in the film, showing her “as a projector.” It has within it references to the first film studio in North America¹, and it becomes clear to the viewer that he or she is sitting in a reconstruction of the “Black Maria,” and thus, in addition to watching what appears to be a documentary about the artist's life and work, has become a physical part of the work.

Extramission 6 (Black Maria) positions itself within a certain history that it also works to reconfigure. In the 17th century it became common to conceive the mind on the model of a camera obscura (a device through which images would enter a dark room through a small hole, and appear inverted on the opposite wall). Where, in the apparatus's visual metaphor, the camera's room would contain a little figure inspecting the images, a metaphor was developed for a consciousness that is aware of its own images.² During that same period, the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher became fascinated with magic lanterns and optical tricks that have

been seen as part of the history of cinema.³ Seers turning her body into a camera renders the *camera obscura*-based model of the intromission of images literally physiological.⁴

Like the *camera obscura* and magic lantern before it, *Extramission 6* offers itself as a metaphor for the relation of perception, memory, and consciousness - the ways in which images enter our lives. When Seers tries to turn herself into a camera, images are incorporated like imprints of the real. Like the wafer transubstantiated into the “real presence” of the body of Christ, and placed in the mouth of the communicant, the photograph as a replacement for eidetic memory is an attempt to stage the recapturing of what is in effect a lost “real presence”. While this model places the emphasis on reception, Kircher's magic lantern and the first film studio imply the production of images. Temporally, a still photograph is always a registration of the past, but a projector throws images before us, with both its title and mechanism gesturing to the future. The two approaches also refer to two ancient conceptions of how perception works, with images peeling off the objects and entering the mind, or alternatively being projected - by the mind - through vision. While Edison was a scientific inventor, Seers names a structure based on his “Black Maria” film studio with the word “extramission,” suggesting the projection of a vision into the world or the beyond, and referring us to the prestidigitator of the alchemist, seer or magus who, according to neo-Platonism, is one who generates images



Lindsay Seers, installation view of *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*, 2009

in pursuit of esoteric knowledge, an idea that finds its source in ancient Egypt. But it is also close to contemporary scientific theories about the active, constructive way in which memory functions, including the neurological basis of the strengthening of long-term memory by attaching associations.⁵ Seers use of these models and ideas questions the “photographic” conception of memory as a passive receiver and storage house of images, seeing it rather as a much more dynamic and constructive interlinking of past as present. After all, Edison’s “Black Maria” was a place where memories were created for the public rather than simply registered.

The film included in *Extramission 6* offers a combination of memories and speculations. Characters who are presented as Seers’ mother and a male friend recall her past life, which a psychosynthesis practitioner and a historian try to interpret, although the enigma - also a question of how we relate to images, including the images that we are seeing as we sit in the “Black Maria” - remains. As far as memory is concerned, Seers’ turn from ingestion to projection, and from intromission to “extramission” suggests that images don’t simply record memories, like photosensitive paper, but are the creation of a dynamic time or duration in which past, present and future are not on a line from a “before” through a punctual “now” to an “afterwards”, but rather co-exist.⁶ Seers’ installations are spaces where past, present and projection into the future interpenetrate.

The “Black Maria” as a place for the production of memory recalls the Renaissance idea of the “memory theatre”.⁷ Seers’ subsequent installation, *It Has To Be This Way* (2009), makes explicit reference to the Renaissance “memory theatre,” which also formed the subject of another work by Seers, *The Truth Was Always There* (2006). The Warburg Institute scholar Frances Yates argued that the esoteric geometry of the memory theatre influenced Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, thus providing a way of relating the stage to the universe. Seers’ 2009 installation incorporated the idea of a memory theatre into its structure, as a way of relating personal and cultural histories through images in the form of videos positioned to create a physical experience in time and space.⁸ Seers’ presentation of the narratives and documents within the frame of an artwork invites us to question their status: do they refer to things that really happened, or are they constructions by the artist? What, in particular, is the relation between narrative and photographic imaging? Does the reference of the photograph to the reality in which it was taken secure the historical truth of what is being told, or does the sometimes-fantastical narrative unfix the image from its reference, inviting other kinds of interpretation? In Seers’ installations, the alternative to the connection of the image to its referent, and therefore to an origin in the past, would be the relation of images to each other through a system of similarities, resemblances and associations. The potentially endless spiraling of images is grounded not by reference



Lindsay Seers, video still from *Extramission 6 (Black Maria)*, 2009

to reality through representation but by coincidence and encounter, the infraction of a “real” that is associated with injury, violence, death, and love.⁹

An artist book was given to visitors of the two versions of *It Has To Be This Way*, and in it we find various ways of interpreting photographic and other images, including reading them as if they were Tarot cards.¹⁰ Through similarities and other uncanny connections, the series of images across the two stories seem to circumscribe a void, which may be related in *It Has To Be This Way* to the disappearance of Seers' step-sister after losing her memory as the result of an accident while shooting video from a motor scooter, and similarly the images in the film of *Extramission 6* seem to revolve around her mother's story of a psychic on Mauritius saying that Seers “had suffered a trauma” at birth. The mention of this is followed by a ritualistic sequence reminiscent of the 19th century “spirit photography,” where the camera was supposed to have captured ectoplasm and ghosts, and which, whatever the trickery involved, figure an uncanny return to the past in the photograph.¹¹ If turning herself into a camera was Seers' attempt to recapture the “original” eidetic character of her childhood memory,

the hint that this may itself have been a response to the trauma of birth, would figure it as an attempt to return to an “impossible” origin before there was any subject of experience. As in the film's interviews and voiceovers, the soundtrack includes scraps of speech that seem to well up from another place. The screen becomes something like that of a dream-projection, and, as in dreams, images repeat and correspond with each other around a core that provokes interpretation by defying it. The psychological, the psychic, and the historical are intertwined with the history of media. If Seers turning herself into a camera renders literal the metaphor of the body as a melancholic crypt for images,¹² her turn as a projector replaces the tomb with a quest and in *Extramission 6* we are given images of ships which signify the role of travel in her narratives. By inviting us into the film's featured structure, which resembles a mausoleum and recalls a production studio, Seers creates an installation in the form of a *mise-en-abyme* that opens the inside to an outside and folds the outside into an interior, enabling our participation in a journey that is both an allegorical search through the layers of duration, and a bodily experience.



Lindsay Seers, installation view of *It Has To Be This Way* at Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, 2010

Endnotes

¹ See Ray Phillips, *Edison's Kinetoscope and Its Films: A History to 1896* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997), pp. 37-45: "The 'Black Maria': the world's first motion picture studio."

² See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

³ Joscelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher's Theatre of the World: The Life and Work of the Last Man to Search for Universal Knowledge* (Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 2009), pp. 191-214; Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing By Technical Means* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), pp. 101-157; Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), pp. 18-19.

⁴ For the history of the physiological turn in the understanding of perception, and its effect on the theorization of media, see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1990).

⁵ See the "neurological" discussion of "Long-Term Memory" in "The Brain from Top to Bottom", online at <http://thebrain.mcgill.ca>.

⁶ This conception of duration and memory is close to that of Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1911) where Bergson writes "The whole difficulty of the problem that occupies us comes from the fact that we imagine perception to be a kind of photographic view of things, taken from a fixed point by that special apparatus which is called an organ of perception—a photograph which would then be developed in the brain-matter by some unknown chemical and psychical process of elaboration. But is it not obvious that the photograph, if photograph there be, is already taken, already developed in the very heart of things at all points of space?" (p. 31). Later he writes concerning the dynamism of the relation of perception and memory: "Our perceptions are undoubtedly interlaced with memories, and inversely, a memory... only becomes actual by borrowing the body of some perception into which it slips. These two acts, perception and recollection, always interpenetrate each other, are always exchanging something of their substance..." (p. 72). See also Gilles Deleuze in *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1986) and *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (London: The Athlone Press, 1989) which draw on Bergson to develop an ontology of cinema. For a discussion of Bergson, Deleuze and photography, see Damien Sutton, *Photography, Cinema, Memory: The Crystal Image of Time* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

⁷ The memory theatre was formulated in Renaissance Italy by Giulio Camillo as a mnemonic device in which images "mapped" the mind. It was then adapted to the form of a theatre in the round through the writings on the esoteric geometry of architecture by John Dee, who was a soothsayer to Queen Elizabeth I. See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1999). Artists also turned to the model of the memory theatre as a basis for media installation from the 1980s, in particular Judith Barry and James Coleman.

⁸ *It Has to Be This Way* relates two narrative threads that are pursued in the videos that form a part of it: one concerns Seers' attempt to puzzle out what happened to her art historian step-sister, Christine, who disappeared after losing her memory due to a motor-scooter accident in Rome where she was pursuing research on Queen Christina of Sweden, and the other is her own research into Queen Christina, who owned a manuscript by John Dee and was also an alchemist. The work thus involves a series of similarities and identifications. The first version of *It Has To Be This Way* was installed at Matts Gallery, London, a variation of this, *It Has To Be This Way 1.5* was shown at Aspex gallery, Portsmouth (2010-11), and the second, different version, *It Has To Be This Way²* where the structure was based on a West African slave fort, was installed at the National Gallery of Denmark, Copenhagen (2010), the Mead Gallery, University of Warwick (2010-11), and the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead (2011).

⁹ Jacques Lacan borrows Aristotle's term "tuché" to describe "the encounter with the real" which he sees as lying behind the repetition and insistence of signs and that he associates with "trauma". Drawing on Freud, he characterizes the "tuché" as the real as encounter in so far as it is "essentially the missed encounter" with the trauma as "unassimilable". Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Penguin, 1977), pp.53-55.

¹⁰ M. Anthony Penwill, *It Has To Be This Way* (London: Matts Gallery, 2009) and *It Has To Be This Way²* (Denmark: National Gallery; University of Warwick: Mead Gallery; London: Matts Gallery, 2010). In the undecidability between fiction and document partly achieved through the use of photographs, *It Has To Be This Way* resembles the novels of W. G. Sebald, in particular *The Rings of Saturn* (New York: New Directions, 1999), which also similarly intertwines memoir with history, and draws on the ruminations and a diagram by the 17th century doctor and writer Thomas Browne. There are also parallels with Sebald's technique in Seers' videos and installations.

¹¹ The traumatic character of the photographic image is discussed in Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981). For "spirit photography" see Cheroux Clement, *The Perfect Medium: Photography and the Occult* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

¹² Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

All images courtesy of Lindsay Seers and Matt's Gallery, London.

Born in Mauritius and currently based in London, UK, **Lindsay Seers** has exhibited widely. Recent solo exhibition venues include the National Gallery of Denmark, 2010, Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, 2010, and aspex, Portsmouth, 2010. Recent group exhibitions include *EFTERBILLEDER (Persistence of Vision)* at Nikolaj Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center, Copenhagen, 2010; *Steps into the arcane*, Kunstmuseum Thurgau, Switzerland, 2010; *Altermodern*, 4th Tate Triennial, Tate Britain, 2009. In 2010, Seers was the recipient of the Paul Hamlyn Award for Artists and in 2009 she won the Jarman Award. Lindsay Seers is represented by Matt's Gallery, London.

Michael Newman is Professor of Art Writing at Goldsmiths College in the University of London and Associate Professor of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. He holds degrees in Literature and Art History, and a doctorate in Philosophy from the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium. He has written extensively on contemporary art, including the books *Richard Prince: Untitled (couple)* (Afterall and MIT, 2006) and *Jeff Wall* (Poligrafa, 2007), as well as essays on Alfred Jensen, Hanne Darboven and Joëlle Tuerlinckx. He has curated several exhibitions, including "Tacita Dean" at the Art Gallery of York University, Toronto (2000), on whom his essays have been published by Tate Britain (2001) and Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris (2003). He co-edited *Re-Writing Conceptual Art* (Reaktion Books, 1999). In philosophy he has published essays on Kant, Nietzsche, Derrida, Levinas, and Blanchot.

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56 Ossington Avenue, Toronto ON M6J 2Y7
T 416.645.1066 F 416.645.1681 E info@gallerytpw.ca
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