

“My future ain’t what it was”

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Things we have understood: the world is round, the sun is bright, we will die. These are reasonable assumptions based on second-hand proofs. Here are some more things that may or may not need proof, but can be understood: what I say in this text is true; words attributed to Elizabeth Price are things the artist has either written or said to me; *Systems* is a book written by Systems Group artists, published by Arts Council England in 1972, and is the subject of Price’s video *THE TENT* (2012). These assumptions are part of a civilised understanding. Indeed, we will probably choose to file these under “things we understand” so we can all move on to build our knowledge from these foundations, or simply move on regardless. We are, after all, reasonable creatures with a sense of perspective and rational proportion. The troubling thing about this, however, is that there is nothing neutral about being reasonable. Reason is just another mode of thinking. It helps us to retain, explain, and *imagine* the things we have understood. So, if we revisit some of the above assumptions, not with reason, but with complicity in our validation of them (where we have all permitted a certain degree of misinformation in order to get away with our reason), where is our sense of proportion now?

For her subject matter, Price often turns her attention to cultural systems that have become predetermined: decorative Modernist objects in *THE HOUSE OF MR X*; the technical language of categorisation in *USER GROUP DISCO*; the documentation of a catastrophic event in *THE WOOLWORTHS CHOIR OF 1979*; the representation of a 1970s manifesto and art work in *THE TENT*. In each case, Price has chosen subjects that have been previously parsed into historical narratives, and are distinct the way in which they have been made to fit a linear, documentary neatness that one might file under “things we have understood”.

Price’s engagement with such material comes from a political imperative: an opposition to the conventional procedures and tidying sensibilities applied to historical subjects. These procedures make us feel as though we are looking at a history, that we are surveying artefacts that no longer speak directly to us. Above all, these procedures have given us the illusion of critical distance between the subject and ourselves. Thus, over time, subjects have drifted away from the messy world of the real, a world full of inconsistencies, strange anomalies and radical possibilities – a world from which we too, as subjects, emerge. In resuscitating these deadened materials, in returning her subjects to the world of emotion, affect and experience, Price attempts to reconcile us with the unpredictable reality that originally gave rise to these subjects and, by extension, reveal the quality of our own subjectivity. We are all in this together.

The imperative to establish and engage in a direct relationship with her subject, something the artist describes as an attempt to “inhabit it”, is a central working method in Price’s video installation *THE TENT*. Extensively reworked from a video of the same name made two years prior, this artwork examines a book: *Systems*. As a subject, Price’s choice of *Systems* initially appeared casual: it was a publication the artist remembers from art school, a book that sat on the shelf near the telephone for years, and was subject to many an off-hand thumb-through. But the ideas of *Systems* and, in particular, its manifesto quality has had influence on the situation we find ourselves in today. Price and, by extension, the viewers of *THE TENT* are inheritors of this cultural material.

The video acknowledges this inheritance, while also skewing it into a contemporary logic. It extrapolates and merges *Systems* multiple voices, images and diagrams, while anchoring itself to one particular proposal – James Moyes’ *Vibration Tent*, an enclosure filled with white light and white noise. At one point, the narrative voice of *THE TENT* proclaims, “We called for a system [that was] plastic, ideographic, unfolding in the actuality of three dimensions.” The physical concept of the tent is expanded into an ideological and imaginative enclosure. But, as with any enclosure, what is constructed inside cannot be outside. This tent is, therefore, a purposeful method of exclusion, a reduction of attention. Price underscores this exclusory quality by selecting elements of the *Systems* catalogue that emphasise the relationship between material, technology and experience. What is excluded from this triumvirate, then, is a corporeal, gendered, embodied reality.

On one level, *THE TENT* is an exploration of the artist figure and his or her method. On another, it is also an examination of how these things – artist and method – become institutionalised, ossified, packed away. The work demands answers of its viewers: at what point does an emancipatory idea (like the declarations which shape Price’s reading of *Systems*, and which scroll across *THE TENT*’s projection screen with rapacity, dynamism and sureness) become an over-determined, brittle authority? If everything is reduced (as it appears in this subjective representation of *Systems*) to a universalism, at what point does one’s own personal subjectivity get excluded from these debates? And, if the utopian notion that artistic efforts born of closed scenarios could indeed have a productive social relationship between humans, in what way can it connect with society and the real: floods in Bangladesh, financial crises, daily forms of social interactions encountered by an artist on her way to the studio or a viewer on a journey to see an exhibition in Finsbury Square? In short, how does art matter beyond itself?

Preoccupied with this issue of hermeticism, Price began to make *THE TENT* in 2010. As with her previous video works, *THE TENT* was subject to a long period of shooting and reworking in her studio – an enclosed situation itself. This final version appears in two parts. The first section sets out the agenda of the Systems Group, their titular book, and Moyes’ proposition. The text (selectively drawn from *Systems*) is declarative and apocalyptic in tone. It speaks of revolutions in human affairs and the transformations in the evolution of the species. The notion of a tent might initially appear as a refuge from that apocalypse. But, in Price’s video, this problematic enclosure is a site within which the ideas of *Systems* can be put under intense pressure and strain. Thus, this tent is the scene of a crisis over meaning and function.

Within this first section, the narrative texts swims among extreme close-ups of geometric abstractions, diagrams and numbers. The increasing surge and force of the editing quickly erases any sense of a human touch in its making; the video favours instead the technological melodrama of quick-fire montage and the excess of detail that comes with high-end video. We begin to question whether the material is being explained to us, or whether the material has constructed its own personality, attitude, destiny. Through this flurry of detail, partial abstractions, sequence of assured declarations, we are witness to a kind of proof-machine that segues into a complete obliteration of blinding white light and deafening white noise – the sublime, the singular, a total spectrum.

The second part replaces the absolute rhythm of the first with a sensual, slower pace. *THE TENT*’s previously impervious mechanical gloss is now supplanted

with an environment of studio sounds. We hear the artist breathing, the hum of the radio, street noise, the sound of the Buzzcocks playing in the room. The artist appears to be engaged in making the section we have just seen. Intercut with these work shots are different sections of the book. New elements from the publication are presented: sporadic shots of human figures, black and white artist portraits, a photograph of young people milling around a public sculpture, the exposed back of a naked woman. This is the minimal corporeal constituency of the book. This second section jars, is angular, compromised. It not only lacks the smooth and confident persuasion of the first section, but also actively seeks to unpick the high-sheen of what came before it. This is the afterword of the apocalypse. Appearing both behind and in front of the camera, Price explicitly invokes herself in the representative continuum of *Systems*. But what is nonetheless sustained from the first section of the film, albeit now in a different shade, is an irreducibility: the horizon of meaning remains opaque. The rational whole, what one might call the procedures of objectivity, is denied.

The primary technique of the camera in *THE TENT* is the extreme close-up. Price's use of the mode possesses a doubly intimate quality. On a practical level, it displays the camera's proximity to the thing it films. Conceptually, it conveys the psychological proximity between Price and her subject matter. In both instances, there is a claustrophobic encounter with the subject. The close-ups in *THE TENT* have no intention to provide an overview, or even a verifiable object, and there is no pretence to provide an objective reality. Consequently, we no longer *see* what is before the camera, but rather we experience something physical: an immersive sound, or an image that invades us on a retinal level. These things are no longer out there. They are inside the eye, embodied.

While Price notes this proximal attitude may leave her disadvantaged in judging the wider implications of her subjects, her process is nonetheless a conscious refusal of historical perspective, an aggressive and effective counter to the rational whole. As a cultured civilisation, we give great weight to perspective and the clarity that can be drawn from a sense of proportion. But if perspective is simply the hierarchy of perception, then Price's wilful loss of perspective (sought most notably in the immediacy of the tangled close-up) collapses that hierarchy. This overflow of detail demands an explicitly emotional, physical relationship with unknowable outcomes. Price's unpacking of *Systems*' retro-future is not only a way of coming to terms with part of our cultural history, but also a way to show how those retro-futures might yet be concealed within our active and unfolding present.