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• Some Things Less, Some Things More

frieze
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Morgan Falconer on Pierre Bismuth

Voice over

I first saw Pierre Bismuth's video *Link* (1998–ongoing) in a show last year but, wanting to refresh my memory of it, I borrowed a copy from his gallery. There may be much that's chilly and dishonest about the white wall of gallery spaces, but once you've tried to watch an artist's video in your living room, you can forgive galleries a lot.

Watching *Link*, however, was different. At its centre lies Joseph Mankowicz's film *Sleuth* (1972), starring Michael Caine as a philandering hairdresser and Laurence Olivier as a pompous elderly crime novelist. Caine's character is having an affair with the writer's wife; the writer is having an affair with a Finn from the local sauna; so the two meet to try and resolve the problem like gentlemen.

Originally a stage play, all the action of *Sleuth* takes place in a single location, the writer's rambling English country pile, shot, as the French put it, *à huis clos*, behind closed doors. But in *Link* the door is flung open: we watch the film on other people's televisions in hundreds of different locations – each time the camera in *Sleuth* cuts to another angle, *Link* itself moves location. So while watching it in one place, you are also watching it in hundreds of others. There are as many as 1300 edits in the source film, so the labour of producing the new multiple setting is immense. Each shot is framed with careful sensitivity, and often with wit: the locations flit from dimly lit bedrooms to bright loungees; then a kitchen, now a gallery, even a TV showroom; and bizarre objects intrude, a glistening curtain of beads obstructs our view in one shot, an ornate lamp distracts us in another. Not surprisingly, this is a labour that still isn't done: only 25 minutes of the film have been produced since the video was begun in 1998; each time an institution wish to exhibit it, Bismuth requires them to fund the production of another five minutes – a small matter, really, when you think of how many times he has to explain the project to a new stranger to gain just those few more seconds.

In many respects *Sleuth* is a fair account of how Bismuth makes art – indeed of how art generally gets made in a shrinking world. For Bismuth it doesn't arrives magically, *ex nihilo*, but is more of an import/export business in which he buys in cultural forms – old films, pieces of music, works of art – playfully processes them and moves them on for sale. It is the mistranslation that results from this cultural traffic that fascinates him: things that start with one meaning take on entirely new ones when they cross borders. Who can say why the Albanians love Norman Wisdom, or why in Japan David Beckham is a secular god?

And who can say how the *Jungle Book* reads in the jungle? Bismuth approached this question in 2002 when he reworked





• Left to right: *Link* (Los Angeles, 1998; Angola, 1999; Cameroon, 2002)



• Origami Mount Fuji (New York)



• Origami Camouflage (New York)



• Origami Central (Solitude)



+ Origami 'Tortue' (The Gazelles) 2003 Inkjet print

Disney's 1967 version of the Rudyard Kipling children's book from 1894 by blending versions in a multitude of tongues. As each character is assigned a voice in a different language, things in the jungle appear far from equitable. Mowgli's Spanish may not carry too many inferences, but the Hebrew spoken by Baloo, and the Arabic spoken by the wise panther, Bagheera, certainly do. And who should have the voice of the King of the Jungle? None but a Blimpish Englishman. Children may have difficulty in picking up on the colonial overtones in Kipling's novel, but the book is surely as shaped with these as it is older myths: Bismuth's version emphasizes this whilst also asking how the tale might be read for all those it reaches. And as with his re-playing of *Sleuth*, so with both Kipling's and Disney's *Jungle Book*: an artefact that was deposited in the world meaning one thing can evolve new and contradictory implications as it travels in time and space.

Such concerns have become more noticeable in Bismuth's art only over the last two years. However, they find a place in his ten-year career in terms of what the critic Michael Newman has seen as his more fundamental preoccupation with interplay between systems and accidents, or what he calls 'rule and contingency' – the fly in the ointment factor. Bismuth's 1995 project *Blue Monk in Progress* illustrates this neatly. Using a Yamaha Disclavier piano, an extraordinary instrument that can record a player's performance and recite it back, Bismuth learnt to play Thelonious Monk's *Blue Monk*. When he reached a reasonable proficiency – errors accepted – he had his performance transcribed into notation and performed once more by a trained pianist, who could integrate all his flaws into a new, technically 'flawless' performance.

If in this instance contingency was inserted into rule, in the 1999 film *Clear and Cloudy Moments in the Afternoon* rule was inserted into contingency, once again proving that it's difficult to tell one from the other. For this Bismuth hired several actors and filmed them walking in predetermined directions through the random traffic of a city square. On first watching the video, it's hard to tell who is genuinely shuttling from A to B and who has been asked to perform the task by the artist. That such activity should have its fakers is perhaps absurd, but Bismuth's point is that the spectacle of passing crowds, the distinctness and anonymity of the strangers, is itself a kind of fabricated spectacle, a quality of the historical production of public space in the city. Without it there would be no pleasure in sitting in cafés and watching people pass by: the pleasure is in guessing the lives, the destinations, of strangers. Bismuth's project may be just a proposition, but then I've often wondered similar things about the punks who loiter around London's Piccadilly. Are there really still people who dress in tartan and drink cider? Or do the tourist authorities pay them?

Bismuth's work is probably divided in two other ways, between that work which is preoccupied above all with context, and that which is interested in form or internal dynamics. And if the figure of Daniel Buren presides over the former, then Jasper Johns presides over the latter: in a 2001 catalogue on which Bismuth collaborated with the artist Jonathan Monk, the two played an association game to explore aspects of their art, and one text Bismuth put before Monk was a quote from Johns' 1965 *Sketchbook Notes*: 'One thing made of another & one thing used as another'. It's an ethos that has come to play a great part in Bismuth's work. For the series 'Unfolded Origami' (2003–4) the artist had a trained origamist fold and unfold a selection of images, using the name of the object that was created along the way to title the



• **Attack** 2001 Collage 59×41cm

Bismuth sees echo chambers built into the layout and the language of newspapers.



• **Blue Monk in Progress** 1999. Disklavier piano, musical score recorded April 1999 on disk, score bound with linen thread, plinth. Installation view.





• Top: **The Jungle Book Project (Japanese)** 2002. Drawing on tracing paper. 30×21 cm.
Above: **The Jungle Book Project (German)** 2002. Drawing on tracing paper. 30×21 cm.

piece: thus *Shell* and *Mount Fuji* (both 2003) title two old black and white posters of Manhattan, perhaps suggesting the paradoxical notion of the city as a new nature, or as a phenomenon equal with that of the greatest freak works of nature. Similar thinking informed the installation *Some Things Less, Some Things More* (2003), in which holes were cut from a partition wall and the circles arranged in an ambiguous, quasi-sculptural pile alongside.

Form and procedure are clearly more important to Bismuth than the precise nature of the materials he is employing. *Link*, for example, has nothing to say about the way cinema establishes narrative through changing camera angles; *Blue Monk in Progress* has nothing to say about modern jazz – other than possibly entertaining the notion that its hard to tell whether it's any good or not. This is a formalism of a kind and, like any formalism, it has limitations; yet for Bismuth art is not a window on to the social world but a category, a perspective from which we might examine the ordinary experiences around us and the messages we're subject to. Rather than an aesthetics of refined sensibilities, it is an aesthetic of everyday technical aptitudes – of watching a movie, walking the streets, reading the newspaper.

In his newspaper collage picture *Attack* (2002) Bismuth took the front page of the *Guardian* newspaper from 13 September 2001 and doubled the image of the smoking crater lying where the World Trade Center had once been. The picture covers all the text on the page but for the headline and the newspaper's masthead, and at a glance one might think it was entirely intended. It is similar, of course, to Warhol's 'Death in America' images of the mid-1960s, in which images of lurid tragedies – car crashes, suicides, the electric chair – are made to echo and repeat across the canvas as in some way they do across the hundreds of thousands of newspapers which publish the pictures. But whereas Warhol's point seemed to be one about the feeling of living in the media's echo chamber, Bismuth's thoughts are more on that single ephemeral copy of the morning paper. *Attack* is still about shock – the stupefaction that comes over us in looking at this horror, and how it leads us back to it again and again – but Bismuth sees the echo chamber built into the layout and the language of the newspaper itself.

When we can't tell in an instant what is the newspaper's intention and what is not, whether we're meant to be doubly horrified, or maybe fatigued into numbness, sober reportage loses its sense. And this is how Bismuth's art intervenes in the world: it quotes, repeats and inverts, rendering public speech as a dictionary of quotations that can always be turned out one way for one occasion and reversed for another, but which will never mean the same thing for everyone.