

Michelle Williams Gamaker: Live in Analysis – 'Strange Evidence' with Anouchka Grose at Matt's Gallery, London, 4 July 2025

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The 4th of July seems an appropriate date on which to visit a gallery so close by the new American Embassy in London. In fact, everything is new in this part of the city stretching from Vauxhall up to the refurbished, converted and commercialised Battersea Power Station. It's difficult to recall what used to be around here, memory and history have been erased by expressive architects and efficient engineers. Now everything seems to shine with spectacular and desirable newness, consciousness of its novelty. But while the past may not be apparent, we know that it can reassert itself at unexpected times and in sometimes inexplicable ways.

I have written enthusiastically about Michelle Williams Gamaker's work before, reviewing for *Third Text Online*, in 2023, the film *Thieves* and its installation at South London Gallery under the overarching title 'Our Mountains are Painted on Glass'.¹ This new Williams Gamaker showing at Matt's Gallery, 'Strange Evidence', extends some of the themes and techniques used in that exhibition but is, formally at least, quite a different proposition.

On the 4th of July, however, it is still a work-in-progress and there was something slightly Brechtian about the way the artist was here inviting the audience into – or at least to look into – every stage of the work's evolution. Having turned Matt's Gallery into an archive, a film set and a film studio, the work goes on to involve other events and venues stretched across several months, promising to ultimately deliver a completed film and its screening focused on the life and work of the twentieth-century actor, Merle Oberon. Like some of the historical characters in Williams Gamaker's *Thieves*, Oberon spent her career tortuously wrapped up in the intrigues and brutality of a fundamentally racist, capitalist and patriarchal movie business.

Williams Gamaker's own experiences with psychoanalysis are also going to play a significant part in the piece, and they were the focus of the 4th of July event. Due to the evolving *modus operandi* of this work (which Robin Klassnik described as a series of 'surprises') it is not yet clear, to this writer at least, to what extent Oberon herself utilised or leaned upon psychoanalysis, but all this is implied but not yet 'given away', and thus promises to be doubly entertaining.

As we assumed we were attending a live event, my partner and I found ourselves rushing to reach the gallery in time, arriving just as the talk was getting underway but able to scramble into

¹ See Paul O'Kane, 'Taking Visual Pleasure in Taking Cinematic Revenge: Michelle Williams Gamaker's "Our Mountains are Painted On Glass"', *Third Text Online*, 28 August 2023, <http://thirdtext.org/paulokane-williamsgamaker>

the only remaining seats, right in the front row. As soon as the event finished we then had to rush away, and so there was no time to mingle, chat, compare experiences or ask direct questions of the artist or gallerist, leaving us curious about any crucial information we might have missed.

Robin Klassnik, the celebrated founder and curator of Matt's Gallery, and a kind of national treasure of UK contemporary art, introduced the event, pointing out that he only had five minutes in which to do so, and, interestingly, those minutes and seconds could be seen counting down on the screen behind him as he spoke. Klassnik apologised that the original plan for the event had been for the audience to witness a live psychoanalytic session between the artist Michelle Williams Gamaker and analyst Anouchka Grose, but that this had changed to what now appeared – to me at least – to be a kind of livestream (but was it perhaps a projected recording?) of the conversation. If it was live-streamed then that conversation would be taking place, strangely, in the space adjacent to the one in which we were gathered. In the adjacent gallery space the artist had installed a convincing film set, or *mise-en-scène*, depicting a recognisably twentieth-century or 'modern' analyst's room.

At Matt's, the audience could explore this set, which also featured video excerpts from the film-to-come. Furthermore, they could examine a vitrine of largely eBay-sourced memorabilia relating to Oberon's career. However, the glamour, hype and publicity represented by some of these materials betrays the difficulties of Oberon's career now exposed by the reframing and recontextualising research pursued by Williams Gamaker. We begin to learn that Oberon was a woman of mixed cultural heritage, constantly forced by a patriarchal, capitalist, misogynist and racist system to pass as white, and taking great pains, even undergoing forms of surgery, to do so.



Michelle Williams Gamaker, *Strange Evidence*, 2025, installation view, Matt's Gallery, London, photograph by Jonathan Bassett, courtesy of the artist and Matt's Gallery

It might have been easy to find an answer to the seemingly banal question of whether the event was live-streamed or recorded and subsequently edited, but I prefer to take the opportunity of this *caesura*, this gap in or lack of knowledge to consider the difference between the two while happy to remain in ignorance regarding whether what I was watching was live or recorded. There seems to be some value or promise in suspending this question and taking the opportunity to consider some possible differences between the two forms: live stream and edited recording.

As a child I recall being introduced to ‘live’ TV, ‘recorded highlights’, ‘slow motion action replay’, and then to the ‘rewind’ and ‘freeze-frame’ facilities associated with VHS video. I am also old enough to recall the first time I saw (in a shop window in London’s Tottenham Court Road), the then new profundity of a video + monitor live field that caught me and every passer-by in its crossfire as we walked past. In 2003, I saw a show at London’s ICA called ‘Video Acts’ which brought together scores of examples of the first ‘video art’.² This often played in and with the ‘live field’ created by having a video camera and monitor in the same space. Judging by that show, the then new phenomenon of a kind of domesticated ‘live’-ness fascinated many of the artists of the early 1970s.

As I said, I arrived at the Matt’s Gallery event just in time to witness Robin Klassnik’s carefully timed five-minute intro and left as soon as the projected piece concluded. My own experiences in psychoanalysis led me to suspect that the session we witnessed must have been precisely fifty minutes long as this is one of the key parameters that makes a psychoanalytic session what it is, as distinct from a less formalised chat. What made me think it might have been recorded and not live-streamed was the efficiency of the changeovers (or were they edits?) when about two thirds of the time into the projected session Williams Gamaker got up from the analysand’s couch and went to sit on a chair. This move inverted her perspective and brought her to face Grose, the analyst. If live, then the cameras and vision-mixer effortlessly followed this fundamental shift and incorporated a series of subsequent eyeline exchanges between analysand and analyst, and so precisely that they looked like meticulous edits.

If the piece was live-streamed then both analyst and analysand should be congratulated for the consistently well-turned nature of their spontaneous and entertaining conversation, including a neatly tied-up resolution. All of this might just be the outcome of the two protagonists’ long and deep experience of talking to each other (Grose has been Williams Gamaker’s analyst for some time) as well as their familiarity with the special kinds of creative dialogue and narrative arc that tend to be produced and pursued in psychoanalysis, and which participants learn to recognise and – to a certain extent – craft. Thus, here we seemed to witness two experts at work in a session, akin to watching two excellent jazz musicians pull what seems to the audience to be a rehearsed and considered composition out of the improvisational air.

² See Klaus Biesenbach et al, *Video Acts: Single Channel Works from the Collections of Pamela and Richard Kramlich and New Art Trust*, PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Long Island City, New York, 2002



Michelle Williams Gamaker in conversation with Anouchka Grose as part of *Strange Evidence*, 2025, at Matt's Gallery, London, still from video documentation by Chloe Page, courtesy of the artist and Matt's Gallery

This analytic conversation neatly concluded and resolved itself with reference to film stars being archived, buried, and resurrected by the arch-twentieth-century art form of cinema, which, like still photography is innately and inescapably archival (a 'museum without walls' as Andre Malraux once referred to photography).³ All this shares similarities with the psychoanalytic process itself, which tends to involve a retrospective angling for and retrieval of significant memories and experiences – salient, repetitive, idiosyncratic, early and possibly perverse, troublesome and formative. These can be collected, objectively reviewed, revalued and rehoused in the present, from where they are able to see their past incarnations anew, aided by a new vocabulary and a revised narrative generated by the psychoanalytic sessions.

In the session at Matt's (whether it was live-streamed, or recorded and edited) Williams Gamaker spoke about her parents' respective belief systems and how they concerned themselves in different ways with death and forms of reincarnation. Grose then connected this to Williams Gamaker's tendency to revisit the movies and movie stars of her mother's generation, and to resurrect, re-empower, redeem and re-deploy the often-abused actors as newly active agents in contemporary art and current cultural debates. This strategy was also played out in the artist's earlier work, *Thieves* (see the *Third Text* review mentioned above) under the methodological banner of what Williams Gamaker terms 'Fictional Revenge'.

While the above might cursorily and crudely summarise certain aspects of Williams Gamaker's recent practices, it could also allude to a wider generation of artists – the video and installation artist Elizabeth Price, for example, or the work of the painter Cathy Lomax,

³ See André Malraux, *Museum Without Walls*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1967

as well as neo-conceptual artist Fiona Banner's writing of *The Nam*.⁴ Then there is the writing of Annie Ernaux,⁵ and a series of recent artists' books by (full disclosure, this writer's partner) artist Bada Song.⁶ All of these artists seem to gaze into screens at old movies in order to make their work. In one of her books, Song spends her time trying, in vain, to acquire a sofa, while in another she creates poetic texts out of long YouTube sessions spent watching old movies from her Korean childhood and depicting the time of her mother's relative youth. Some of these artists might have grown up with psychoanalysis as a contemporary discourse; most would at least have had sofas and TVs, which could perhaps stand in for the couch / the analyst nexus. Some might have enjoyed trips to the cinema as part of their family culture, while others' parents were keen amateur photographers or avid wielders of Super-8 film cameras. Then came VHS player/recorders, DVD hoarders, and more recently the moving-image cornucopia that is YouTube, allied with the eBay facility that makes Williams Gamaker's accompanying display of relevant movie memorabilia infinitely accessible.

It is perhaps important to recall and restate here that, according to Walter Benjamin, a new, inescapable and peculiar indexicality accompanied modern, photographic and cinematic mechanical reproductions per se, bringing with it a new emotional relationship with the image: 'It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture.'⁷ Photographic images, despite their unprecedented and apparent verity, nevertheless unnaturally stripped the emerging modern world of colour, movement and sound.⁸ Soon they became 'movies', then 'talkies', and later – perhaps equally unnaturally – 'technicoloured' (and, it could be said, over-coloured). However, as Laura Mulvey has claimed, while explicating a similarly morbid and maternal tendency in the writing of Roland Barthes, these images have always and also pointed us in a newly emphatic manner to the certainty and seriousness of death; their profound indexicality providing a reminder of the hardest inescapable fact of our all too brief, and yet, at times, seemingly eternal lives, Mulvey writes: 'In [Barthes'] *Camera Lucida*, the presence of death in the photograph is a constantly recurring and pervasive theme ... [Barthes reflects on] the coincidence with the decline of religion and suggest[s] that, with photography, death is inscribed into life without the mediation of religion or ritual...'⁹

⁴ See the author's articles on Elizabeth Price: 'Technologies of Romance: looking for "object love" in three works of video art', *Science Museum Group Journal*, <https://journal.sciencemuseum.ac.uk/article/looking-for-object-love>, Autumn 2019; and on Cathy Lomax: 'Painting the scene of the self: the art of Cathy Lomax', *Journal of Visual art Practice*, vol 18 no 1, 2019, www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14702029.2018.1479939. See also Fiona Banner, *The Nam*, Frith Street Books, London, 1997.

⁵ See, for example, Annie Ernaux, *The Years*, Fitzcarraldo Editions, London, 2018

⁶ Bada Song has published five artists' books: *Cash or Smash*, 2015, *So Far No Sofa*, 2023; *Women Who Scream*, 2024; *Women Who Weep*, 2025; and *Women Who Smoke*, 2025 – all published by eeodo, London

⁷ Walter Benjamin, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p 226

⁸ See Alan Trachtenberg, ed, *Classic Essays on Photography*, Leete's Island Books, New Haven, Connecticut, 1980

⁹ See Laura Mulvey, *Death 24 x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*, Reaktion Books, London, 2005, p 59

The historical parade of relatively available image technologies listed above, many of which were also commodities, may seem to render our lives and values commonplace, flimsy and disposable, yet at the same time make us (and more of us than ever before) memorable, monumental and perhaps even heroic, as they preserve our image in childhood, youth and seniority.¹⁰

Mechanically-reproduced images – photography, cinema and gramophone records – all served (as Benjamin wrote in his best-known essay) to fundamentally change the value and purpose of art, from something with roots in hierarchical, exclusive, esoteric and mysterious cult values, to something based on popular, democratic and political (ultimately communist) values.¹¹ In today's (so-called) artworld, we might have recently witnessed a certain shift in contemporary art, leaning in the direction of relatively lo-tec, lo-fi, local, textile-based and other-crafted, and otherwise 'traditionally' informed works, influenced by premodern processes and perhaps acting as a foil or challenge to the deluge of the so-called 'new technologies' currently swamping our cultural environment. Williams Gamaker, however, asserts herself here as an exemplary representative of a generation of artists who continue to contend with the legacy and implications of photography, cinema, and the special encounter of those simultaneously morbid and 'moving' influences with the long history of art, images and technologies. Using her richly researched and executed historical practice, Williams Gamaker here once again awakens the dead and provides them with a possible afterlife that might be a little more just than the painfully difficult lives they led as precariously placed and unreal icons. In doing so, she enriches the present and influences our own lives, emboldening us while encouraging us to be vigilant about the ways in which we might be used and represented by the avaricious 'creative industries'.

As for whether the 4th of July event at Matt's Gallery involved live-streaming or recorded and edited video, hopefully that question has been used here in a way that is more productive than merely answering it. Having said that, perhaps we have stumbled upon something profound about this difference after all, between the live stream and the recorded and edited video, a difference akin perhaps to that between life and death. Today, we are no longer satisfied with the relative lifelessness of the edited recording, no matter how moving and colourful and therefore realistic the original, photographically based image might be. The photographic image no longer reigns, as we have entered, through the age of data (which never sleeps), into the realm of the 'live stream' – our latest attempt to conquer death. Today's new sense of liveness (the buzz of being online, the grief at losing our connection and becoming offline) derives not from the age of the photographic image but from that of the video image. Its roots can be traced to that nexus-like camera plus monitor conspiracy,

¹⁰ See Paul O'Kane's writing on this theme in the following: *History in Contemporary Art and Culture*, London, Routledge, 2023; *Technologies of Romance: Part 1*, London, eedo, 2017; *Technologies of Romance: Part 2*, London, eedo, 2018

¹¹ See 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, op cit, pp 217–251

wherein we first (not in the 1830s but in the 1970s) found ourselves to be newly 'live' and thereby newly alive.

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