

Nought to Sixty

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Stephen Connolly

Some of the strongest cultural responses to the shifts in the political and social landscape that followed 9/11 have come through film, and particularly through the mode of documentary. Stephen Connolly (born Montreal, 1964, lives in London) is an artist-filmmaker who employs the investigative and reconstructive aspects of documentary, exploring how its formal conditions can reflect on both individual and social agency.

Shown at film festivals as well as in gallery contexts, Connolly's work uses various practices associated with conceptual film, including atemporality and montage, while always emphasising a central motif or subject. The artist does not foreground his own presence, but employs a multitude of voices and modes that include direct commentary, reportage and reconstructed speech.

Connolly's *Film for Tom* (2005) attempts to piece together elements of a deceased friend's life. It is a portrait, yet one that is necessarily fragmented - in response to a personality that was not straightforward, and that was not comfortable within 'conventional' society. The artist's own audio recordings of Tom, conversing on politics and on his place in the world, are coupled with images and sounds that operate as traces of the man: an answer-phone message from his old school, reporting an entry in the school records; images from an archive of his photographs. *Film for Tom* is a searing and poignant act of remembrance, but also a rounded expression of the difficulty of understanding an individual's position in the world.

Connolly's earlier film *The Whale* (2003) is described by the artist as "an oblique meditation on safety, fear and notions of faraway places". Here the fleeting image and voice of Ulrike Meinhof, who was one of the leading members of Germany's Red Army Faction, is intertwined with footage of people in an urban park and of a walk through Cairo's City of the Dead. A dialogue between mother and child unites these disparate elements.

In Connolly's hands the documentary is a nonjudgmental form, un-dogmatic about its status as historical document or mode of investigation. *Great American Desert* (2008) moves from contemporary footage of recreational vehicles in the Arizona desert, to images of a re-staging of the Hiroshima bomb as propagandistic entertainment within the Los Angeles Coliseum in 1945. Through a mode of filmmaking rooted in the personal and quotidian, Connolly highlights the origins of our culture of spectacle and leisure - a culture that can obfuscate both history and truth.

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