

Comforts

I've been able to define two categorizations of online screenings this past year at home: the set-everything-aside-get-a-glass-of-water-make-it-fullscreen ones, and the resize-the-browser-window-so-it-fits-beside-another one: an inevitable and distracted multi-tasking that is the result of all the work, play, leisure, and consumption of my life being relegated to online space. Het Nieuwe Instituut's recent month-long screening of *Comfort and Vision* has fallen into the latter; in fact, I'm writing this with one eye as I watch with the other. I feel fine about this. *Comfort and Vision* is a compilation of one minute segments of 21 artists' works. The different artists' content flows together, creating slivered peeks into video practices. As a result, the context of the works and the artists' subject positions are curtailed by the screening's format. The artists have chosen their one minute themselves, so it is the sequencing of the whole 21 minutes that my attention is being asked for. I am unresolved on whether this format is an opportunistic gesture of the artists, or an extractive gesture of the organizers. Either way, I feel permitted to pay a little bit less attention. I offer just one of my two eyes.

I'm wearing my good headphones. I can hear the sound change as each minute passes. I hear different voices, I write to some fixed shots while some more demanding fragments catch both my eyes. I make the window a bit wider, then narrower again as I return to writing. My attention ebbs and flows; in and out of the screening. "Comfort is where the least unpredictable things happen. Does that make our senses lazy?" Bayri asks in his curatorial statement, within the context of a pandemic affected house-bound viewership. In these times, I avoid the word "lazy" like ~~the plague~~ the virus. Bayri's provocation makes me think not only of what it means to spend the majority of my days indoors, but what other parts of my life outside my house have fallen into routine or habitual comforts: my relationships, my way of speaking, how I think of and represent myself in public.

While watching *Comfort and Vision*, something happens that I expect was unintended by the organisers: I recognize a voice, reading a list I've heard before. Specifically, it is the voice of

Sophie Bates, Rotterdam-based artist whose work I am familiar with, and who is a friend. The one-minute excerpt of Bates' work is from her video *South West to South East (London)*, which she exhibited at the exhibition space Peach in Rotterdam last summer. I didn't see the exhibition in person, but she sent me a file and I watched it on my lap, at home. *South West to South East (London)* was a glass-of-water-full-screen kind of viewing experience. I watched it twice, and the second time I exited full-screen and opened a new window to write a letter to Sophie that turned into a kind of chronological annotation of the work as it played a second time. I wrote to her then about familial comforts, performances of courtesy and finding space to be a self.

Bates' one minute fragment in *Comfort and Vision* is the opening scene of her video *South West to South East (London)*. My letter circled around that memorable first scene: the artist alone in bed masturbating and a list read out-loud. Below is an abridged and edited version of that letter-turned-annotated-response, half a year after Bates' video was exhibited, months after the original letter was written, resurfacing now on the opportunistic occasion of Het Nieuwe Instituut's screening of *Comfort and Vision*.

The opening scene, a list read out-loud, went quickly: it lingers in my memory as the artist's night alone in bed masturbating. Hypnotized by this beginning, I hold on to it as the video quickly continues. In the following scene, I find myself in a car, in the chaos of familial conversation. There are people talking over each other about a news story – a woman being run over five times – which is numbed by the numerous voices announcing it. The car is a little room and everyone is talking over one another.

This scene is more about the action of *thinking of* the story – the woman being run over five times – *together* rather than the story itself. I'm thinking about what must have been a long job of subtitling this scene. Bates' over-processing of this moment with subtitles amplifies its dissociating effect, and makes me think about how much headspace *thinking together* takes. Subtitling is a retroactive and slow process, and here it has been applied to this fast, transient moment: in a car, in the morning, in an enclosed shared space. These car scenes amplify the loudness of how thoughts are spoken, and enforced, with people we are familiar with, with family. This hurricane of familial conversation follows the

very different hurricane of the listing and masturbating in the opening scene that I'm still holding onto, where I found Bates (myself) alone in a bed masturbating, googling: *why I'm not wet, cervical cancer, how to have better sex*.

Amplified thoughts and sharing continue with a group of women who seem to call themselves "The Sheen Girls". We are listening to mainstream dance music, and I think it's New Year's Eve. A boy named Matt makes a stuttered giggle, which sounds like the laugh all boys trained themselves to make in the early 2000s. That laugh is both nostalgic and troublesome: a marker of coming to a certain age, and an aural signifier of social and gendered power. It reminds me of trying to figure out what I should find funny as a young girl in a group of friends.

Again, this family is saying whatever comes to mind out loud in the car: "*remember driving in Spain*", "*won't do that again*", "*it's only twelve minutes from their house, fifteen from the other*", "*won't make much of a difference*". These scenes amplify the loudness of how thoughts are spoken, and enforced, with people we are familiar with, with family. Again, I'm thinking about the first fragment, about her masturbating in her bedroom.

I'm back with The Sheen Girls on New Year's Eve and it reminds me of a conversation I had with a friend¹ recently. She described to me how her high school friends still "perform acts of courtesy": for everyone's birthday there is a score, for holidays there is a score, for girls nights out there is a score, for dinners with couples there is a score. All of these things we do with people we know to perform our familiarity, or to reinforce and affirm some reciprocal and intentional being in each other's lives. I do love to dance these courtesy performances with the people I love, because in those moments we share a language of love, and a space that feels safe. However, I wonder sometimes if the steps we follow together as people who love each other abridge the possibility of knowing each other further, in different ways, making space for our inevitably changing selves.

¹ This friend is Clementine Edwards.

In Bates' *South West to South East (London)*, I am reminded that these traditions are deeply gendered, and how desperately I yearn for new forms of reciprocal affirmations of familiarity, comfort, and long-term love that stand outside a heteronormative cultural regime. In other scenes of the work, The Sheen Girls sit at a summertime table and talk about their professional success in relation to what cigarettes they can afford; a mother comments on her newlywed son's under-decorated apartment; later, she reads a definition of Love at a church podium. And all throughout, that stuttered giggle from Matt rings in my ears as a reminder of what it felt like to figure how much of myself I could be as a girl growing up, in the company of family with whom I thought things together out loud with, and the company of friends who had thought things together out loud with their own families, and how these swallowed and re-performed thoughts shaped the ways of our being together.

All of a sudden I'm hearing Christmas music and seeing mash and gravy and it is the formalized tradition of a holiday, edged right up against the more insinuated traditions of The Sheen Girls and the family car ride and the Bible's definition of Love. At this dinner I'm really missing Bates' bedroom (at this point, I associate it with my own bedroom): talking about wetness, your partner's penis, searching on Google. Like, I just need some time alone in my bedroom to be me. In a house full of family, the me behind my bedroom door ends up being an exaggerated performance of "me" in resistance to the "me" that sits at the Christmas table in the company of the people and places I've known "forever": since primary school, since birth.

Back in the car. At least it's quiet. The driving shots are starting to make me a bit sick and I'm trying not to feel trapped in all these familial worlds and have a bit more sensitivity to them. I feel trapped in this car.

Now someone is playing a piano. Everyone in the room can be alone together for a while when someone plays a piano. I am relieved by this piano.

What lingers in *South West to South East (London)* is its irregular tempo; it bounces between the ongoing shots in the car, the summertime table, the under-decorated

apartment, the Christmas table. As the video takes me on yet another drive through the countryside, I hear Bates read a text about the memory of a drive to her grandparents' house: a predictable routine she takes comfort in. This text slowly dissolves into a list, just like the list from the opening scene. I love Bates' lists and how she reads them. The lists function like an aftertaste of associative memory, freed from the accumulation of time, old habits, traditions, and courtesies.

A list is predictable in its ongoingness, but in its direction can take new forms of association and relation. Its lack of pronouns or persuasive adjectives and its promise to end is a different kind of predictability than that of performed courtesies. It is comforting. As *South West to South East (London)* ends, I find myself thinking of the list from the beginning: the masturbating and wetness and she-boss and Google. Maybe the best thing about that opening list is that I miss it the whole way through.