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Memory Flows: *Traffic Series* by Jennifer and Kevin McCoy

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Just as commuters typically encounter the same faces and places every day, the miniature figures that populate Jennifer and Kevin McCoy's artificial worlds in *Traffic Series* are doomed to see the same scene again and again. The tiny versions of 'Jennifer' and 'Kevin' who observe the action from a distance are also trapped in an endless cycle but they at least can view the scene from multiple vantage points. Sometimes, Jennifer and Kevin even occupy multiple positions in relation to the scene, as in the case of *Traffic #1: Our Second Date*, where they are present as both detached commentators and captive viewers, in thrall to the image on the silver screen. It is possible to read these various processes of repetition as an attempt to excise or 'work through' some form of trauma, in the hope of an eventual resolution and release. But as each car, or indeed the entire scene, passes in front of the camera it quickly becomes apparent that there will be no resolution. We are not at a film shoot and there is no one here to call 'action' or 'cut'. Instead, what we are presented with is a 'live' scene in which the cameras keep on rolling just like a 24 hour news channel. But despite this insistence on liveness the events presented by the McCoy's also belong to the past, because each instalment in *Traffic Series* refers to a specific film from the late 1960s or early 70s. So each scene seems to suggest the re-enactment of a fragment of cinematic spectacle, in which the event or place being represented exists alongside its representation on screen.

By referencing the strategy of re-enactment, the McCoy's are invoking a very early form of cinematic (or rather 'proto-cinematic') entertainment: the panorama. According to Alison Griffiths, the re-enactment or reconstruction of a celebrated event, such as a famous battle, was a 'key organising principle of many non-fictional panoramas' towards the close of the eighteenth century. She suggests that processes of re-enactment actually came to define the 'panorama effect' experienced by visitors to these entertainments – a sense of 'revisitation, of witnessing again, in modified form, that which has occurred in a different time and place'.¹ Griffiths emphasises that while each panorama depicted a moment frozen in time, it also presented this moment as though it was unfolding in time and space. Panoramas could even depict the 'kinetic' in various ways: through the physical movement of the image before the spectator or through the use of lighting effects that gave the impression of changes in time (as

in the case of Daguerre's 'diorama'). These entertainments also offered diverse modes of spectatorship: sometimes the viewer was mobile, experiencing a succession of 'scenes' as he or she walked past a scene mounted or painted on a curved wall. In contrast, at the moving panorama the viewer would sit in a darkened auditorium for the duration of a performance, which included music and an explanatory lecture.

In some ways, the work of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy offers a fusion of these disparate modes of display and reception. While the spectator within the panorama rotunda might stand at the centre in order to view a scene in its entirety, the visitor to the *Traffic Series* can walk around the scene and look down at the figures below, comparing their own view with that projected on the wall. Alternatively, it is possible to take up the static position modelled by the miniature Kevin and Jennifer in front of a tiny television or cinema screen. *Traffic Series* does not, however, make the same claims to truthfulness or authenticity associated with the panoramic depictions of great battles or other historical events in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The McCoy's are not necessarily interested in creating a convincing representation of the 'original' event (which would in any case have been staged for the film cameras many times over). Rather, they are fascinated by the processes through which their memories of these films have become intertwined with the history of their own relationship. So the scene from *Weekend* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1967) is assembled entirely from memories of their second date, while *Traffic #3: In the Cardiac Ward* incorporates a miniature version of the hospital room where they watched *American Graffiti* (George Lucas, 1973) together.

There are other forms of mediation at work in the translation from two to three dimensions and the use of models serves to situate *Traffic Series* at a point of intersection between the past and future of cinema. Physical models have been central to the technology of visual effects ever since the 'fairytale' films of George Méliès in the late 19th century but with the advent of computer animation and visualisation, physical and digital modelling techniques have become ever more integrated into the process of filmmaking. These techniques now enable the pre-planning as well as the actual production of complex (and costly) scenes, many of which combine motion control with motion capture. Digital modelling is also widely used within the realm of architecture and urban planning and the digital visualisation or 'walk through' has become almost as common as a physical construction. Presumably, architectural models and other visualisations have played a part in the design and development of the new

Visualise arts centre in Carlow, and *Traffic Series* offers an interesting standpoint from which to examine the processes of consultation and negotiation that are integral to public art.

These activities of negotiation were traditionally conducted ‘backstage’ but over the past decade they have begun to acquire a greater visibility in contemporary art practice, to the extent that many artists now direct their attention towards the investigation and representation of social relations, particularly when those relations are characterised by conflict or inequality. While certain forms of self-consciously ‘relational’ art practices might tend to emphasise the achievement of consensus and the resolution of conflict, some artists and critics have also highlighted the importance of art as an arena in which antagonism can be made explicit. In an article that offers certain parallels with the work of the McCoys, Joe Scanlan argues that traffic, and specifically the approaches to ‘traffic control’ that rely on a shared ethical code, can provide an insight into the dynamics of self-determination and group interaction at work within much relational art. He suggests that while cooperation and consensus are probably required to ensure safe flows of traffic within social spaces, art should be a place where consensus is neither assumed nor enforced.²

Conflict is also integral to narrative cinema, of course, and screenwriting manuals regularly emphasise the need to establish and subsequently resolve the internal conflicts of central characters. Although there are many exceptions to this norm, commercial film and television tends to treat social or political conflict as the backdrop to a personal dilemma. It is possible, however, to identify a struggle against these norms in the films of the late 1960s and the early 1970s - or at least a resistance to conventional forms of narrative resolution: *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *Weekend* do not end happily. But by the mid-1970s, a return to established norms was evident, as suggested by the resolution of conflict at the close of both *The Sugarland Express* (Steven Spielberg, 1974) and *American Graffiti*. In the latter film, the nostalgic 1950s setting also enables the evocative recreation of a sense of urban collectivity associated with small town life. Since the early twentieth century, many artists working with the moving image have sought to contest or at least deconstruct these narrative conventions and the work of the McCoys is directly informed by the use of video tape delay technology to examine the relationship between self and image in the performance art of the 1960s and 70s.³ In *Traffic Series*, however, the video image also evokes newer technologies of both surveillance and entertainment, which converge in the multi-angle (and ostensibly ‘interactive’) coverage of football on digital television. This latter connection becomes

particularly obvious in Swans' Electrical shop, in the presentation of *Traffic Series #2: At Home* alongside a range of high definition flat screen televisions.

Back at the old Royal Hotel site, the references to cinema are more pronounced, perhaps because the video projections on the walls recall a more obviously 'cinematic' tradition of display. But it may also be because the hotel that once stood here was, like the cinema, the scene of many social gatherings. Now this space is empty but for the installation, and its concrete floor and bare walls seem to amplify the soundtrack – a cacophony of traffic noises. Closer to the models, it is possible to hear or at least imagine the sounds of the miniature cars as they negotiate tight corners on the main street of *Traffic #3: In the Cardiac Ward*. At certain moments the traffic on Dublin Street also becomes audible, providing a reminder of the world outside. The sense of multiple temporalities seems particularly acute here because of the doubled (and contested) status of this space: the site of both a new building and an old one, which now exists only in memory. In this setting, Jennifer and Kevin McCoys' *Traffic Series* seems to offer a means of negotiating temporal as well as spatial traffic, providing an array of imaginative routes through the memories that continue to flow around this place.

¹ Alison Griffiths, 'Panoramas and the Origins of the Cinematic Reenactment', *Screen* 44.1, Spring 2003, page 2.

² Joe Scanlan, 'Traffic Control', *Artforum*, Summer 2005, page 123.

³ The work of Dan Graham is particularly relevant. See Dan Graham, *Two Way Mirror Power: Selected Writings by Dan Graham on his Art*, (edited by Alexander Alberro), Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999.