

**ELIZABETH PRICE**  
**SOUND OF THE BREAK**

MARCH 23 – MAY 29, 2023

**BOOKLET TEXTS OF THE EXHIBITION**

**INTRODUCTION**

Elizabeth Price's video works present a captivating interplay of image, text, and music. From the very beginning, the title of the exhibition "SOUND OF THE BREAK" draws attention to one of the most significant peculiarities of Price's working method: audible elements—that is, music, voice, sounds, and noises—play a decisive role in these works, in which the artist narrates what are actually familiar, everyday moments from an unexpected perspective, thereby unearthing entirely new layers of meaning.

Her works are also characterized by a highly idiosyncratic appropriation of the aesthetics of corporate slideshow presentations, with explanatory text boxes appearing above a sequence of archival images, computer-animated graphics, and found or original video sequences.

Price employs this aesthetic to develop a unique form of Institutional Critique that speaks to her particular concerns regarding social hierarchies, gender, language, technology, and memory. Rather than clear and obvious symbols, it is the rereading and reexamination of objects, the observation of marginal notes and secondary information, that are of interest to the artist. Strictly speaking, Price looks to the "footnotes", which become her conceptual and theoretical frameworks and function as spaces of feminist collaboration. This allows her to explain correlations she discovers in these interstices. In her works, Price focuses on seemingly insignificant objects, unheard voices, and blind spots in our perception. Her selection and subsequent digital manipulation of the material also raises questions about power and gender relations, in turn addressing issues of social representation.

A hallmark of Price's style is the use of animated text within the image that echoes advertising jargon—a feature that immediately connects her to an earlier generation of text-based conceptual artists. Price's videos encourage us to challenge our notion of the present so as to discover its nature and other potential perspectives. The exhibition is divided into two parts: the exhibition's entrance leads to a space dedicated to video lectures by the artist, located between the four video works. In these video lectures produced during the Covid-19 pandemic, Price discusses her work in detail, explaining the technical processes and the development of her work's content, and elaborates on the complexity of her thinking and craftsmanship. In both her video lectures and moving-image works, she explores themes such as work, technology, gender, and politics, as well as her own research on art and disembodied voices. Visible from this space are passages to the right and left that lead into the four moving-image installations. In each of these two rooms, which contain furniture-and-video installations, two videos alternately animate the installation within the space.

Elizabeth Price lives and works in London. In 2012, she won the Turner Prize for her solo exhibition *Here* at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, Gateshead. In 2013, she received the Contemporary Art Society Annual Award with the Ashmolean Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. She is a professor of film and photography at Kingston University London.

***A RESTORATION (2016)***

This video provides a hectic, hallucinatory survey of the vast image archives of the Ashmolean Museum and Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford. It is narrated by a chorus of self-proclaimed “museum administrators” and features every type of visual document created by the two museums in their long history of excavating and collecting artifacts.

Although the documents were originated in varied media, they all appear here as digital artifacts. And we encounter them only within the administrators’ computer file system, starting with thousands of images created by Sir Arthur Evans, archaeologist and first director of the Ashmolean (in its modern form). The administrators show us photographs, drawings, and paintings he created and commissioned during his reckless restoration of Knossos, the Bronze Age city on the island of Crete. They flip through these images impatiently, using the twin projection screens like the pages of a photo album. At other times, pictures stack up swiftly, like windows opening on the desktop of a computer.

Speaking as a combined synthetic voice, the administrators narrate the documents. They lead us through Evans’s project, satirically reconstructing his destructive restoration of the ancient city. Then, having rebuilt that ruin in their digital realm, they adopt its mazy structure as an alternative repository for the museums’ collections. This absurd notion leads to a series of eccentric categorizations and fantastical interpretative leaps.

At one stage, they take us through each of the museums’ departments in sixty seconds by filtering one of the few types of object common to all: the drinking vessel. This intoxicated dash starts with a Minoan cup and concludes with a Jacobean wine glass (which later gets noisily smashed). Later, they imagine the mythic maze of Knossos as a giant cochlea—the spiral chamber of the inner ear—and harvest all of the sounds that the thousands of museum objects could possibly make. They orchestrate this cacophony to restage the fall of both the ancient city and Evans’s project of restoration.

***FELT TIP (2018)***

This video features a collection of men’s neckties made between 1970 and 1990. Many of their designs appear to incorporate imagery of computer networks, interfaces, and memory chips. At the time, information technology was revolutionizing the office workplace, which perhaps explains this. But there are other connections: woven textiles and computing share a long technical history. Indeed, the computer’s ability to “remember” is derived from the jacquard loom.

*FELT TIP (2018)* draws on this history of data storage, but also extends it into an imagined future: a corporate realm in which administrators are employed to store documents in their own DNA.

These administrators—who are the narrators of the work—describe how billions of bytes of data are written into the cells of their fingertips. As a kind of therapy and a form of protest, the administrators begin to collect images of men’s neckties, which they regard as significant artifacts in the history of hegemonic memory. They furtively annex part of their fingertip data stores for this purpose, and use these images to elaborate on the enduring class and gender hierarchies of office life.

Their stories turn on a series of visual echoes and substitutions. The weary phallic symbolism of the tie is ignored in favor of similarities to the ink-pen nib, fingertip, stiletto, and tongue. As they flip through these images, the administrators swiftly segue from considering executive authority to related matters of authorship, digital inscription, and oral history. Word games are also used, ranging from bawdy jokes to etymological references. Indeed, the administrators express themselves in a combination of slang, innuendo, synonym, and rhyme. They draw upon the roots of words—the digital (finger) in the digital and the secret of the secretary—to propose a writing of fluid, heterogeneous meaning. Everything gets mixed up, including languages themselves—English with French, philosophy with pop—in the telling of the tale.

***NIGHT OF THE WORLD (2023)***

In December 2002, a ship called the Tricolor sank amid dense fog along with its cargo of 2897 Luxury cars. It went down in an area of the Channel between the British Isles and mainland Europe called West Hinder. The video takes us to this location, into the dark hold of the wrecked vessel, to witness the spectral image of its luxury cargo drifting in the murk.

The exact area in which the Tricolor sank is a small area of the sea unclaimed and not legislated by any state. Within the video, it operates as an “other” place with different laws, much like how outer space functions within science fiction. This provides the premise for a fantasy narrative in which the luxury cars exert a kind of consciousness. The morphology of their “intelligent vehicle control systems” (which digitally perform navigation, entertainment, climate, and safety functions) is corrupted by immersion in the polluted, underwater environment. They develop memory and desire, as well as the language to communicate these things, derived entirely from their specific user manual and product press releases. Most particularly, they acquire a powerful collective will, and the ability to exert their force in concert.

It is the combined force of the cars’ “intelligent control systems” that constitutes the video’s protagonist. It narrates, addressing the viewer via onscreen motion graphics and a choir of synthetic voices; it provides mapping graphics to narrate the location of the wreck, and it selects the musical soundtrack for the action. In the latter stages of the video, the narration shifts into a more lyric form. The cars “play” a song from their hard drives, and their drifting inertia evolves into a lovely, synchronized underwater dance. This begins in an apparently joyful, almost optimistic spirit, but concludes with a spectral threat.

An earlier version of this work called *WEST HINDER* was produced in 2012.

***UNDERFOOT (2022)***

The first seven minutes of *UNDERFOOT (2022)* take us through the extensive reading rooms of Europe’s largest lending library, shortly before its public opening in 1981. A series of photographs created at that time provide the basis for this tour. They document a large, late-modernist building with spacious interiors of clean, geometric design. While the rooms are furnished for hundreds of readers, they appear entirely unpopulated and, even more conspicuously, hold no books.

The rare opportunity to observe a library prior to the admission of its contents offers a certain imaginative license: to fill it up differently. This is seized by the video’s two unnamed, voiceless narrators, who guide us through the empty building. The tour is anodyne at the start, but the narrators focus with increasing intensity upon the acoustic qualities of the hardwood veneers and decorative carpets that line the reading rooms.

In moderating the sonic world of the library, these materials enact a kind of confinement and exclusion. Yet through their specific materialities and imagery, they are also fugitive and diverting. The narrators duly exploit this contradiction, now with the feverish excitement of a ghost story. They elaborate the library’s geometric modernist interior, via certain Gothic precedents, into a realm of foliage and flora. And here, they exhort us to dig.

The second part of the work reveals glimpses of a body of archival material located in the same city as the library: a collection of floral designs for the spool carpet loom. This remarkable, if grotesque invention of the industrial age supplied yarn to the loom using a chain of hundreds of linked spools, as wide as the carpet itself and hundreds of feet long. The chain of spools was suspended overhead, slung between rolling cogs, extending far beyond the loom-body and spreading across the factory ceiling—much like an upturned, phantasmic image of the carpet being woven below.

***THE CHORUS AND THEIR MEMORY (2020)***

This is the first of several video lectures created by Elizabeth Price during the Covid pandemic, when lockdown restrictions were imposed in London. Unable to deliver lectures in person, and with creative projects interrupted, Price began to make a series of intricately composed video lectures. Conducted not only from the solitary space of her studio, but also deep within the digital repositories and computer interfaces where she creates her videos, they offer a forensic encounter with artistic method and motivation.

In this lecture, Price primarily focuses upon the two-channel work *FELT TIP* (2018), unpicking its complex production processes and analysing the social history of the textiles it features. Dwelling, in particular, upon a series of neckties that seem to be decorated with the image of a computer chip instead of a historic, institutional crest, she addresses the differing notions of long or deep cultural memory at stake.

***A GOTHIC CHOIR: THE TOTAL WORK (2021)***

Polyphony and the dramatic chorus are recurring themes in the moving-image art of Elizabeth Price. This manifests in her use of narration provided by multiple voices. Often, these varied “voices” represent different archival and technological sources and are the basis for the development of a heterogeneous method of audio-visual composition. *A GOTHIC CHOIR: THE TOTAL WORK* (2021) is the first of three lectures in which Price explores the significance of the medieval architectural form of the Gothic choir in the development of her own language of expression in moving-image art. In particular, she identifies the architecture of the choir as a literal, sculptural expression of the enduring resonance of the voices of the dead.

***A GOTHIC CHOIR: PLANS AND ELEVATIONS (2021)***

In this, the second lecture dedicated to the Gothic choir, Elizabeth Price explores the similarities of that architectural form to the design of law courts, theaters, and political chambers of debate, such as the British House of Commons. Further to this, Price relates the choir to systems for the organization of knowledge, arguing that the historic “voices” inferred by the Gothic choir are often also those of the authors who created some of the first libraries. She develops these themes with particular reference to *A RESTORATION* (2016), moving through its dense, digital repositories of historic photographs and documents, and exploring her own methods of reorganizing vast amounts of this material on the editing timeline, only a fraction of which is visible in the video itself.

***A GOTHIC CHOIR: SONG AND DANSE (2021)***

Certain origins of the Gothic choir lie in the classical chorus, defined as a circle of singing dancers. In this lecture, Elizabeth Price considers Gothic revivals and their enduring impact on ideas of embodied performance and voice. Briefly addressing costumes and postures of power in academic, ecclesiastical, and legal contexts, Price goes on to explore the expression of voice in the tradition of British satiric prints, which were contemporaneous with the Gothic revival in literature and architecture.

In the latter part of the lecture, she assesses the impact of the Gothic on audio technology, arguing that the architectural choir’s inference of spectral voices is also a prelude to more recent technological revenants: all those disembodied presences created by voice-recording technologies from the wax cylinder to the digital. Price asks what it means to reassemble such a choir within the digital. Is it possible to conjure the dead to sing a different song?