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Notes from a ceiling in north London

By Charles Darwent

From somewhere long ago, Matthew Buckingham's video installation *The Spirit and the Letter* dredges up a snippet of physics: that images seen through a lens appear inverted. I haven't thought of this for years, but Buckingham's work brings it back – maybe because I'm sitting on the ceiling of the room where it's being played, or that its heroine, Mary Wollstonecraft, has made her entrance upside-down. Seen through Buckingham's lens, the world looks the right way up, an antidote to the chandelier that sprouts from the floor of the room I'm in. The chandelier in *The Spirit and the Letter* hangs reassuringly downwards, although that comfort is lost when, bat-like, Wollstonecraft walks past it on the ceiling. She opens a door, but the wall above it is a barrier, like the half-door of a barn. Wollstonecraft peers over this, then sits in the top of a window and reads from *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*: "You who expect constancy when everything is changing... you yourself are strikingly altered."

This madness suggests two things: that films are works of artifice, and that history is as well. We remember Wollstonecraft as a camera might, two-dimensionally, frozen in time; but she, like all history, is constantly being re-written. She's at home in a Georgian room, and yet its doorways have become barriers, the soffits of its windows things to be sat on. Wollstonecraft reads from her work in the present tense, although it was written in the past. Gravity can't keep her feet on the floor, history can't tie her down.

The Spirit and the Letter is a self-confessedly deceitful thing, obsessed with its own frailties, and this is true of the other works in this show. The subjects of *Everything I Need* and *False Future* are also historical figures, respectively the gay psychologist, Charlotte Wolff, and the



inventor of motion pictures, Louis Le Prince. Actually, the subject of all three films is film.

Everything I Need chronicles Wolff's return to Berlin after 45 years in Britain. The work feels like a Seventies home movie, with images of a Caravelle jet projected alongside extracts from Wolff's autobiography. Like Wolff, we look for some kind of meaning: "Which Germany would I be returning to?" she asks. "1918, 1923, 1933... 1952, 1961?" There's history going on, but which? In the eternal flux of time and film, where do we sit?

False Future shows Buckingham's preoccupation with his medium. Buckingham replicates Le Prince's famous eight-second shot of Leeds with an equivalent of his own. It does what film does, which is to record truth; buses going by, people walking. Yet the one thing we don't know about Le Prince is how he died. In September 1890, he boarded a train to Paris and was never seen again – a curious omission for a man whose legacy was the recorded image. It's an irony Buckingham savours.