



WHO GETS TO LOOK

ERIK BENJAMINS
SABLE ELYSE SMITH

CURATED BY VIRGINIA ARCE

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UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, IRVINE**



Erik Benjamins
A group of elderly ramblers passed by our front door on the way to their hearth, 2016
digital capture
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*"Souvenirs are collected by individuals, while sights are collected by entire societies."*¹

- Dean MacCannell

*"The concept of the gaze highlights that looking is a learned ability and that the pure and innocent eye is a myth."*²

- John Urry and Jonas Larsen

The exhibition *Who Gets To Look* brings together video, sound, and text-based artworks by Erik Benjamins and Sable Elyse Smith into a site entirely contingent on spectatorship: the art gallery. Produced in different geographical locations (China and The United States) and attending to seemingly differing social concerns, the artworks in this exhibition actively unsettle their shared point of reception in the conscious and unconscious imagination of the spectator. Simultaneously engaging two sites of extreme social mediation, tourism abroad and the expanse of the American prison system, the artworks in this exhibition call into question the authenticity of our perceptions and the mechanisms that shape our spectatorship. Using the unlikely lens of cultural tourism and its effect on the social imaginary³ as a bridge between these ostensibly different artworks, reveals their shared critical intervention in the field of looking as well as the spectator's conscious and unconscious participation in the production of the social imaginary.

The exhibition's guiding principle – that cultural tourism can be used as a lens to interrogate how we experience and imagine these seemingly disparate subjects – is largely informed by the work of Dean MacCannell, whose writings provide a framework for considering tourists as more than mere sightseers “deployed throughout the entire world in search of experience.”⁴ MacCannell's notion expands the definition of tourist and tourism, providing an alternative analysis of the experiences and perceptions of modern man, one that implicates us as sightseers and spectators whether we are abroad or at home.

Hailing from a site of quintessential exoticness from a Western standpoint, is Erik Benjamins' *A group of elderly ramblers passed by our front door on the way to their hearth*⁵ (2016), a document of the artist's stay in Sichuan, China. The work employs texts and sound recordings produced concurrently in such a way that the texts function as navigational markers for the recordings that are in turn, meant to evoke one's imagination of the city. With the exception of the texts, the work includes no illustrative, pictorial, or image-based representations. Alternately, Sable Elyse Smith's video works, *How We Tell Stories To Children* (2015), *untitled: Self-Portrait* (2013), and *Men Who Swallow Themselves In Mirrors* (2016), draw upon familial relationships that exist within the radius of the American prison industrial complex⁶ in order to break apart



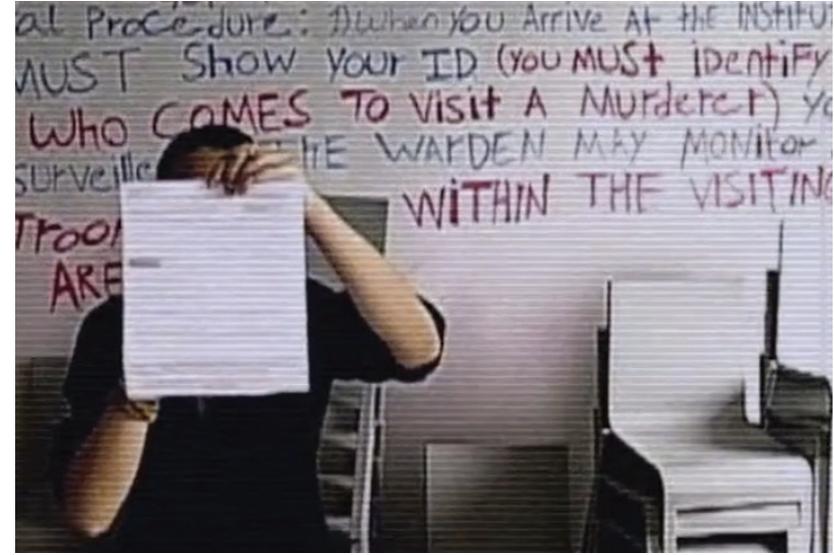
Erik Benjamins
A group of elderly ramblers passed by our front door on the way to their hearth, 2016
digital image
Courtesy of the artist
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morality-driven narratives that justify its necessity, expansion, and obscures its racial inequality and violence. How then do we bridge an experience abroad with an unnamed prison cell? Today, there are a multitude of reality television shows, movies, websites, social networks, etc., in which the world of travel itineraries and prison cells are mediated for curious viewers to watch from a comfortable distance. We can experience the world vicariously through celebrities and other notable public figures who transform “exotic” experiences into the everyday. We may not have firsthand knowledge of a given culture, but we can access infinite mediated representations of it. Alternately, if we're fortunate, we will never have a firsthand experience of incarceration, but we all have a perspective on what a prison



Sable Elyse Smith
How We Tell Stories To Children still, 2015
 single channel video
 Courtesy of the artist
 Copyright Sable Elyse Smith

looks like and what kind of people fill it. If our only proximity to a prison cell is through marathons of reality television and inmate penpals, just as if our only proximity to a given culture is through similar filters of mediation, then are we not all some form of cultural tourist? In critical response to this phenomenon, Benjamins' and Smith's works provocatively conjure elements of the "known" only to reveal the problematics of looking from such a removed distance, calling into question the viewers' privilege of being able to temporarily occupy a space in the realm of the Other. As such, these artworks also remind us that a position of exteriority, along with the luxury to move from place to place, implicitly bears the counter position of interiority and the inability to move within that same leisure and freedom.



Sable Elyse Smith
 untitled: *Self Portrait* still, 2013
 single channel video
 Courtesy of the artist
 Copyright Sable Elyse Smith

To produce a touristic document without pictorial representation, which in turn makes conventional spectatorship impossible, was largely the impetus for the creation of *A group of elderly ramblers* passed by our front door on the way to their hearth. As previously stated, the artwork takes form as a series of texts and recorded sounds captured across various public spaces throughout the province of Sichuan, China and its capital city Chengdu, most notably People's Park.⁷ The work doubly functions as an alternative model to reflect upon an experience abroad as much as it represents an active refusal to take recourse in the artifice of familiarity. Benjamins' critical intervention positions him as a tourist cognizant of the privilege to temporarily inhabit space in a different cultural landscape

and as one who seeks to experience the complexity and unique cadence of that landscape without conceding to the impulse to mediate that experience by flattening it into a two-dimensional image. As such, *A group of elderly ramblers...* is presented as an immersive installation to be experienced without the sensorial tool of sight. The sounds that make up the recordings include fragments of informal conversations between passing strangers, pre-produced and improvised music, and the myriad sounds of the city. Although the text component of the work requires an element of visuality in the register of *reading*, like the recordings they too are ultimately activated in the imagination of the listener/reader. That said, in recourse to our imagination we are quickly confronted with a problematic question: is our concept of this “foreign” place anything other than the product of artifice and mediation? This problematic notion of mediation prompts us to reconsider our conceptions of people, communities, places and events from which we are removed, as well as our ideas regarding authenticity and inauthenticity. This line of inquiry leads us to consider the problematic desire to experience “authenticity” both abroad and domestically, and the impulse to retain experiences by creating totalities of the world through images and social narratives. The text component of the work employs a combination of poetry, pragmatic writing and puns in order to reveal and undercut the impulse to render a multidimensional world into a two-dimensional plane. As such, Benjamins’ phrase, “*The good feeling that one may have*



Sable Elyse Smith
Men Who Swallow Themselves In Mirrors still, 2016
single channel video
Courtesy of the artist
Copyright Sable Elyse Smith

*when walking into a cafe is not necessarily one that needs to be developed,*⁸ takes on a multifaceted dimension.

Another excerpt from the texts asks, “*Does spectatorship have a duration?*” This question is redoubled by the form of the work itself. The recordings are not presented in chronological order but interspersed throughout an extended period of time. Vacillating between an auditory volume that fills every corner of the space, and barely audible to all but the most attentive ear, one never quite knows when the voices are done speaking nor to *whom* they are speaking. When they are audible enough to fill the entire space of the gallery, the myriad of unidentifiable yet familiar sounds are occasionally interrupted by a stranger’s

voice *puncturing* the distance between the spectator and the Other, thus breaking the fourth wall.⁹ Subsequently, the subject of the look is suddenly aware of this act and may, in turn wish to talk, interact or become a part of the production. While there is still a notable degree of mediation in this case, the work inverts the hegemonic dynamic of spectatorship, one in which the gazer looks out at the Other from a safe remove to a more dynamic situation where the Other's "blind reception" takes on an equalizing tone.

Pivot to the work of Sable Elyse Smith, in which the space between the observer and the observed is continuously punctured by a father's voice in *How We Tell Stories To Children*. The first few seconds of the single channel video opens with a distorted sound evocative of a sense of dread. The video slowly pans left revealing the partial image of a black figure running down a street obscured by darkness. The figure's awkward cadence appears trapped and bound to the unnatural rhythm of the soundtrack. The audio is momentarily silenced and the screen turns black. The silence is suddenly disrupted by unintelligible whispers and an image of light pouring through a window obstructed by bars, at which point a story begins to unfold. A male voice speaks: "OK, hey Daughter... what can I say? I remember when you was a little girl..." The image again cuts to black. Between these short and abrupt cuts, a deeply personal relationship is suggested. He recounts memories

of his daughter's childhood in fragments while alternately, a woman's voice recounts fragments of everyday life before the foreclosure of the male speakers' freedom.

In *untitled: Self Portrait*, Smith positions herself as a stand-in for a visitor in a prison waiting room. She reenacts the choreography of security screenings and anxious pacing, the corporal effects on the human body under the duress of bureaucracy. Within the video's frame, a handwritten text on the wall behind Smith reads, "Who goes to visit a murderer?" This question holds a double valence. First, it brings to light the familial and intimate relationships that incarcerated persons partake, ones that endure in the face of a deeply depersonalizing system of punishment with origins in the institution of slavery. Second, it beckons the spectator to consider the following questions: Who goes to prison and who is pardoned? This proposition points to the inconsistency of the application of law that supplies prisons with bodies and leaves in its wake rupture and loss. Certainly not all crimes are punished, moreover, it is precisely the same space of social imagination that allows us to conjure up exotic places and people while simultaneously constructing fantasies of crime and punishment.

Smith's *Landscape 1*, is an eight foot wide neon sign that reads "And there are plenty bois/out there screaming" in bright white light with a striking green underscore. The

orientation of the text calls to mind the image of a horizon, a symbol of possibility and futurity as much as it is an actual calculable space. It's an apt metaphor for prison and the social inequalities that lead many to inhabit it. The "out there" exists only in relationship to the "in there" of the prison, echoing the interior/exterior relationship in Benjamins' work, whereby the outsider attempts to insert themselves into the unfamiliar. The term "bois" elicits youth culture but also suggests that the term "masculine" – particularly *black* masculinity – fulfills the role of a villain in "our" cultural imaginary and alternately implies a fluidity of gender, a possibility that not all *bois* ascribe to the same totalizing masculinity, but are nonetheless lumped into a homogeneous villainy. The fragment further paints a landscape of suffering, countering the escapist images that correctional institutions typically display in their visiting room murals created through the exploited labor of those who are confined to prison. The visiting room itself can thus be considered a site of cultural tourism of the cruelest kind, a proposition that resonates with MacCannell's analysis of designated tourist attractions, wherein he proposes that "These 'attractions' offer an elaborately contrived indirect experience... They are ways for the traveler to remain out of contact with foreign peoples in the very act of "sight-seeing" them."¹⁰ The provocative parallel between experiencing the world through the mediation of a tour guide's regimented itinerary and the heavily mediated contact between prisoner and visitor is rightfully unsettling

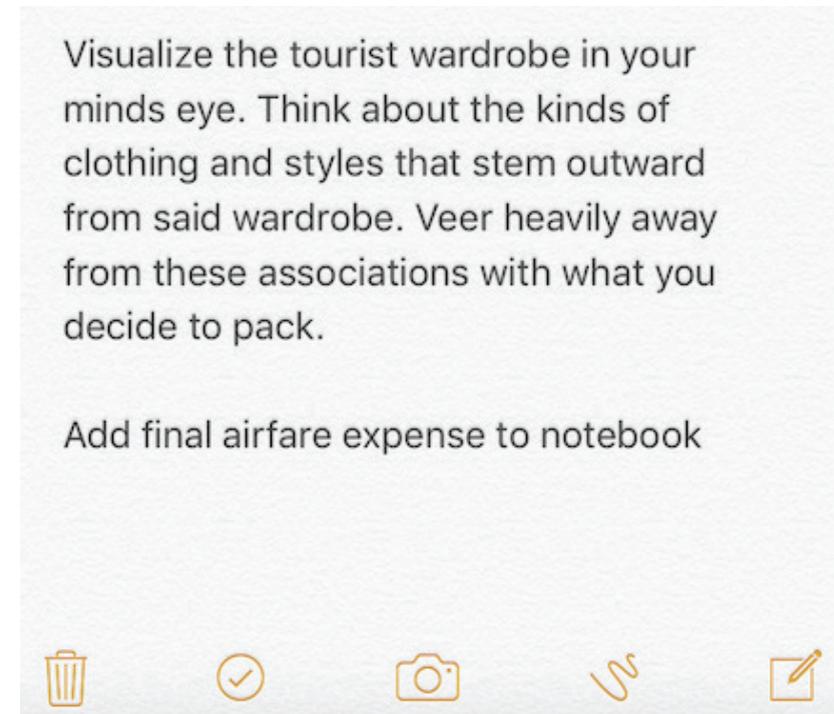
because it reveals the paradox of constructing an experience of authenticity from inauthentic conditions of being.

In the gallery, *Men Who Swallow Themselves In Mirrors* is projected larger than life, seemingly engulfing its surrounding space and forcing the viewer to stand in an uncomfortable distance to a subject who, existing outside of the gallery, is segregated to the realm of social visibility: an incarcerated black man. The video does not play in an uninterrupted loop allowing a rupture in what might otherwise be an engulfing theatre of suffering. Instead, the video is followed by a pause that allows the sounds of *A group of elderly rambles...* to fill the room. The disruption in the loop is a critical break in the cycle of neutral spectatorship, creating a harsh juxtaposition between the realms of the imaginary and the real, or at least what we *assume* to be imaginary and real.

Another fragment of the text from *A group of elderly rambles...* reads: "Your speed will fall into place with the speed of the place you are visiting." The irony of what this phrase means for the traveler, the cultural tourist and the prisoner is profound. It is also a fitting metaphor for conscious and unconscious forces that shape the world from the standpoint of the spectator. Sociologist Michelle Brown asserts that a pivotal change in the structure of the American prison system lies in the perception of "distanced spectators" and their willingness to reconsider

what is social and who counts as part of that sociality.¹¹ She writes that, “We hear about and produce criminological and sociological studies which attempt to intervene and speak back to mass incarcerations, but rarely speak self reflexively of our own places in that dialog and in proximity to pain.”¹² For her part, Smith’s critique of the carceral system employs images that are paradoxically specific and general, underscoring that the scope of the prison system extends to countless fathers and daughters alike.

In pairing these two disparate bodies of works, the exhibition not only points to the complications of looking and the subsequent unequal power relations therein, it uses this juxtaposition as a starting point to disrupt notions of neutral spectatorship by implicating the viewer’s role in constructing the “exotic” and “divergent” Other. Furthermore, in the parallel between sites of quintessential escapism and points in a constellation of systemic violence, the relationship between how we imagine the world and how we shape it becomes increasingly intertwined. As such, Benjamins’ strategy of privileging the unique cadence of a place and a rejection of the impulse to make the unfamiliar familiar presents us with an alternative model of experiencing Otherness. Smith’s works, which employ narrative ruptures and interspersed fragments of poetic reflections on the relationships that transgress the boundaries of prison walls, restore an often denied humanity



Erik Benjamins
A group of elderly ramblers passed by our front door on the way to their hearth, 2016
digital capture
Courtesy of the artist
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to the incarcerated. Through their respective aesthetic and conceptual gestures, the works reveal the political dimension of the social imaginary, the impossibility of neutral spectatorship, and suggests the potential for alternately more equitable and self reflexive ways of perceiving the world.

Notes

1 Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: University of California Press, 1999), 42.

2 John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0* (London: Sage Publications, 2011), 11.

3 The concept of the social imaginary employed here is informed by philosopher, theorist, and psycho-analyst Cornelius Castoriadis. See Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society* (Cam-bridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 84.

4 MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 1.

5 The title of the artwork references an encounter the artist experienced while walking across People's Park in Chengdu, during which a man stopped him mid-walk to ink in water on the ground: "a group of elderly ramblers passed by our front door on the way to their hearth". Erik Benjamins (artist), in conversation with the author, December 2016.

6 The phrase "prison industrial complex" is used in relation to "military industrial complex," a term denoting the collusion between the United States Military, National Defense agencies and a myriad of corporate interests that profit from the expansion of U.S. militarization. President Dwight D. Eisenhower first warned about the military in-dustrial complex during his farewell address on January 17, 1961. The term "prison industrial complex" points to a similar metastasizing relationship between public and private sectors that has resulted in a penal population of over 2.4 million people, mostly black and Latino men. See Michelle Brown, *The Culture of Punishment* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 13.

7 In recent years, People's Park in Chengdu, China, has taken on a notorious reputation as a site of contested public use that has sometimes led to violent clashes. See Chris Buckley and Adam Wu, "In China: the 'Noisiest Park in the World' Tries to Tone Down Rowdy Retirees," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2016, accessed December 20, 2016. http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/04/world/asia/china-chengdu-park-noise.html?_r=0.

8 Erik Benjamins. *A group of elderly ramblers passed by our front door on the way to their hearth*. 2016.

9 The phrase "breaking the fourth wall" is a direct reference to Brechtian theatre wherein the imaginary divide between performers and audience is ruptured. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Performance: Messingkauf and Model-books*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 1988), 78

10 MacCannell, *The Tourist*, 103.

11 Michelle Brown, *The Culture of Punishment* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 210.

12 Ibid, 199.

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