

Michael Hanna, 'Short Films about Learning'

By Catherine Gander

Michael Hanna recognises that approaching a photographic archive involves operating between temporalities – between archival time as it is captured in moments and stored in silence; and experiential time as it is lived in rhythms and remembered in images. Belfast Exposed's archive is a repository of national memories, a storehouse of pictures of a past that the city is intent on leaving behind. Yet as Charles Merewether has commented, the archive is 'a site where memory and forgetfulness can face each other',ⁱ and such a confrontation can lead us to illuminating discoveries about our own capacity to contain images.

Hanna is the latest talented artist to respond to the archive in a list that includes Duncan Campbell and Adam Broomberg & Oliver Chanarin. Different from theirs, however, Hanna's project appeals less to the archive as index or trace than as a realm wherein accepted truths might be challenged. Exploiting what the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein asserted was montage's capacity to engender 'a new concept, a new quality' out of the juxtaposition of diverse elements, Hanna overlays striking photographic images with excerpted recordings from lectures on human psychology, matching the pace of the image sequences to the cadences of the voice. The result of this verbal-visual montage is, in the words of Eisenstein, 'not fixed or ready-made, but arises' from the work because it demands that 'the emotions and mind of the spectator' are actively involved in the creative learning process.ⁱⁱ By aligning the photographs with words that speak to their grounding in basic anthropological impulses, Hanna works less to understand 'Belfast' as a place, and more to direct our attention to the human, universal element within its collection of images.

So doing, Hanna opens up the archive to a range of embodied experiences that render the images avenues into a more ethical, universal experience of human suffering and conflict. More than this, he holds the archive up as a mirror. The more we hear the lecturer's messages of human psychology, the more we see ourselves in the people and events before us. 'This is about the self', states the voice in the tenth second of the first film. By the time those first three words are repeated a split-second later, a set of relationships has been established between images and text that extends to include the viewer. Whatever 'this is about', it is clearly not about the past.

The voiceover in its American joviality seems initially to belong to a world and a time far removed from that which the images represent. But the cumulative effect of the installation's elements works quickly; as the immediately arresting quality of the photographs gives way to a more mesmeric condition of arrhythmic repetition, the contextual significance of the words 'arises'. Hanna plays here with the effect of habituation, a psychological mechanism crucial to patterns of human learning. As the voiceover informs us of the necessity of habituation to our ability to live in a world of innumerable stimuli, the images work in ironic conjunction to undermine this necessity. 'Belfast' itself is a well-worn visual composite, familiar through repeated exposure to the very pictures Hanna chooses to revisit. By drawing attention to our capacity for desensitisation, Hanna compels us to look anew.

The exhibition thus opens up the archive at the same time as it releases conceptual art from charges of hermeticism and encryption; engaging the emotional and cognitive processes of its viewers, it reveals the connective mechanisms of our encoded responses to the world around us. In the darkened gallery space, we are drawn into the images as they flash before us – their procession predicated on the body’s speech rhythms, their affect heightened by the new conceptual meaning afforded them by the words alongside. The experience is immersive and embodied. Indeed, even the number of images within each film connects to human patterns of data storage and recollection: Hanna has selected them purposefully to cohere with George Miller’s memory theory of the ‘magical number seven, plus or minus two.’ⁱⁱⁱ The fact that these films hinge on Hanna’s researches into human behavioural and learning theories should come as no surprise. Their overall effect is a combination of what psychologist Daniel Stern labelled ‘vitality affects’: feelings that arrive and depart in waves, surges or rushes that affirm our connection to the world and dismantle the false boundaries between the mind and the body.

Typical of Hanna’s art is the impulse to generate new practices of experience within familiar states, unsettling the semantic relationships between the verbal and the visual, the perceptual and the conceptual, and invoking an awareness of those processes that operate under the level of our consciousness. This is what philosopher Brian Massumi calls an ‘artwork as event’, because the synaesthetic experience of the films constitutes a type of action in itself, whereby ‘what we abstractly see when we directly and immediately see an object is *lived relation* – a life dynamic.’ ‘With every sight we see imperceptible qualities, we abstractly see potential, we implicitly see a life dynamic, we virtually live relation. It’s just a kind of shorthand to call it an object. It’s an *event*.’^{iv}

‘Short Films about Learning’ is an event that simultaneously evokes flashbacks to Belfast’s troubled past as it invites us to understand that our present state is the result of an accumulation of such moments. While the archive cannot possibly represent the ‘sum total of the known and the knowable’,^v it can, as Hanna has indicated, provide a multiplicity of perspectives that point to a ‘lived relation’ of the past with the present – and perhaps the future. The last film in the quartet is more overtly political than the others, but all four prompt us to reconsider the relevance of revisiting stored images of experience, as well as to challenge our own embedded patterns of perception. As such, the entire work leaves us with more questions than answers – and that is the essential condition of learning. By lifting the cover off the container of the past, Hanna demonstrates that the Belfast Exposed archive is vital in both senses of the term. His films are about our capacity and potential to learn. What we learn, however, is up to us.

ⁱ Charles Merewether, ‘Archives of the Fallen’ in Merewether (ed.), *The Archive* (MIT, 2006), 162.

ⁱⁱ Sergei Eisenstein, ‘Word and Image’ (1939) in Eisenstein, *The Film Sense*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (Faber and Faber, 1986), 14, 34.

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.intropsych.com/ch06_memory/magical_number_seven.html

^{iv} Brian Massumi, ‘The Thinking-Feeling of What Happens’, *Inflexions* 1.1: ‘How is Research-Creation?’ (May 2008), www.inflexions.org, 5.

^v Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive* (Verso, 1993), 44. Quoted in Colin Graham, *Northern Ireland: Thirty Years of Photography* (Belfast Exposed and the MAC, 2013), 187.