



aemi Touring Programme 2024

Spirit Messages

'Spirit Messages' is aemi's 2024 touring programme, an annual selection made to bring together some of the most exciting new moving image work by Irish and international artists. Alongside a variety of other concerns, the artists featured in this programme employ a diverse set of creative strategies to reveal an interconnected world, one in which the medium is not just the message but the means through which the paranormal can engage our attention. From folk tales to esotericism, poppers training videos, horror flicks and sci-fi, the films in 'Spirit Messages' draw from an eclectic array of sources to suggest that the idiosyncratic forms of communication we adopt are often choices that are as subversive as they are functional.

Film information

Ross McClean, *Echo*, 2023, Ireland/United Kingdom, 16m/digital, 12 mins

Amanda Rice, *The Flesh of Language*, 2023, Ireland, 16.5 mins

Niall Cullen, *The Dog Who Became a Frog*, 2023, Ireland, digital, 6.5 mins

Jamie Crewe, *False Wife* 2022, United Kingdom, digital, 15 mins

Luis Arnías, *Terror Has No Shape*, 2021, Venezuela / United States, 16mm/digital, 10 mins

Dan Guthrie, *Coaley Peak (A Fragment)*, 2021, United Kingdom, 16mm/digital, 6.5 mins

Running time: 66 minutes

Moth in Relay is a commissioned text by Leah Reynolds written to accompany aemi's 2024 touring programme Spirit Messages

Moth in Relay

by Leah Reynolds

In computer-lore it goes that in 1947 a moth was found in the military computer *Mark II* by Dr. Grace Hopper and her team. It was logged in their records as '15.45, moth in relay'.¹ The moth's flattened body was logged too, next to the entry under sellotape with the comment 'first actual case of bug being found'. The term bug—coming from *bugge*, with its etymological variances of bogeyman, hobgoblin, or monster—was already in use to describe small difficulties that arise in carrying out a project. So the NASA team, understandably, couldn't resist a pun with the actual bug's body pasted in to boot. The incongruity of bodies and machines was made stark; they are to be kept separate. The consequences and subsequent conjectures of such binary thinking is one strand that runs through this programme.

How is the soft, memoiric body absorbed into the machine, into a system? Ross McClean's *Echo* reminds us of the original wonder of a disembodied voice coming to you across the airwaves as the protagonist practices radio transmission from his home. Analogue radio omits its signal in electromagnetic waves, and McClean's film captures the crackling and whirring potential of connection that surrounds the air of the protagonist's suburban home. For all the technology's bulky assemblage and fiddly, painstaking effort, we feel the reward of a sweet sense of kinship channeled and carved through space. Here, radio transmission is a soothing aid to connection. Soothing, perhaps only now, in retrospect, for its preservation of certain limits: voices are benignly disembodied; the granular mesh of sound adds character rather than frustration; and there is also the fact that the machine can be turned off (Siri and Alexa are not yet—always—listening.) McClean's film is also interjected with home videos of the protagonist's life. There is a harmony between the body and machine, of a life co-mingled with technology. If there are spirits here, it is of good times past, of lost loved ones, of a life-force illuminated upon waves.

¹ For this piece of writing I have played with an idea taken from Amalie Smith's *Threadripper* (2020), in which she references the original case of the moth found in a Mark II relay, and speculates on the moth's uploaded body in future, machine-learning technologies.

Analogue technology is also subject to deterioration and in Amanda Rice's *The Flesh of Language* we learn of a few ways this can happen. Rice brings together differing narratives of both fact and speculative fiction in relation to the preservation of analogue technology and, more specifically, Irish elk fossils. A voiceover tells us that magnetic tape is made from crude oil, and so in addition to the original recording we are listening to compressed geological matter, the relics of animals and plants dug up and reconfigured into plastic compounds and strewn into tape. There are other surprise voices captured too—as some audio clips of a 1960s investigation attest to—we hear them discuss and demonstrate some whispery sounds recorded on tape and thought to be 'spirit messages' of the dead or other. *The Flesh of Language* culminates in an energetic disco summoning, where smooth young bodies and fossilised-elk bones partake in a striking, choreographed dance. The disparate strands come together with the contrast of young and ancient being placed on a continuum: the spirit of matter is ceaselessly reproduced. As a species, it would seem we are trying so hard to get away from our bodies but cannot resist both organically and artificially haunting our own technologies.

One might hope that the move from analogue waves to discrete units of digital information might keep those speculative spirits, bugs, hobgoblins, and monsters at bay. It at least keeps things neatly partitioned, even if the problem of the body lurks along the sidelines of an evaporating, viable existence. With comedic, lo-fi sound and imagery, *The Dog who Became a Frog* makes use of an AI tool to predict the artist's death (1989-2077), and within a binary of humans and machines a tone of despair looms heavy. A cyborg-like voice tells us of the dog's body he's abandoned in favour of a frog's, escaping further down the animal chain, perhaps, to escape a late-capitalist reality that only further ostracizes the human or animal. We see lo-res clips of student life or 'youth culture', posited against a glossy futurism of Apple products and robots doing backflips. A mid-tempo pop song plays along as if blindsiding one into their own mild annihilation by the insidious assimilation of digital consumerism. Returning to the inert, fleshy, and pulsing body of a frog is one way to return to a place of potential.

We have seen *The Dog who Became a Frog*, where the fungibility of an existence is carried out by an act of transgression in favour of a less corruptible form. *False Wife* by Jaime Crewe takes this fungibility in the opposite direction. The body has left the spirit matter of analogue and uploaded itself in a heady, digital awakening to an amorphous existence. The structure of the film mimics that of user-made 'popper training videos', where pornographic content is spliced together in an instructional masturbatory foray and the senses let loose by the

euphoric effects of sniffing poppers. But *False Wife* is a folksy twist on a popper-fuelled bacchanalia, where instead of pornographic revelry you are instructed through your own demise. An automated voice guides you through an egocide, telling tales featuring almost-familiar story tropes and bombarding the eye with layered, transforming imagery. Along with the disorienting narrative, *False Wife* propagates a life-form of spawning images which operate similarly to what Hito Steryerl describes as 'nodes of energy and matter.'² Images no longer behave in the fixed manner in which they came to be, but display a 'readiness for transgression and simultaneous submission.'³ To return to our moth in the relay, a moth in the analogue Mark II computer shuts it down, but a moth in the digital realm can proliferate endlessly, fluttering through neural networks of endless image-making. The uploaded body of *False Wife* contends without a history in boundless space, where perpetually unstable images can see and search within each other. The bug in the machine has assimilated, and now it speaks a language that excludes us entirely.

The poet Bhanu Kapil wrote on the immigrant experience in America asking the question 'What is a monster? Anybody different.'⁴ What does not turn the machine cogs is scooped out and stuck to the page as a monstrous example. This problem of assimilation is one put forward by Luis Arrias' *Terror Has No Shape*. The medium of 16mm lends sumptuous colour and grainy depth to unconnected, observational shots of an urban environment, and after being handheld by the brutal narration of *False Wife*, as a viewer the lack of instruction feels akin to abandonment. The ambient sound takes a moment to fade in after the first image, and soon after, comes crackling, interlobar noises. A sense of disturbance is afoot and arrives in the form of a white viscous object, sometimes monstrous in shape and sometimes a flaming asteroid. Whether we associate the American suburb with filmic horror because of its predominance in the genre and film industry, or the very idea of a paved-over, contained existence is—quite simply—ripe for haunting, Arrias' film makes literal the horrors that are produced by such a system.

This experience of otherness subtly continues in Dan Guthrie's *Coaley Peak*, a short 6 minute meditation of an idea that is intentionally left as a fragment. In captions, the narrator tells us they didn't finish the film for reasons they'd prefer not to go into, and presents us with a single 1970s photograph of three black figures in the English countryside. In front of them are

² Hito Steryerl, *Is the Internet Dead*, in *Duty Free Art* (2019) p143

³ Steryerl, *In Defense of the Poor Image* [[In Defense of the Poor Image - Journal #10 \(e-flux.com\)](#)]

⁴ Bhanu Kapil, *Incubation: A Space for Monsters*

green rolling hills, but they've twisted away from the scenic view and are looking back to the camera. Again, the problem of assimilation is suggested by the narrator who puts words to their expressions, they are saying; *we're here now, so what?* The question is simple but so quickly a divide is created. The binaries come flooding in: English and white, countryside and leisure come up against; black and foreign, urban and deprived. Who owns this land and who is this view for? The narrator leaves it open for us to speculate, and the photograph of these people is left flapping in the wind, their distance from the scene held taut. We've returned to the open air of Ross McClean's *Echo* and are departing on a question mark, leaving channels open and murmuring for the spirits, bugs and monsters.