

Notes on Finding Chopin: Dans l'Essex
Tris Vonna-Michell

The film installation *Finding Chopin: Dans l'Essex*, (2015) is the latest reconfiguration of my research on French concrete and sound poet Henri Chopin (1922–2008). The film is a form of documentation, bringing together several iterations of my ongoing performances and installations titled *Finding Chopin* which have continued since 2005. Between the 1950s and 1970s Chopin created a large body of pioneering recordings using early tape recorders, studio technologies and sounds of the manipulated human voice. Chopin lived in my hometown Leigh-on-Sea in Essex, England, between 1968 and 1986.

Shot on 16mm film, *Finding Chopin: Dans l'Essex* begins and ends with scenes of the estuary and Essex marshland filmed on a single day from dawn to dusk. The landscape footage bookends an amalgamation of footage and scenes of a tableau of staged objects, ephemera and slide projections which constitute the latest iteration of *Finding Chopin*.



1.

In a way, the emergence of the film came from a necessity, a need to capture and timeline the disbanding threads of *Finding Chopin*. Also longevity; the dwindling means and drive to keep re-inventing and re-assembling the components of this work. The idea behind making such a film evolved from a residency in Montreal and having the opportunity to be in the city while an exhibition of mine was up. What was initially just a convenient overlap, although at first I resented having to balance a residency and show in such close proximity, soon became the catalyst for the film. Since the show was up for only six weeks the planning, production and filming phases were all in quick succession. It was very much a dual act of bringing together a coherent exhibition, and also with the intention of it functioning as a film set.

By visiting the show regularly during my residency, I witnessed how quickly and unpredictably certain slides would fade, discolour, image alignments wander, projections lose focus and how the objects and prints on the table would wilt, disappear, re-appear and collect dust. Suddenly the work *Finding Chopin* seemed to me an increasingly fragile endeavour. But it was not only the obsolescence that the work embodied or the impermanence of my performative self, which induced the need to start filming. I conceded that all the parts that kept this work together were just about tangible and intact, held together by slender measures and by my performative presence during the install phases.

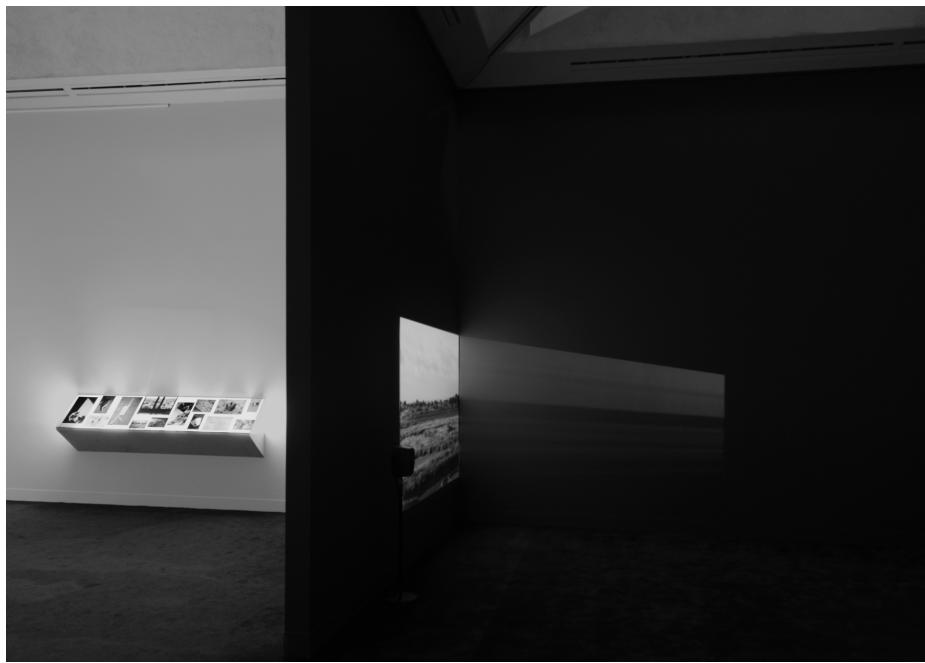


2.

Hence the idea of filming the devolution of *Finding Chopin*, from the point of accumulation rather than disintegration, gained motion and took precedence. All filming took place during closed exhibition hours, which reduced the moments of filming to short and intense segments. Montreal, once heralded as Hollywood North, was the ideal place for me to make my first filmwork, especially considering it was all shot on 16mm film.

Similar to my performances there was no written script, but this particular *Finding Chopin* installation consisted of, amongst other elements, a slide projector with a full carousel and a table installation. The 80 slides provided the script in terms of chronology; in how to sequence the film segments. Every slide in the carousel was projected and captured on film, thereby ensuring that the projections became my visual timecode, despite most of them being in the background or barely visible. When performing this work those same slides are often present, yet peripheral. The other key framework or limitation which determines my performances is the presence of an egg timer. This object has continuously sculpted my performances. I felt the film needed a similar device: one roll of 400 feet negative film gave me just under ten minutes of footage. This was the perfect imposition and my unwritten script.

Continuing the logic of treating footage chronologically, I decided to take the last *Finding Chopin* live performance recording, made in conjunction with the exhibition in Montreal, and use as the soundtrack for the film. An unexpected inconvenience surfaced when choosing which camera to rent and realising that image and sound would be recorded independent of each other. This de-synchronisation of image and sound altered my comprehension of the filming process since there was a constant deferral. Throughout the filming there was always this act of re-doing the same motion, the same take, but with sound only. This slowed everything down, every action, regardless of how successful it may have seemed, was played out twice. I kept lapsing; falling in and out of the process of filming. It also became integral in the editing phases. After splicing together the film-segments and film set audio recordings it was just a matter of dropping the live performance recording onto the timeline. Since the voice was rapid and circular while the film segments panned slowly anti-clockwise until the last projected slide, there was deliberately no consistent anchoring of image to voice.



3.

In relation to my performances the filmwork has a different constellation of form and imagery, a different way to tell the same story, yet both are heavily determined and aligned by the presence of time. To an extent the film resonates facets of the live performance experience. After completing the initial editing I watched it through many times and always felt that the beginning was too abrupt and the sudden egg timer ring too piercing to be a suitable ending. The voice stood as the dominant trajectory throughout, hence a kind of parenthesis was needed, similar to how I would perform, to lead the audience in. The estuary and marshland footage became a calm counterweight and a means to enter and leave the performative space that it encapsulated.





4.

With every iteration of *Finding Chopin* – idiosyncratic searching and researching, memory and not having a written script – there's always this sense of loss, misalignment or forgetting. Originally I had hundreds of objects, documents and photographs belonging to this work, but after the Montreal exhibition and completing the film, there was only a handful left. The materials had undergone a reductive process, whereas the making of the film was more like an accumulation of many materials and forms of documentation.

5.





6.

There is a fragility to this way of performing, and also with how the material components emerge and remain together for each new iteration. Regardless whether a programmed slide sequence, installation or a performance accompanied by props and images, *Finding Chopin* still feels unsettled and uncontrollable. In a way I prefer that the film be closer to the experience of a live performance; in the perceived sense of ephemerality and volatility. It is about being within and then falling beyond the premises of an artwork.

IMAGE LIST

1

Filming location in Leigh-on-Sea, 2013
Photograph by Roger Plumstead & John Salim

2

Finding Chopin, 2014
Installation consisting of accordion wall, 35mm slide projection,
soundtrack on headphones, table construct containing objects and
printed matter and video on monitor
Installation view from *Tris Vonna-Michell* exhibition, VOX – Centre de
l'image contemporaine, Montreal
February 7 – April 12, 2014
Photograph by Guy L'Heureux
© Courtesy the artist, Jan Mot, Brussels, Metro Pictures, New York,
Overduin & Co, Los Angeles and T293, Rome and Naples

3

Finding Chopin: Dans l'Essex, 2014
Film installation (16mm film transferred to HD video)
Installation view from *Turner Prize 2014* exhibition, Tate Britain, London
September 30, 2014 – January 4, 2015
Photograph by Andy Keate
© Courtesy the artist, Jan Mot, Brussels, Metro Pictures, New York,
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4

Finding Chopin: Dans l'Essex, 2014
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5

Addendum I (Finding Chopin: Dans l'Essex), 2014
Lightbox consisting of backlit photographic prints
Installation view from *Turner Prize 2014* exhibition, Tate Britain, London
September 30, 2014 – January 4, 2015
Photograph by Andy Keate
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6

Filming location at VOX – Centre de l'image contemporaine,
Montreal, 2014
Photograph by Mathieu Grenier