

Matthew Buckingham
Muhheakantuck – Everything Has a Name

STATEMENT

Working across the media of film, video, writing, drawing and print I hope that my work asks the question ‘what role does social memory play in defining the present moment?’ By this I mean, what are the politics of interpreting past events and how is this alternately hidden or articulated? The term social memory evolved partly from an interest in pursuing an alternative to ‘academic’ or ‘historical’ memory. This was seen as a more flexible discipline that could accommodate ‘unofficial’ modes of recall such as oral history or ‘visual culture.’ The academy and historical memory later countered that, not being systematized or rigorous, social memory ran the risk of collapsing into the type of memory which also reproduces stereotypes or nationalistic narratives. By the last quarter of the twentieth century many historians had synthesized something of each, developing historical practices that incorporated aspects of both position, particularly within strategies of ‘history from below’ and the ‘new historicism’ that came out of feminism and queer theory. Susan Buck-Morss, writing about Walter Benjamin, asserts that for Benjamin the ‘vanishing point’ of history is always the present moment. Formulating it this way implies that to think about the past is much more a process of re-staging events here and now, rather than actually returning to a past time to make discoveries. I think this way of approaching the present and past places more responsibility on us as we make decisions and exercise whatever agency we may have. This idea of history vanishing into our present also signals a degree of urgency in those decisions, an urgency that is echoed in the often-quoted phrase from William Faulkner: ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past.’ Memory is one of the most pervasive elements and tools of human life. Within photography, film and video, questions of time are endemic. Photography and film always insist on something that was. Roland Barthes might have said that, in terms of language, the tense of film and photography is: ‘this-will-have-been.’ This is a kind of future/past tense which I believe always provokes speculation and interpretation over the meaning of images. This speculation unfolds between three positions: the photographer, the subject photographed and the viewer of the work. Each has a different role and different stake in the triangle between them and in the image produced. I attempt to use this speculative aspect, the interpretation that every image demands, to rethink the ways that we represent events and narrate out experience and others’ experience. This is what I set out to do with my project ‘Muhheakantuck- Everything has a Name,’ which looks at the relatively brief but disastrous period of colonial contact between the Indigenous population of the Hudson River valley and the Dutch in the 17th century. Most histories of New York City allocate only a few pages to the city’s 24,000 people. Even fewer are

aware that today almost three times that number of Native Americans live in the city. By focusing explicitly on this passage of time, and its resonance, I hoped to defamiliarize New York to the majority of its citizens, and to those who, by proxy, believe they know something of the city's history.

Material histories, and in turn, the material limits of production are central to my practice. I aspire to cause the spectator always to question what they see and the context in which they find it. This has meant working very closely with the physical environments in which my work is made and shown. This is not always apparent in the static (or, for that matter, moving) documentation of the projects. Hopefully by stretching the conventions for showing work and recognizing –as the philosopher Edward Casey points out—that to be is to be somewhere, and 'somewhere' is always a place, viewers of my work may extend the questions I'm raising into the surroundings and their own lives. Physically, this often has to do with the scale, position, and relation to the surrounding architecture or even neighborhood where my work is shown, something which sometimes must be experienced in person.

Matthew Buckingham, November 2007