

Friederika Fast in conversation with Bob Levene. (presented alongside film screening of Inertial Frame).

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This is not a direct transcribe. Friederika Fast's questions are in black text. [Bob Levene's answers in blue text.](#)

Introduction.

Bob Levene was born in 1975 in Kinston Upon Thames in England. She studied Fine Art at Hull School of Art and Design from 95-98 and went onto to do an MSc in Electronic Imaging at Duncan of Jordansone in 2000. Besides her own work as an artist since several years she collaborates with Rob Gawthrop under the name Automated Noise Ensemble. Her work has been shown in a number group- and solo exhibitions in GB as well as on various art festivals. Most recently she has spent 3 months as artist in residence at Artists Unlimited and will be returning back to Sheffield soon.

With your exhibition „Observed Motion“ at the gallery of artists unlimited you shaped a quite calm and silent atmosphere although your oeuvre also includes quite noisy works. What was the reason for this? [It wasn't a conscious decision for the show to be a quiet one, its how the work evolved. I guess you could say that I spent most of my time thinking only about 'looking' where as a lot of my previous work has been driven by how we experience sound through looking. There was a point when I was putting the show together when I did become very conscious of how the pieces sit with each other, thats when I maybe brought together work that had this calmness / stillness about it. But its interesting you describe it as quiet show \(which I agree with\) when there is sound in the works. I guess because there is video of movement you expect sound. If there is motion, there is vibration and therefore you always have sound. But questions of volume or noise is another subject.](#)

During the last three months you were focusing on questions of perception. For this you were arranging little experiments dealing with time, space, the photographic surface. Since photography for you is a quite new media, did you sometimes feel like the pioneers in this field of early photography (Edward Muybridge or Étienne-Jules Marey)? [I certainly looked to the work of Marey and Muybridge and have always been excited by the early pioneers around who were exploring and creating new technologies. I don't think I felt like a pioneer, as I had 200 years of developments and the purpose & aims were different. But there is an innocence and blindness in my approach almost a childlike questioning & enthusiasm, not taking anything for granted and having no idea what lay ahead, maybe there are similarities from that point. Some of the earliest films and photographs have a playful questioning of the medium inherent in the work, which has a real joyful curiousness about it and its something that I really like.](#)

In sciences empirical observation serves to achieve objective and repeatable data`s. In tradition to natural sciences you were arranging those experiments but as an artist you are interested not in these facts, but in other aspects. [What are these? I'm interested in using these experiments to question the way in which we go about understanding and making sense of things. They are partly investigations into the idea of investigating, but they are also a genuine attempt at understanding how things are through observation, experience and documentation some of which are crude forms of 'experiments'. I've always had an interest in the physics and the phenomena of the natural world and the way we measure things in order to prove or disprove and to objectify. What I try to do](#)

in my work is bring my own subjective experience in line with the tools, instruments, methodologies that the objective scientific approach has. I try to place my self & my own experiences within these objective methodologies. This kind of thinking was really prominent in a piece called *As Far As The Eye Can See* when I worked with a surveyor to map my own views onto an Ordnance Survey map.

The term observation (Beobachtung) was also used in empirical social research. Social Scientist and philosopher Niklas Luhmann used the term as an epistemic term. He speaks of first-order observation as a direct sensual input and a second-order observation which is the reflection on this. Are you dealing with second-order observations? I think that you are talking about how our belief, expectations, assumptions & prejudices can effect what we think and what we see and how people observe what they expect to observe. What science does through repeated experiments and data gathering is test these hypothesis and begin to rule out bias. But I don't really see my work in those terms, partly because the work I produce has constantly shifting rules and guidelines and is in-precise and partly because I'm not trying to draw a conclusion from any of this. All my experiments have inaccuracies within them, they describe the floors and contradiction's between the exactness and the objective and subjective experience, they exist because of the conditions and processes I use and because they are not made with that kind of precision outcome or repeated data in mind. My focus is on the broader concept and in the case of this particular exhibition, how photography & video – and all that surrounds it - the camera, the frame, the print etc 'reproduces' / re-presents things, how the our 3D real experience is translated into the flat world. I was also interested in the relationship between the photograph and graph as visual data, how we explore visual ways of representing data.

Playful humour and absurdity of your pseudoscientific experiments and the simple, nonprofessional look of some photographs or videos remind me a little bit of performance videos like by Dennis Oppenheim, Vito Acconci or Bruce Nauman. How do you think your work is related to early performances? What does it mean to you to use your own body in regards of the relation of sender and receiver? Through your investigations the body becomes involved, but it is less focused on the personal and the conception of the self than on the boundaries of our (most of the times technically mediated) perception and beliefs of the truth. I very much like the work of those artists you mentioned and it was with them that I found the route in to grab a video camera, shut the door and spend weeks at a time being fascinated by the live / realtime / mediated aspect of video and sound. I guess that was at the core of what I did, at the beginning the actions and objects I used were often an after thought to the structure or scenario I had set up with cameras, monitors, mirrors etc. I was never interested in me as an image, gender, personality or any of the body politics kind of work, I was simply fascinated by the presence of the real and the mediated at the same time. Looking back it makes complete sense that I'm in the centre of a lot of the work either directly or conceptually, because its an attempt to make sense of world through my own experiences, so the work is often presented from 'my point of view'.

Experimental musicians, filmmakers and artists Alvin Lucier, Anthony McCall or Christian Marclay, who investigate the relations between sound, film, space, viewer / listener are other references for your work. What do you have in common with these artists? They all explore the material, conceptual & cultural properties of sound

and light and have a sculptural aspect to their work. I never restrict the media or technology I work with and I don't refer to myself as a particular kind of artist, but if I was to pin it down I would say that I'm very much routed in a sculptural practice, maybe not in the traditional sense of material and form but in the conceptually understanding of space, distance and time. I also think the artists you mentioned work in more than one scene / world, which I feel I do. Lucier's work bridges sound art, music, performance and acoustics, Marley also dips in and out of the worlds of Visual Arts, Sound Art, Djing / hip hop and film and McCall sits between film / cinema and sculptural installations.

Your work is presented in the art context as well as in the music context. How do you feel about this? What do the different audiences have in common? Also the film context. It's a blessing and curse, but mainly a blessing. I'm not sure if I know the differences or commonalities between the audiences exactly, but it's a very interesting experience presenting the works in such different environments. There are many cross overs, but there are also very different rules, cultures and audience behaviors that make the work feel very different to me. At least the experience of presenting is different, maybe not for the audience.

"Inertial Frame", which you produced 2008 in Finland during your residency, is a 43 minutes video showing a very slow tracking shot. It captures the moving sea, sky and islands of the Finnish Archipelago in the dark winter months. It consists of 5 real time shots between two islands you going back and forth by the ferry. What does this scientific term "Inertial Frame" mean? In physics it refers to an 'inertial frame of reference', which is something that is moving at a constant speed in a straight line, or it is standing still, either way, its not changing its speed - it is constant. So an inertial frame of reference is a non-accelerating frame of reference. Take a juggler on a bus, if there was no noise or visible scenery & it was moving constantly - there is nothing in that situation for the juggler to know they are moving, there is no experiment you could perform to determine if the bus was moving or was parked. Inertia means that an object will not change its velocity spontaneously, it will have to have some force applied to it. When I first went to the Finnish Archipelago, I went on a bus and at one point in the journey the bus drove onto a car ferry to cross over to the next island. There were no windows, so I could not see out & the noise and vibrations from the ferry was muted by sitting inside the bus. I got a bit irritable when we'd been sitting there for 20 minutes not moving and thought it was just a polite Finnish mentality when nobody else seemed look bothered. Then all of a sudden, the bus engine starts up and we drive off the ferry on the other side of the water. It was such a strange experience.

Compared to other works "Inertial Frame" seems to be a quite precise, almost perfect screening. As it seems the camera for you does not seem to only be a "limited baggage", but a trustable medium to express your conceptions.

What technique did you use for "Internal Frame" and why? (It concerns the performance pioneers who in a way had also a skeptical relation to the camera and who have been more interested in the action itself (feeling the camera as a "limited baggage"). Internal Frame of course is related to the filmic space, time, move and making itself an issue. But its very precise quality (what technique is it?) seems not to point out any technical limits but to focus on the limits of our conceptions of space time and speed - you won't even feel really that there is a camera... Here at least the camera itself does seem to be a perfect and accepted medium to express your conception). I'm not a technology fetishist and many times I have felt that too much thought & consideration on the 'look' & the 'technically correct' actually gets in the way of the idea. But with this work as well as a previous work called 'close up' it was the opposite. My first attempt at filming IF was with

the only camera I had which was standard definition, and there was so much quality lost in the image that you noticed the medium more than the landscape, so much of the detail was lost, so I borrowed what I could with no budget and I managed to get an entry level Sony (1RA)? HDV camera and the quality was passable, although it really struggled with the low light. And it is in the process of looking at the image and believing in the image of the landscape itself that the concept sits.

Watching "Inertial Frame" you are not only discovering the calm beautiful landscape, but also perceiving the passing by of time. After the discovery of the Silence in your exhibition, is your film the discovery of slowness (against the busy times)? Finland's Archipelago consists of 1000s of Islands with a network of car ferry's connecting them. During the summer months it becomes a popular tourist destination. There is a continuing argument amongst the locals about building more road bridges in order to help relieve the backlog of queuing cars that the ferry system creates. It was interesting to me having spent much of the last two years travelling from place to place how the world looks different when we are walking past it, to when we travel on a bike, car or plane. It is our desire for technological advancements in transport that frames and dictates how we see the world and its this transportation infrastructure that creates our definitions of what fast and slow is.

The film is silent, too. Is this to minimize, to focus on the visual stimuli?

Ultimately yes. Initially I did record some sound, but nothing seemed to make sense or add to the visual experience, in fact on the contrary it really diverted and distracted from the subject. Adding sound would have either added an emotive or narrative level which I didn't want to do or dictate to the viewer.

The silent long term video reminds me of "Empire" by Andy Warhol which was showing the Empire State building over 8 hours at night. Does your film have anything to do with it? Andy Warhol's film has been called an unwatchable film. Why do you show a 43 minutes film? Warhol's film has been a realtime screen. In opposite to Warhol you have cut the film material taking out the scenes in the harbor focusing only on the passage and the cameras standpoint changed with the movement of the boat. 43 minutes is pretty small fry to 8 hours, which is a length that is too much for most people, theaters etc. There is most defiantly a question of time passing, but Empire opens many different questions around still / movement, film / painting, the medium that I don't think Inertial Frame does. Empire explores real time much more than Inertial Frame and it is also now shown as an installation. For me Inertial Frame is much more about motion, depth & speed than full real time duration. It wasn't important or needed to show every minute from the start and end of shooting. The length was dictated partly by the time the ferry journey took from Island to Island and partly by wanting equal increments from day to night. There are 5 shots but they are not all consecutive, they are shot over a period of 4 or 5 hours.

Despite its very continuous perspective and movement the different parallel movements of sky, water, and boat point out – as like the little irregularities and imperfections in your photographic attempts – the relativity of human perception (as in you subjective cartographical work). Especially when the light falls, the viewer becomes a different impression of movement, speed and time passing by. We recognize that with the change of light distance flattens and the movement slows to an imperceptible level. How is the relation between shown time and real time, between experienced time and measured time? The flatness you talk about, i.e when the light levels and

tones of the sea and the sky start to merge and the islands become seemingly continuous black mark, turn's the film of a real landscape into an abstraction, a painting or drawing. That happened because it was an image on the screen, I didn't see it like that when I was filming it, the sense of space is different even though it was very dark, the belief of knowing how far those islands were was hard to dismiss in the actual location. When the light fades there is less information and detail to describe the sense of motion, so by the last shot it almost seems still image, but you know its not because of what the last 35 minutes has told you, it becomes a fight between knowing, believing & seeing. In the film, there are 3 points in which you see ferry crossing the frame, this is only the real reference to the vehicle / ferry that the camera is on. It is also a a chance to see the speed at which your traveling from a different perspective and its quite shocking how fast it seems to be going, especially in the later / darker shots, the view of the sky, sea and islands seems almost still and then all of a sudden this ferry shoots past very fast, its a strange contradiction.

What are you working on currently? My first focus is on a live performance / sound based piece that I'm developing on an Island just outside Helsinki for later this year, which play's around with the speed of light and speed of sound. But I'm also interested in continuing the work that I started here during the residency, developing more ideas around the photographic & graphic image as well as data visualization and inscription.