

# Peter Bobby

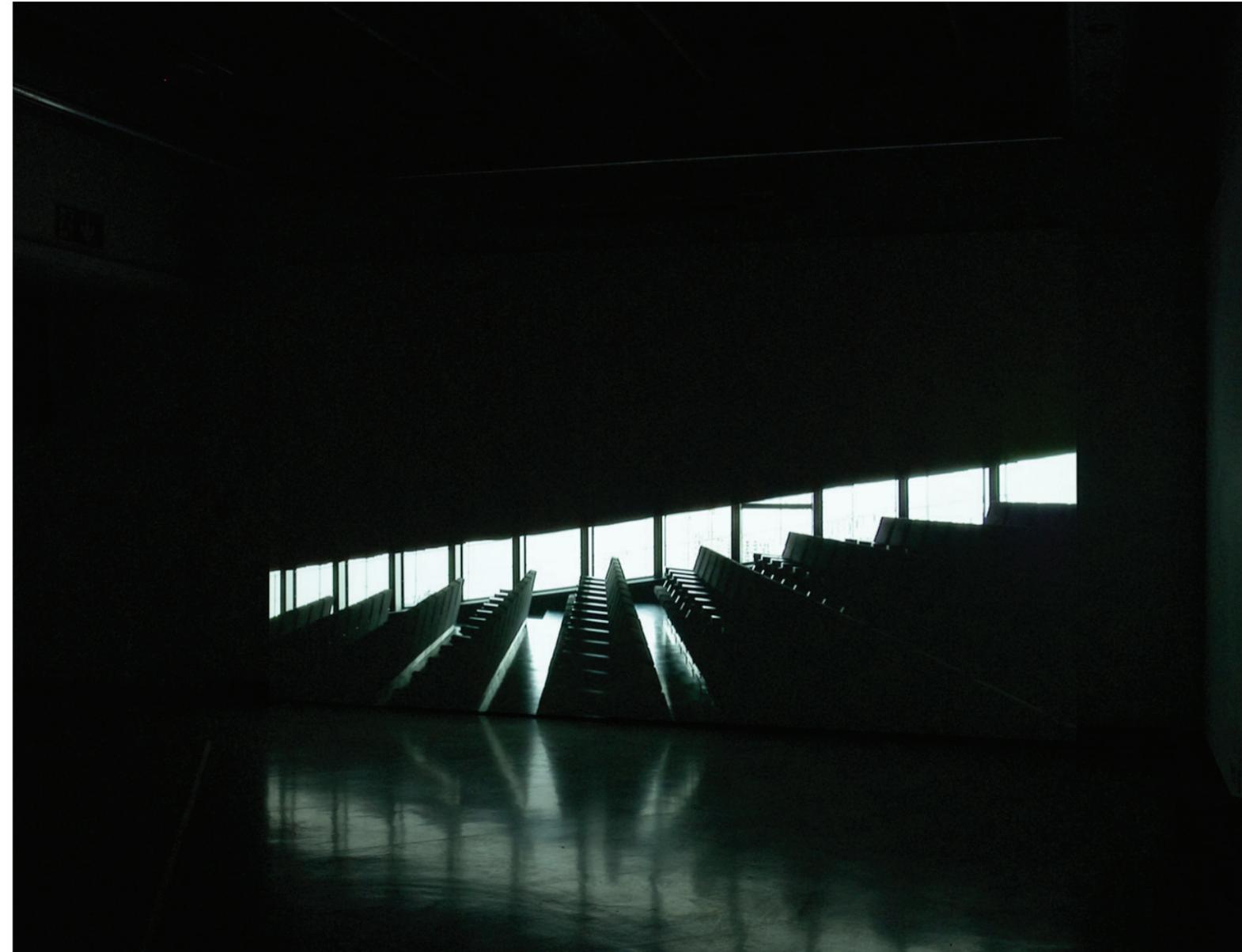
## Picturing Photography and Passing Birds: Joanna Lowry

The ancient story told by Pliny of Zeuxis is a well-known one – how he challenged his fellow artist Parrhasios to a competition to see which of them was the better painter. Zeuxis painted a picture of a flowery bower with grapes hanging from a vine and a group of birds flew down to the painting to try to eat the grapes. 'See', said Zeuxis, 'how clever a painter I am that I may deceive the birds – now draw the *curtain* so we can see your painting'. 'But this curtain is a painting', responded Parrhasios – 'See how I have deceived you'.

The story is, of course, a parable about the relationship between representation, truth and deception. It suggests to us the insecurity of the boundary between a world that is pictured and the real world that we inhabit. In the classical world such concepts were bounded by the notion of the frame, and the idea of a painting as a window onto the world, a window in front of which we might stand and look but that represented a world that was nevertheless separate from us. It is curious that, by drawing our attention to the painting's capacity to dissolve the boundary

between the world of the image and the real one, the story of Zeuxis and Parrhasios paradoxically reinforces the extent to which the security of our visual field depends upon that boundary being secure: we seem to want the painting to be real, but we need to know that it is a representation at the same time.

Zeuxis and Parrhasios were standing in front of a painting that, were it to be seen today, would be called by Lev Manovich a 'classical screen', a bounded virtual world, contained by a frame, both within our own real embodied world but separated off from it, enticing us to enter that world and become psychologically seduced by it, but always ultimately located safely in the world of the sign. Manovich groups paintings and photographs together in this way as 'classical screens' closely related to those other kinds of image, cinema and television, which he calls 'dynamic screens' – spaces which are also secure representational worlds nested within our own, but in this case moving rather than static.

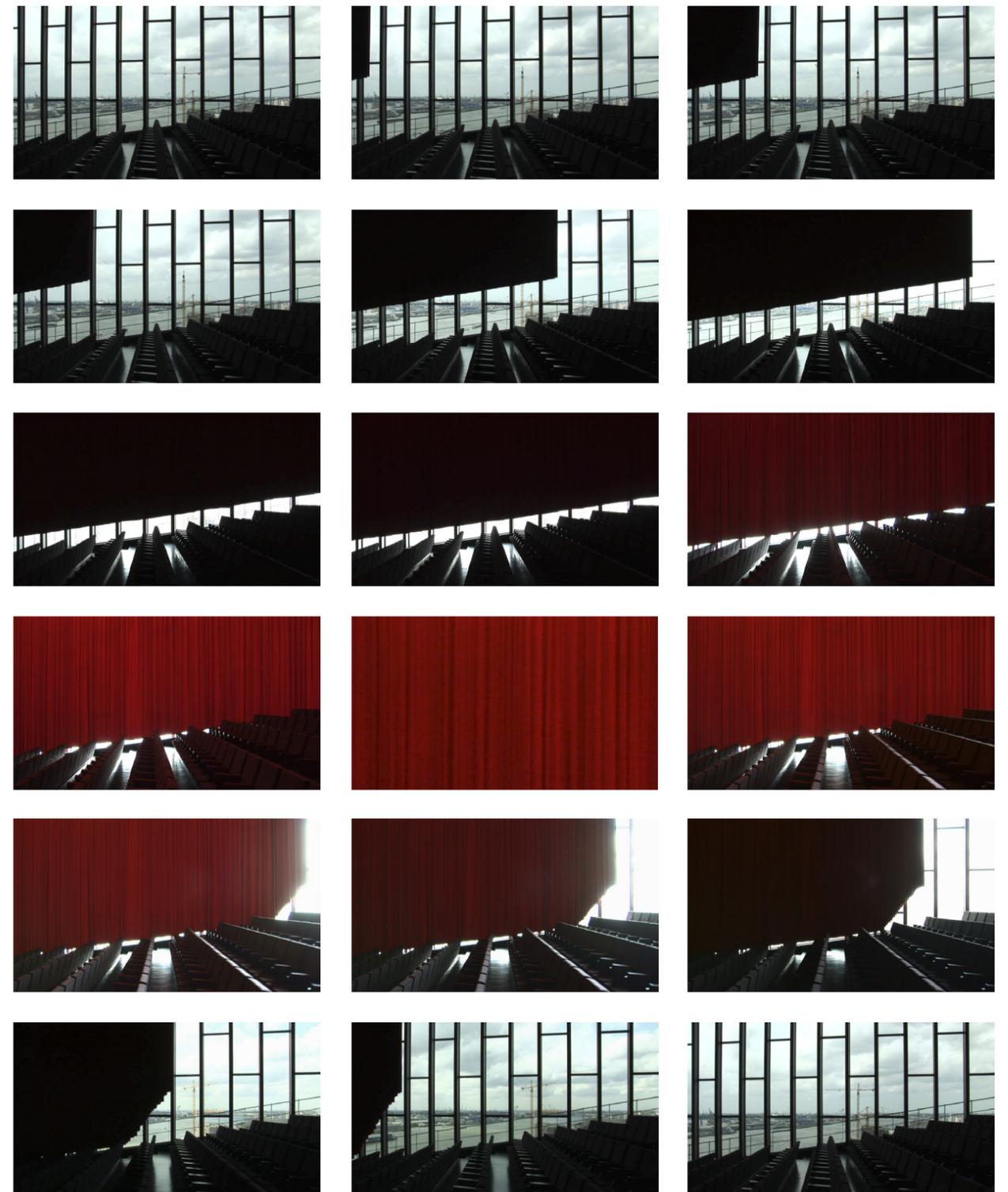


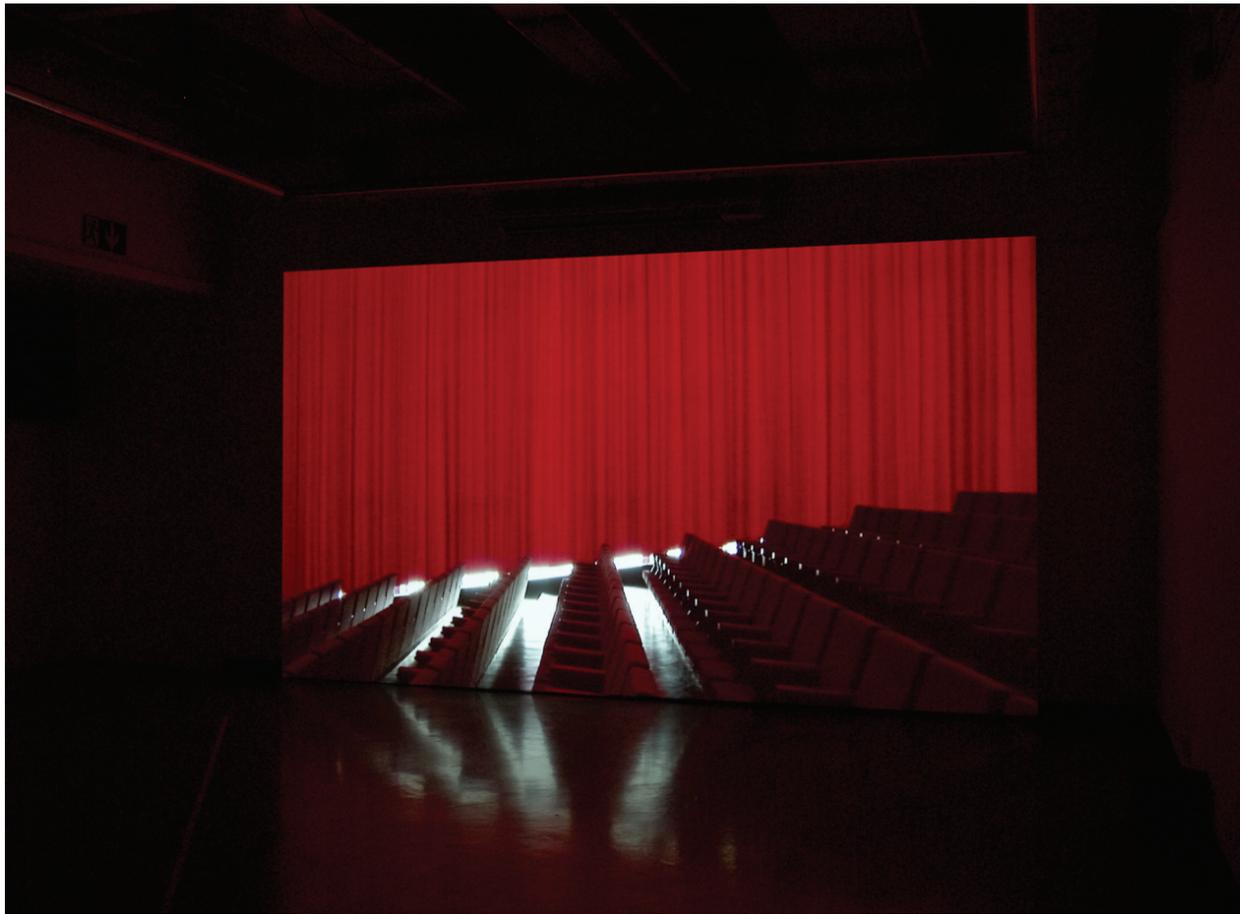
It can be argued though that the photographic and filmic technologies that preceded the emergence of video also challenged the security of the classical screen. As images that are produced mechanically through the work of light on film they are less secure in their status as signs for they are always, in some sense, transparent to the world. This of course is the source of the fascination of all 'photographic' technologies: that sense of a random wildness to the image that lies beyond the gift of the artist, the possibility of something always given by the world itself. So just as our classical painters were preoccupied by the play of illusion and the possibilities that that offered for elaborating the notion of the frame and for 'painting the curtain', so contemporary photographic artists are often preoccupied by rather different concerns - such as the relationship between the indexical and the symbolic, and what it is to make a photograph that is also a 'picture' rather than just a mechanical transcription of the real. Developments in digital video have added to the complexity of our engagement with these types of picture making, the digital encoding of reality seeming at times to have the capacity to exceed vision whilst simultaneously reminding us of the essential instability of the image.

The debate around the status of the photographic picture as a window on the world has also been complicated by the historical association of the camera with the eye. The apparatus itself lends itself to being a model both for the way in which we see the world and for the way in which we psychologically project our desire onto it. In the eighteenth century the camera obscura was popular as a model for the philosophical representation of the mind. Later in the nineteenth century the retina of the eye, as a screen on which the world might imprint itself like light on a film, provided psychologists with a model for the operations of memory. Psychoanalytical models of photography, film and video have further complicated our relationship to the image. For Zeuxis the problem of how one understood the relationship between the real world

and the represented one was an issue primarily of technique, for example of how one might paint one's window on the world convincingly. But for the modern spectator, who inherits a psychoanalytically inflected understanding of the image, the key issue is the way in which technologies such as photography, film and video might also represent the operations of an apparatus that is being operated by a desiring, embodied subject and that is itself a technology of desire. Peter Bobby's *Curtain* is a meditation upon precisely these questions about how we can understand the boundaries of the photographic picture. The piece is shot in HD video but engages at an allegorical level with a series of debates about representation and spectatorship that have their origins in painting, photography and film. He uses a simple video of a curtain being drawn across the window of an auditorium to bring together a set of ideas about the relationship between eye, mind and camera that offer a reflection upon the nature of what we might call, in an inclusive sense, the 'photographic.'

He presents us with a scene of the Rotterdam docklands, seen through the window of a spectacular modernist auditorium. The piece is made to be viewed in a darkened gallery space as a large-scale projection - optimally 5m wide. At this size it mimics both the viewing conventions of the type of spectacular picture window that it actually represents and those of cinema. The pictorial conventions of painting are further invoked through the gridded structure of the vast window which recalls the perspective grids that Renaissance draughtsmen used to aid them in transcribing a three dimensional world into two. This is a clear reference to the Albertian window, to the world as seen through a classical screen. We are aware that this device suggests to us that we should see the scene as though it were a painting, but we are also aware of the pane of glass not as a window onto the world but as a window pressed up against it, 'screening' us from it. Bobby seems to be using this complex web of references to pose the question of what a picture rendered in video might be.





Initially we might assume that the scene depicted here is a still image and it is only after a few seconds that we note the slow progress of a barge down the river, or the almost imperceptible rotation of a crane like a huge clock hand revolving on its axis. A tarpaulin attached to one of the cranes flaps in the wind. There is a gathering sense of expectation, of waiting for something to happen, though we have no idea where or when the story might begin. Every now and then a bird soars past the window – embarked upon some narrative journey of its own. This tension between the rigid containment of the scene and its internal fissuring by the randomness of events offers us one point of reflection upon the nature of the photographic image. The world gives itself to us through photography but we can only see it through making it into a picture. In some ways *Curtain* can be seen as the inverse of the Zeuxis story for the picture we are presented with

here is not covered by a curtain at the beginning of the video - during the course of the piece the curtain is drawn across the window to conceal the picture, and is then slowly drawn back again. It is as though we are being offered a scene of the 'unmaking' of the image and drawn back to its origins within the camera. The mechanical closing of the curtain and the subtle 'click' that accompanies its movement simultaneously evokes both the shutter mechanism of a camera and the closing of an eye. As it closes the muted colours of the world outside give way to a deep blood red wall of luminous fabric, an entirely static image closed off from the animate world outside. Then the auditorium becomes entirely dark. In this brief sequence of events we experience the transition between one dream world to another – the world of the docklands beyond shifting magically to a world of embodiment, of the inside of the eye. Bobby's camera



is set on an automatic setting and we see the struggle of the apparatus to register the shift in the level of the light in the room, the transition between these two types of world being one that is performed by the apparatus not simply represented by it. The few seconds of complete darkness are seemingly outside time, they could represent seconds, minutes or hours. More significantly they could represent the limits of the image-making apparatus – the gap between the frames in a film – video using a reference to a related medium to reflect upon its own condition. After a few seconds the curtain slowly rises again and light is again restored to reveal the crane a little further along its orbit, another boat passing by, a bird passing the window on its own curve of time. Perhaps these occasional birds offer us another clue to the way the world of representation has changed since classical times. The birds in the ancient story

were assumed to be part of an undifferentiated world on this side of the screen, one in which humans and birds might share the same concerns and where, if the artist was skilled enough, the birds themselves might even recognize his representations and try to eat the painted fruit. The birds that occasionally fly past the window in Bobby's film are transient strangers: we can't be sure when we see them fly past just who is in the picture and which side of the screen we are on. And the medium of video here cannot contain their appearance or disappearance, it can only expose the disinterested randomness of their flight.

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