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FILM

ON LOCATION

Erika Balsom on Ben Rivers's *The Two Eyes Are Not Brothers*

EVEN BRITAIN'S NATIONAL broadcasting service is not exempt from the pressures of London's bullish property market. In 2012, the BBC announced the sale of its Television Centre, the huge facility in White City it had occupied since 1960, to developer Stanhope PLC for £200 million (roughly \$300 million). Much of the now-vacant complex is, unsurprisingly, slated for demolition, to make way for housing, offices, a hotel, and a private club. Among the storied structures soon to be razed is the Drama Block, a cavernous space where scenery and props were once built. It was this doomed warehouse that Ben Rivers chose as the site of his recent Artangel commission, *The Two Eyes Are Not Brothers*.

On view this past summer, Rivers's five-screen installation is closely related to his feature film *The Sky Trembles and the Earth Is Afraid and the Two Eyes Are Not Brothers* (2015), but differs markedly from it. Both works take their titles from the 1960 Paul Bowles short story "He of the Assembly," in which a man named Ben finds an envelope on the ground with his name on it, containing a paper bearing the cryptic phrase. In the kif-infused tale, its meaning is never explained, but in relation to Rivers's work its resonances are multiple. The film and the installation function like the unfraternal eyes invoked in the letter: They are proximate but not equivalent, producing an unconventional vision when taken together. This embrace of two distinct but linked gazes marks the installation more broadly. One eye looks back to Bowles's life and work, particularly his 1947 story "A Distant Episode," an adaptation of which forms the basis for the feature film; the other turns to the sets of three movies being shot in Morocco, one of which is Rivers's own. The installation thus orchestrates a highly intertextual encounter between the cross-medial tensions of literary adaptation and the reflexive impulses of the small cinephilic genre of films about filmmaking. It offers Rivers a means to probe two issues of long-standing concern in his practice: the notion of cinema as process rather than product, and the ambivalent status of supposedly primitive elsewhere in the Euro-American artistic imaginary.

The mention of a multiscreen installation inside a massive disused building might make one expect a large-scale spectacle like Isaac Julien's *Ten Thousand Waves*, 2010. Such works are often accompanied by spurious claims of heightened complexity and democratized spectatorship as compared to the supposed tyranny of the traditional cinematic *dispositif*, regarded as a disciplinary enclosure enslaved to linearity. But Rivers is an artist who has long valued the perceptual conditions made possible by the cinema space, finding in it an

ideal location for the durational commitment his works demand. In this regard, he is perhaps a strange candidate for a major commission from Artangel, an organization known for staging ambitious site-specific projects in locations that sometimes risk overshadowing the artistic interventions within them. However, Rivers responded to the particular exigencies of the Television Centre by constructing several makeshift cinemas out of previously used plywood flats, inspired by abandoned film sets he saw in Morocco. From the outside, these structures foreground their hasty and haphazard assembly; from within, they channel attention. With no two projections visible at once, each possesses a measure of autonomy while simultaneously existing as a unit of articulation within a single work that mobilizes the surrounding architecture as a readymade. While the feature film possesses a more singular trajectory befitt-

ing its form, the installation manifests as an expansive network of affinities, but does so without homogenizing its component parts.

Rivers treats the Television Centre above all as a space of production, aligned not with the finished products of the culture industries but with the labor that feeds into them. The space where sets for television shows were once built becomes a space in which the various strands of Rivers's project—necessarily braided more tightly in the feature film—are left unraveled. This is not to suggest that the feature is understood as the primary, finished text and the installation a mere supplement; rather, Rivers insists on the complementarity of these two iterations, elevating and rendering visible procedures involved in the making of a film that generally remain hidden. A monumental black-and-white video projection displays 16-mm footage shot on the set

Rivers's work prompts a consideration of what the European artist takes from the people and places he visits in search of other worlds, as well as what he is looking to find in them.



Ben Rivers, *The Two Eyes Are Not Brothers*, 2015, mixed media, five-channel digital video projection (color and black-and-white, sound, infinite duration). Installation view, Television Centre, White City, London. Photo: William Eckerley.



From left: Ben Rivers, *The Two Eyes Are Not Brothers*, 2015, mixed media, five-channel digital video projection (color, sound, infinite duration). Installation view, Television Centre, White City, London. Photo: Marcus Leith. Ben Rivers, *The Sky Trembles and the Earth Is Afraid and the Two Eyes Are Not Brothers*, 2015, 35 mm, color, sound, 96 minutes.



of *Las Mimosas*, an as-yet-unreleased film by Oliver Laxe, a Spanish filmmaker living in Morocco (since 2007) and working in a similar vein as Rivers. A brief, silent loop of footage Rivers shot while working as a second-unit cameraman for Laxe shows an extra from *Las Mimosas* sitting in the passenger's seat of a car, occasionally returning the gaze of the camera positioned in the backseat. While these images could be understood as taking one behind the scenes of *Las Mimosas*, they are also raw material for Rivers's feature, which begins as a document of this shoot, before Laxe walks off the set and into fiction, becoming the protagonist of an adaptation of "A Distant Episode." Unedited rushes of a scene from this section of the feature appear in another room. Bowles's story follows a linguistics professor—in Rivers's version, a filmmaker—visiting the fictional city of Ain Tadouirt. Despite misgivings, he follows a stranger into the desert, where he is attacked and kidnapped. After his tongue is cut out in a highly metaphorical act of violence, he is clothed—his subjectivity shattered—in a suit made of tin-can lids and made to dance on command. The rushes show nothing of the protagonist's brutal trajectory but simply multiple iterations of this obscene jangly performance, bringing into play the notions of repetition and versioning that run throughout the project. Given the looped form of the installation, Laxe is condemned to dance forever, unable to access his story's end, when the sight of a DVD player's screen saver jolts him out of his tongueless stupor and he refuses the demand that he perform, fleeing to an uncertain fate in the desert. Whether he runs toward or away from this reminder of his former life remains unknown.

A fourth projection depicts the beach setting of artist Shezad Dawood's *Towards the Possible Film* (2014), a twenty-minute science fiction that bridges the archaic and the postapocalyptic. Rivers uses an appropriated sound track, realized by Catalan composer Carles Santos for Pere Portabella's *Vampir-Cuadecuc* (1971), a film shot on the set of Jesús Franco's *Count Dracula* (1970).

The stunning hand-processed, black-and-white 16-mm CinemaScope employed in Rivers's beach sequence departs sharply from the saturated ochers and aquas of Dawood's film but closely recalls Portabella's high-contrast cinematography. Unlike other films about filmmaking from the same period, such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Beware of a Holy Whore* (1970), *Vampir-Cuadecuc* eschews fiction and is unconcerned with narrating social relationships among the film crew. It cannot be said to break the fourth wall, for it does not establish such a thing in the first place. But nor is it an observational documentary in the vein of Les Blank's *Burden of Dreams* (1982), shot on the set of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). Portabella is uninterested in revealing anything about Franco's film, content to parasitically use it to underline the mutability of the profilmic event and the fragility of cinematic world-making. Rivers clearly positions himself as an inheritor of this stance, shoring up his alliance with Portabella elsewhere in the exhibition with an audio installation comprised of an excerpt from Santos's sound track echoing in a largely empty, paint-splattered room.

In the past decade, Rivers has gained international recognition for a body of experimental docufictions that seek out alternative forms of living, whether in the solitary existence of Jake Williams, who appears in *Two Years at Sea* (2011) and *This Is My Land* (2006), or in the imagined utopias of *Slow Action* (2010) and *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness* (codirected with Ben Russell; 2013). In this regard, his fascination with Bowles—who was based in Tangier from 1947 until his death in 1999—is unsurprising: Bowles, like Rivers, was interested in searching for an escape from the instrumental reason of modern society. Bowles functions not only as a point of identification but also as a figure through which to interrogate the position of the artist who develops a practice predicated on taking flight into a romanticized alterity. Like Bowles's best-known work, the novel *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), "A Distant Episode" charts the

dissolution of the Western subject in Morocco, conceiving of this undoing as a site of desire and horror. These are works that diagnose the Orientalist worldview but reproduce it as well. It is hard not to see in the filmmaker protagonist of Rivers's adaptation of "A Distant Episode" an allegory of the director. While by no means a form of autocritique, the installation foregrounds the complexity and ambivalence implicit in the feature. In a 16-mm loop that visitors must activate by pushing a button, an actor from Laxe's film wears a sweater belonging to Rivers as he sits with Mohammed Mrabet, the Moroccan author and artist who was for decades Bowles's close friend and collaborator. Mrabet recounts stories to Rivers's alter ego, just as he did to Bowles, who translated and transcribed them, facilitating their publication in the West. The projection raises questions of translation across media and across cultures, while also gesturing to the imbrication of friendship, labor, and power. Bowles and Mrabet collaborated out of friendship—much as Rivers makes films with people close to him—but it was a friendship marked by the specter of colonial relations and one that ended badly, with Mrabet leveling claims of theft and exploitation. The crucial introduction of Mrabet prompts a consideration of what the European artist takes from the people and places he visits in search of other worlds, as well as what he is looking to find in them. Rivers's feature is undoubtedly one of the year's best, but this footage does not appear within it. The exploded meta-cinema of the installation provides an opportunity to stage an adjacent space of research and thought, enabling a reflection on what it means to work together and on what motivations and responsibilities propel artists who venture into the desert. □

The Sky Trembles and the Earth Is Afraid and the Two Eyes Are Not Brothers makes its US debut at the 53rd New York Film Festival on October 4.

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