



MS&MR

XEROX MISSIVE 1977/2011

AGNSW CONTEMPORARY PROJECTS

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#3.11



Collaborative duo Ms&Mr explore the transformative potential contained within archives. Their practice is founded upon a process they call 'retroactive collaboration', which involves reanimating historical records such as photographs, childhood drawings and home-movies. By augmenting the narratives these documents represent, the artists manufacture exchanges that could never have taken place, harnessing the archive as a medium through which to communicate and collaborate with former versions of themselves and others.

Ms&Mr use this process extensively to modify their personal histories, inserting their adult selves into one another's childhood to contrive a shared past that reinforces the psychology of their present relationship. Recently they have begun to incorporate material sourced from repositories beyond their own. For the artists, these gestures of retrieval and their culmination in new pseudo-historical narratives account for the archive as a site of projected desire. Through the archive, the past can be rewritten and new points of contact forged, which may in turn invoke effects upon futures yet to be realised.

In addressing this idea, Ms&Mr emphasise the capacity for video to fluidly traverse moments in time, as well as its specific relationship to notions of memory and the index. We look to the archive to verify history and memory as authentic, placing particular emphasis on the recorded image as objective residue. Given they are actual inscriptions of their subjects, recorded images are both testimony to an occurrence and a document that can stand in for this event after the fact. Simultaneously, they are a marker of that moment's permanent disappearance – a symbolic vestige of death. In this sense, the camera can be understood as 'literally an archiving machine',¹ and the archive as a space where the living commune freely with the dead.

In their video installation *XEROX MISSIVE 1977/2011*, the artists channel these considerations of 'trans-temporality', testimony and intimate contact into an exploratory portrait of the late science fiction writer Philip K Dick and his fifth wife Tessa Busby. During an intense and prolific career, Dick published more than 40 novels and 100 short stories, establishing a reputation as one of the most original thinkers working in sci-fi who pushed the genre's inherent friction between fact and fantasy to its extreme. In 1974, while he and Tessa were married, Dick had a series of apocalyptic visions during which his domestic surrounds in Southern California were replaced by another version that looked like ancient Rome: an alternative universe into which he would periodically be thrust.²

Dick examined these experiences obsessively until his death in 1982, documenting his search for meaning in a lengthy exegesis. The nexus between his real life and fictional writing was also the subject of a speech he delivered at the Science Fiction Convention in Metz, France, in 1977 titled 'If you think this world is bad, you should see some of the others', and an interview he gave immediately following. The traces that remain of these events reveal Dick's firm belief – in the wake of his visions – that the 'counterfeit worlds' and 'partially actualised realities' described in his novels do exist, and that what seems false and delusional might in fact be a screen for the truth.

XEROX MISSIVE 1977/2011 draws on the archival remnants of Dick's 1977 speech and interview, transforming fragments of film and audio. These manipulated extracts provide an insight into his philosophical interest in what constitutes reality, as well as his personal theories on related phenomena such as branching universes and 'orthogonal time'.³ While these ideas (and Dick's speech generally) were greeted with scepticism in the 1970s, they bear a relationship to contemporary discussions in theoretical physics today – discussions that, in turn, inform Ms&Mr's practice.

Interlaced with this material is footage of Tessa taken by the artists in 2011 on location in California, as well as extracts from an associated interview in which she reflects on Dick's beliefs and their shared period of upheaval. Tessa held a particular significance for Dick as one of his 'dark-haired girls': a recurring figure in his novels who would disclose to the protagonist that their perception of reality was false. Her appearance to him in real life seemed to confirm elements of his fictional writing to be true. *XEROX MISSIVE 1977/2011* plays on the idea of Tessa returning telepathically to Dick from his future, where she is now decades older, fabricating a conversation between the two figures across an impossible stretch of time and distance. In effect, the work functions as a third temporal order, an alternate reality that can exist only within the dimensions of the screen.

As it plays out within each video and across the multiple channels, the exchange between the two figures is disorienting and unnerving. *XEROX MISSIVE 1977/2011* immerses viewers in a realm that reflects Dick's unstable sense of reality after 1974. It also recalls the deranged worlds described in his novels: 'delirious, paranoid, entropic and mystical, [places] in which reality had given way to endlessly regressing fictions, vast conspiracies, and mysterious messages from other realms'.⁴ This notion of indeterminacy is reflected in the void-like space of the videos, in which the figures float like spectres or phantasms.

The abstracted, nebulous way in which Dick and Tessa are represented frames their role as signifiers. Ultimately, the work aims to transcend their biography in order to address broader questions about the nature of time and reality, and the sometimes-precarious threshold between authenticity and artifice. Correspondingly, it considers the way in which history and memory cut across these domains. In exploring how the archive relates to these concerns, Ms&Mr borrow from archival processes. They gather together traces of past events and map a correlation between them. However, the artists deliberately draw on source material that has an ambiguous archival status: footage and sound that is essentially documentary, but that describes beliefs and events at least partially speculative or delusional. In so doing, *XEROX MISSIVE 1977/2011* points to the inherent slippage between the objective and subjective that underscores the archive's operation, much the same as memory itself.

Anneke Jaspers

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Art Gallery of New South Wales

1. Okwui Enwezor, 'Photography between history and the monument', *Archive fever: uses of the document in contemporary art*, International Centre for Photography, New York & Steidl Publishers, Göttingen, 2008, p 12

2. On occasions, these experiences of paranormal phenomena were shared with Tessa.

3. Where linear time moves from past to present to future, Dick considered orthogonal time to 'touch' the past, present and future simultaneously.

4. Pamela Jackson's description of Dick's 1966 novel *Ubik* applies broadly to his oeuvre; 'Sing out Ubik', *Histories of the future*, Duke University Press, Durham NC & London, 2005, p 173





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IT'S A COMMON THEME IN MY WRITING, THAT A DARK-HAIRED GIRL SHOWS UP AT THE DOOR OF THE PROTAGONIST AND TELLS HIM THAT HIS WORLD IS DELUSIONAL, THAT THERE'S SOMETHING FALSE ABOUT IT. WELL, THIS DID FINALLY HAPPEN TO ME ... SHE DID APPEAR, SHE WAS A TOTAL STRANGER AND SHE DID INFORM ME OF THIS FACT. THAT SOME OF MY FICTIONAL WORKS WERE IN A LITERAL SENSE TRUE

PHILIP K DICK, SPEECH GIVEN AT SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTION, METZ, FRANCE, 1977

BIOGRAPHY

Stephanie and Richard nova Milne have exhibited nationally and internationally as the collaborative entity Ms&Mr since 2003, including solo exhibitions at Artspace, Sydney [2010]; The Physics Room, Christchurch, New Zealand [2010]; and Kaliman Gallery, Sydney [2009 and 2007]. In 2008 Ms&Mr exhibited in *Primavera* at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; in 2005 they were awarded the prestigious Helen Lempriere Travelling Art Scholarship, enabling residencies in New York, Toronto and Paris. Their work is held in a number of collections, including the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou, France.

READING.VIEWING.LISTENING LIST

by Ms&Mr

- Elisabeth Antebi, *Les evades du futur*, television documentary, France, 1973
- Emmanuel Carrère, *I am alive and you are dead: a journey into the mind of Philip K Dick*, Picador, USA, 2003
- Robert Crumb, *The religious experience of Philip K Dick*, an 8-page illustrated feature about PKD, originally published in *Weirdo* #17, 1986
- Philip K Dick, *Ubik*, Doubleday, USA, 1969
- Chris Marker, *La jetée*, film, black and white, 28 min, France, 1962
- Andrei Tarkovsky, *Solyaris*, film, 165 min, Soviet Union, 1972

LIST OF WORKS

XEROX MISSIVE 1977/2011
multi-channel video installation
archived video recordings [1977] transferred to HD video, original 3K video [2011], animation

A trans-temporal portrait:
Philip K Dick (1928-82)
Tessa B Dick (b 1954)

Production images courtesy of the artists

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