

Exploration and Unlearning

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– Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, 1972

Play is often at the same time, training in motor skills and sensory awareness, exercise and excitement, and warfare with the adult world, as well as providing a disturbing parody of this world.

– Colin Ward, *The Child in the City*, 1977

(...) she seems to project her nerves, all her senses, deep into these lifeless objects. Confronted by a wall, which is so high that she cannot reach up to feel the top, she nevertheless obtains an impression of what it is like by throwing a ball against it. (...) With the help of the ball she received an impression of the hardness and solidity of the wall.

– Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experience and Architecture*, 1959

Exploration and Unlearning is the title of a series of videos we have produced together with our daughter Solvej between 2004 and 2006. The first video was produced when she was just turning five years old and the last one when she was six. The series was produced for television and the reflection in the videos upon this mode of distribution developed and changed from production to production, for Solvej as well as for us. The technologies of representation, from the camera to the screen, were continually an object of contestation during the production of the videos. Sometimes it was the object of play and happy transgression, at other times an object of dispute and outright war. With one camera we had only one 'eye' to share between us, and what kind of 'eye' was going to become 'the camera eye'? - that was the contested question.

The Exploration and Unlearning series was produced for tv-tv, a Copenhagen based activist television station. We have been involved in founding this station and are still regularly producing programmes shown on television in the Copenhagen area. In this way television has in the last three years, in a particular way, been a part of the life at the Copenhagen Free University, where the three of us live. Within the framework of the CFU we also arrange open evenings for communal television watching, accompanied by discussions on television production and reception, present and historical. As Jean-Luc Godard pointed

out in quite a poetic way, television is something that you watch 'together alone', where cinema is something that you watch 'alone together'. We wanted to break that structure of social isolation by bringing people together to watch television within the framework of the domestic space that is the Copenhagen Free University.

Our way of working at the CFU is experimental and it is rarely systematic in an academic or scientific sense. When working with television we have been asking basic questions: what is a camera, how can it be used, and who can use it? What is a microphone, how can it be used, and who can use it? And how can a camera and a microphone be used together? Very basic questions, but also complex ones, because the camera and the microphone are social technologies. Many interests want us to believe that only professionals can use these technologies in a meaningful way. That's ideology, of course. Solvej is able to use the camera very well. She produces images. She represents.

With her parents working with television as media activists, Solvej was curious about television. She did not have a specific interest in the activity, as we know it, but more a playful attempt to fill the word with various meanings that make sense to her. Like the children of bakers, who often want to play with flour and rolls, somehow to play or parody the role of the adult. And of course she was watching the kids' programmes on mainstream television herself. tv-tv has its slots late at night, from 11pm three days a week, and that was of course much too late for Solvej to watch, which she complained about on many occasions, wanting us to move the slot to a more child-friendly hour. Solvej has been playing with our camera quite often, taking it into her room, making small films with her toy landscapes. Sometimes she has used it as a mirror, pointing the lens towards her face and turning the small viewer screen around, so that she can watch herself and talk to herself through the camera. Very simple experiments with representation, sometimes she was not even seeing the technology, believing that the viewer screen was reflecting her image like a mirror, and when touching it with her finger it went past the image frame, because the lens has a slightly displaced view. But for her it was also social communication because the recordings were not relevant to her before we watched them together: mirror and screen.

The *Exploration and Unlearning* series is about what happens when the adult world attempts to collaborate with a child on telling a story, simultaneously constructing a language. And in this case it is not only adults and child, it is also parents and child, which of course would be a treat for any psychoanalyst to look at. But our interest has mainly been around the space of conflict, between the unmediated desire to play in various ways and the social conventions of communication and meaning that is connected to any technology of representation. The desire to play pushes away any utilitarianism because play does not need any specific causality or to reproduce any specific social value to

make sense for the kids involved. In the *Exploration and Unlearning Series* we are moving through a series of themes around these conflicts between play and social meaning. *Hamburg Town*, which was the first production, is thematizing the use of the camera as a tool of communication, as well as an object of investigative play. In the *Blackbird* the focus moves to the medium of television as the main subject; it uses the news broadcast as a genre for a playful investigation. And finally the *Film's Start* where Solvej visits a professional film photographer at the film school to get an insight into how the production system works and discuss what is going on behind the cameras.

Playful and improvised approaches to the use of the video camera in television production is not a new thing. When the video camera became smaller and cheaper at the end of the 1960s, its usage was suddenly open to people other than the professionals. Until the Sony Portapak hit the streets in 1967, television cameras were big and clunky and were mainly used in television studios. The emergence of the Portapaks catalysed a new movement of Guerrilla Television in the US with collectives such as the Videofreex, Ant Farm and TVTV. TVTV (with capital letters) is the grandfather of tv-tv in Copenhagen, although we didn't actually know about our secret distant relative before we had aired our first programmes in Copenhagen in March 2005.

Solvej's way of using the camera has something to do with the fact that she can easily carry the camera even though she occasionally gets a sore arm. In the *Film's Start* she asked Henriette to carry the camera for a while. This lightness of the equipment of course makes it easier to do improvised things, and to be active in provoking what's in front of the camera. When nothing is happening she makes things happen herself, for example by putting a leaf in front of the lens to see what happens with the image. This is very much in line with Skip Bloomberg of TVTV, who started playing the harmonica on the floor of the Republican's Convention in Miami in 1972, just to provoke some reactions and make something happen in front of the camera. Later it was shown on television in *Four more Years* in 1973. Skip Bloomberg and the TVTV crew were probably quite conscious of the scope of the reactions that they were provoking, but still nothing was planned, and when some of the security people arrive, Skip started to interview them about the music that he was playing. Solvej is intuitively conscious of the camera not only as a mirror held up in front of reality but also as a technology that is changing the social landscape. She is playing a similar role in undermining our intentions for a meaningful language of representation, as TVTV did in the 1970s when challenging the language of mainstream television. This even though the scale and context are very different.

In the book *The Child in the City* (1977), Colin Ward refers to the historian Poul Thomson, who stated that children, 'like other social undergroups, have long protested against their position by resistance, sometimes open and sometimes

hidden, a war with adults which parallels and echoes the war between the classes and the sexes'. Whether this way of thinking in terms of larger social groups is relevant to the conflicts that we experienced when we worked with Solvej on the videos is hard to say, but there was clearly some antagonism between our interests in telling a coherent story and Solvej's desire to play with the camera. Maybe our experience was too isolated and too specific to draw any more general conclusions, but still these conflicts were sometimes coming to a loggerhead, and Solvej decided to boycott the project altogether. She knew perfectly well that her weapon was refusal. Solvej's ability to disrupt and cut through our ideas on how to represent things has more in common with the way in which Negt and Kluge described the Public Sphere of Children as a counter public sphere to the adult world. In this they describe what would happen if a group of kids were to storm a television studio during a live broadcast, which is perhaps closer to describing the deep-rooted incompatibility between the adult world's desire to make sense in a specific way, and the kids' much less utilitarian ways. When the kids storm the television studio, all of a sudden the construction and rigidity of this communicative system and public sphere becomes visible, and 'the fact that the public sphere is always that of adults'. To be totally honest, in the editing process we did cut out the most acute conflicts that happened between one of us and Solvej, as it is just too embarrassing to see the kind of fascism that is built into any communicative regime and public sphere, which even the most civilised person will happily reproduce. At least we did at times.

The following exchange is a double interview where Henriette interviews Solvej and Solvej interviews Henriette about the *Exploration and Unlearning* series.

Solvej: Well, um, it's time to do an interview, um, I mean it's because... what's it actually like to edit that what's-its-name? I mean the film.

Henriette: It's actually one of the most fun things I know, because you have a lot of tape with hours and hours of film on it, and then you can change it and make it be about almost anything you want it to be about, actually.

Solvej: But what if it's a really, really long film and there's really a lot of good stuff in it, but the bad thing about it is that right in the middle of the good stuff there's something that turned out bad, you cut that out, right, and make something new, don't you?

Henriette: Yes. If you think you've said something really idiotic then you can just cut it out.

Solvej: Yes, if you accidentally said something wrong, and it was really good... or if you happened to fart right in the middle of the film, I mean... or if you just had to move the figure...

Henriette: Yes, then you can just cut it out.

Solvej: Hm, well, there's something else too, because when you make the film, how do you think of what to call it and so on? Can you tell me that, then... tell me that.

Henriette: But these particular three films we've made together, it's actually you who made up the titles.

Solvej: Yes.

Henriette: But other times... Well, in fact I go and think a bit about it... I think the title should explain the film a bit, and then the title should be something that makes you want to see the film...

Solvej: And it has to be really good and stuff like that, like for example if it was about a person, the film could be called what the person was called.

Henriette: What did you think about when you gave the films titles?

Solvej: I thought about... well, first you have to find out what the film will be called and then you have to find out what it'll be about. As soon as you've found out what it should be called then it has to be about the same thing, sort of, right? But it's really hard to say, but... it's really hard. It's also something to do with... I mean because... well, in my school there's something called headings. It's the same, only when you're writing...

Henriette: What it says at the top?

Solvej: Yes, that sort of thing. What it's about and so on, it's a sort of headline you could say. Yes. And, er, sometimes it's a bit... oh, what should the film be called and be about? It's really, really hard, for me it takes either two or one weeks. I think mostly two or three you could say. 'Cos it's really difficult to make up a name, so if anyone wants to make a film, then before I make a film I have to give it a name.

Henriette: Do you have to do that?

Solvej: At least it's pretty smart to do that. 'Cos then you know what it'll be about.

Henriette: Do you have any more questions?

Solvej: I just have to think about whether I have. I'm just trying to see if I have. Well, what's the best thing you know about the films we've made? A clip, I mean? Really exciting, or fun?

Henriette: In *Hamburg Town* I like the bit where you put that leaf in front of the camera, do you remember that? I think that's pretty funny.

Solvej: Oh yes, I put my finger in front like that.

Henriette: *The Blackbird...*

Solvej: *The Blackbird*, that was exciting, and the one with the playgrounds, *Hamburg Town*, that was for instance if you just happened to be in Hamburg, then that was a little example of where you could be in some playgrounds that were good fun.

Henriette: Yes. And then of course there's *The Film's Start*, I think it's funny where Rasmus and you go into the big film studio and imagine how the house must have been built with that scenery. Then you make believe you're walking into the corridor, I think that's pretty funny.

Solvej: Hmm, I think so too, actually. And when you found that creaky floorboard too.

Henriette: Yes, in the sound room.

Solvej: Yes, like when there was a creaky floorboard and whether it was part of it...

Henriette: I thought the creaky floorboard in the sound room, which he calls the Foley room by the way, was there in case you might need the sound of a creaky floorboard, but that wasn't the idea after all.

Solvej: But then you could sort of... if you were poor and had a very old house, then there might be something that creaked, right? So quite honestly why don't they have a creaky board like that in a sound room?

Henriette: Well, exactly. There are a lot of creaky floorboards in our flat... Should we swap now? I'd like to ask you some questions about the camera. Because just when you'd turned five years old – do you remember we had your fifth birthday down in Hamburg? And then we thought you must be old enough now to use a camera. Do you remember a bit about how you learned to use it?

Solvej: No, I don't actually, not properly, but I'll have to see if I can think back... it was because you started filming a bit and then I think I wanted to do it too. So I think maybe I said that I was big enough to film and stuff like that...

Henriette: And it was really quite easy, for all you had to do was press the button, Are there more things you remember you do with the camera?

Solvej: Once I could remember how to zoom, but I don't remember so much any more – well, with the little camera we've got.

Henriette: Was there something you could see on the camera when you shot a film?

Solvej: Well at the start of the film there was such a really nice blue, I think, but it's certainly really good fun to make a film.

Henriette: Why?

Solvej: Well, I'll just see what I can say. Because it's a bit like a logbook, you can remember what you've been doing. If you've been filming all the time, then you know what you've done. Then you don't need to have any logbook.

Henriette: Do you think you remember that trip to Hamburg better because we filmed it?

Solvej: No, but you... I can remember a lot, I mean that I was in a lot of playgrounds and that sort of thing, you know? It's sort of really good to have a camera.

Henriette: But do you think it's easy to use a camera?

Solvej: Yes, it's easy, but there's so many buttons that you don't know the difference between. I'll probably learn it when I get a bit bigger – after all I'm seven. I do think I'll learn it when I'm about eight or nine.

Henriette: Can you see what it is you're filming while you're filming it?

Solvej: Yes, because there's that little screen.

Henriette: Do you think about what you're pointing the camera at?

Solvej: Yes, but sometimes you think it's the screen that's filming, and that's a bit... then you have to...

Henriette: What will your next film be about?

Solvej: I don't really know.

Henriette: But you're making one now?

Solvej: Yes, but it just has to be edited.

Henriette: What's it called?

Solvej: *Life Backwards*.

Henriette: And what's it about?

Solvej: Well, we run the whole film backwards, that's mostly what it's about.

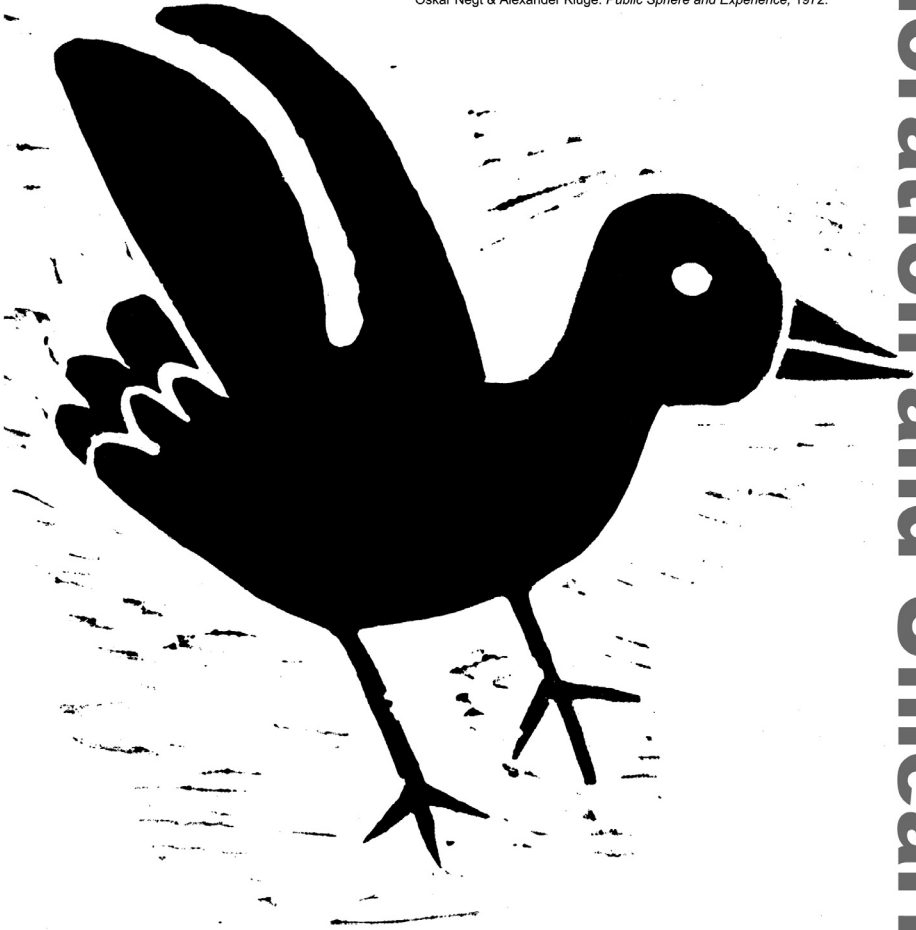
Henriette: Can you remember some of the funny things from it?

Solvej: Yes, at least where I ride my bike backwards, that's something nobody can do...

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Oskar Negt & Alexander Kluge: *Public Sphere and Experience*, 1972.



The Blackbird



The Blackbird is a news programme about two baby blackbirds who fell out of their nest. Six year old Solvej was especially absorbed by the event. It gave her the idea for this programme. The Blackbird is a part of the television series *Exploration and Unlearning Series* that investigates how knowledge is constructed and deconstructed through experience and play. The Blackbird was shown on tv-tv in Copenhagen 2005. The Blackbird is produced by tv-sol/FreeUtv. More info on copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk

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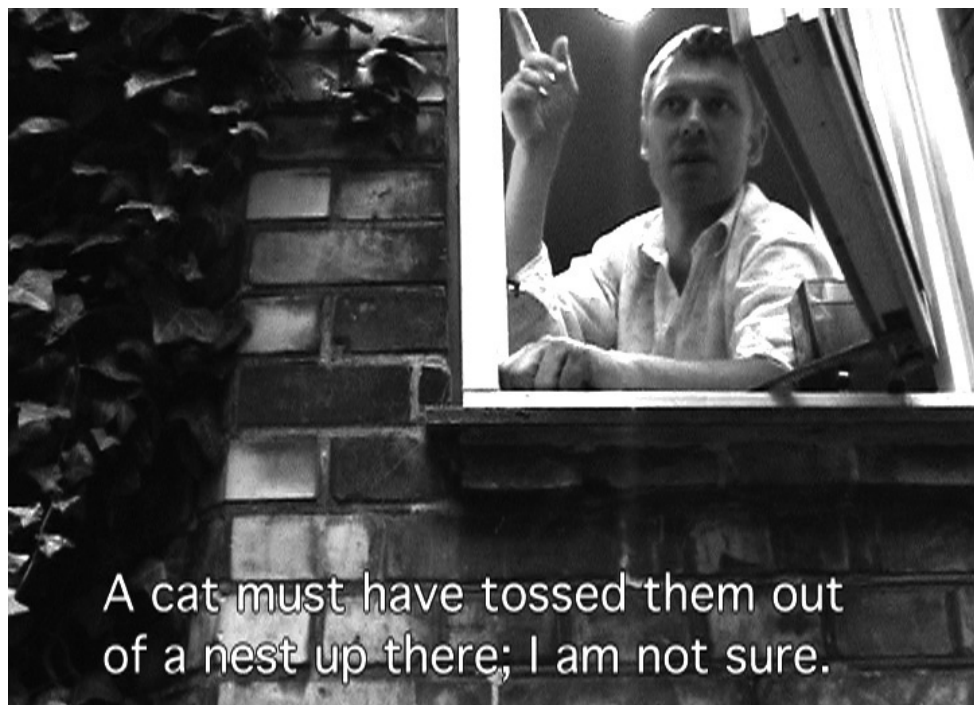
The Blackbird was shown on tv-tv in Copenhagen 2005.

Language: Danish, subtitles: English and Russian.

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Copenhagen 2005





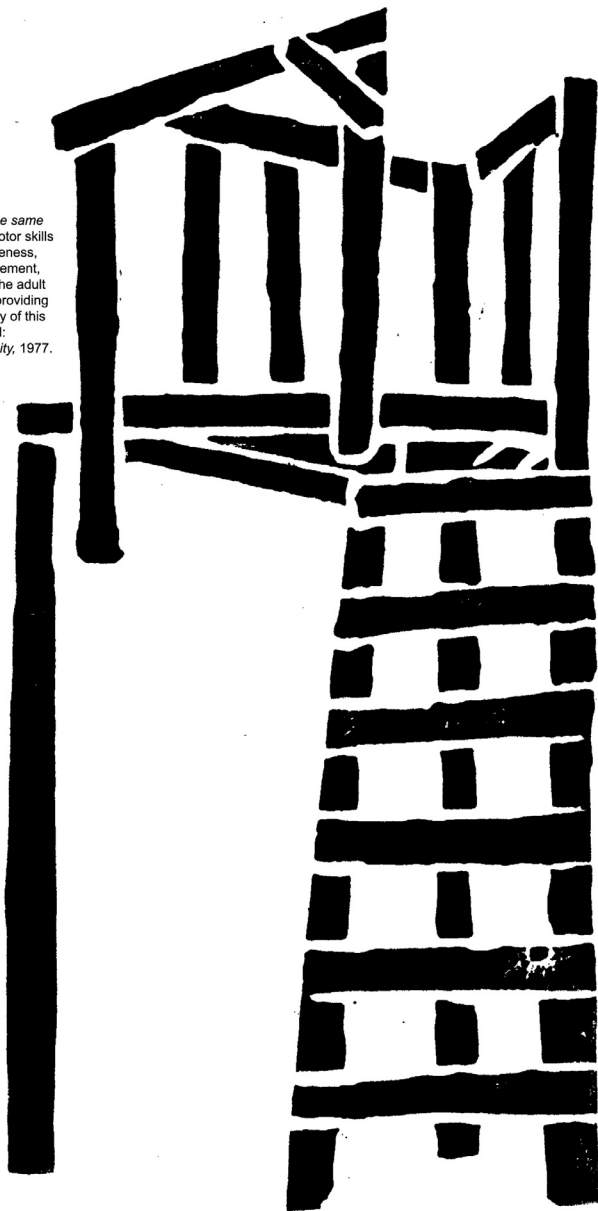
A cat must have tossed them out
of a nest up there; I am not sure.



I couldn't reach them.
There was nothing I could do.

Exploration and Unlearning

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The Child in the City, 1977.



Hamburg Town



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Copenhagen 2005



This is Hamburg's Town
and that's the name of this film.



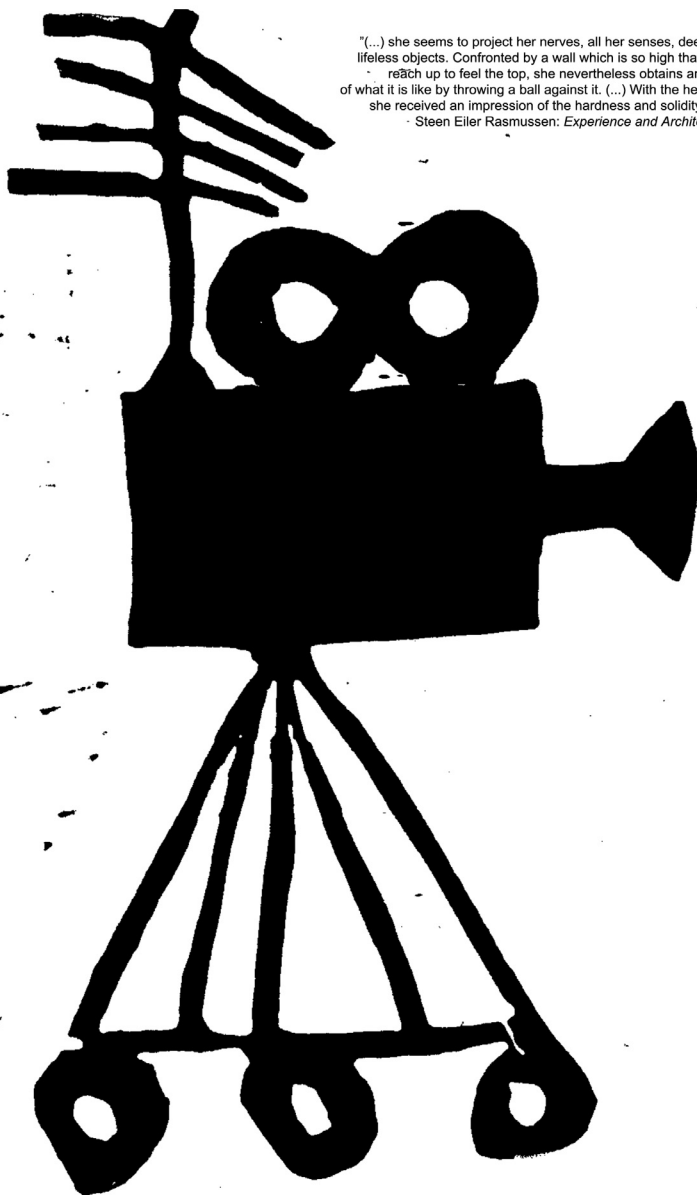
I am not scared.
Because I'm a 5 year girl.



Exploration and Unlearning

"(...) she seems to project her nerves, all her senses, deep into these lifeless objects. Confronted by a wall which is so high that she cannot reach up to feel the top, she nevertheless obtains an impression of what it is like by throwing a ball against it. (...) With the help of the ball she received an impression of the hardness and solidity of the wall"

- Steen Eiler Rasmussen: *Experience and Architecture* 1959.



The Film's Start



Armed with a camera six year old Solvej visits a film photography student at The National Film School in Denmark. He gives Solvej and her mother a guided tour of the school and tells about all the things we can't see when we are watching television or film. **The Film's Start** is a part of the television series **Exploration and Unlearning Series** that investigates how knowledge is constructed and deconstructed through experience and play. **The Film's Start** was shown on tv-tv in Copenhagen 2008. **The Film's Start** is produced by tv-sol/FreeUtv. More info on copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk

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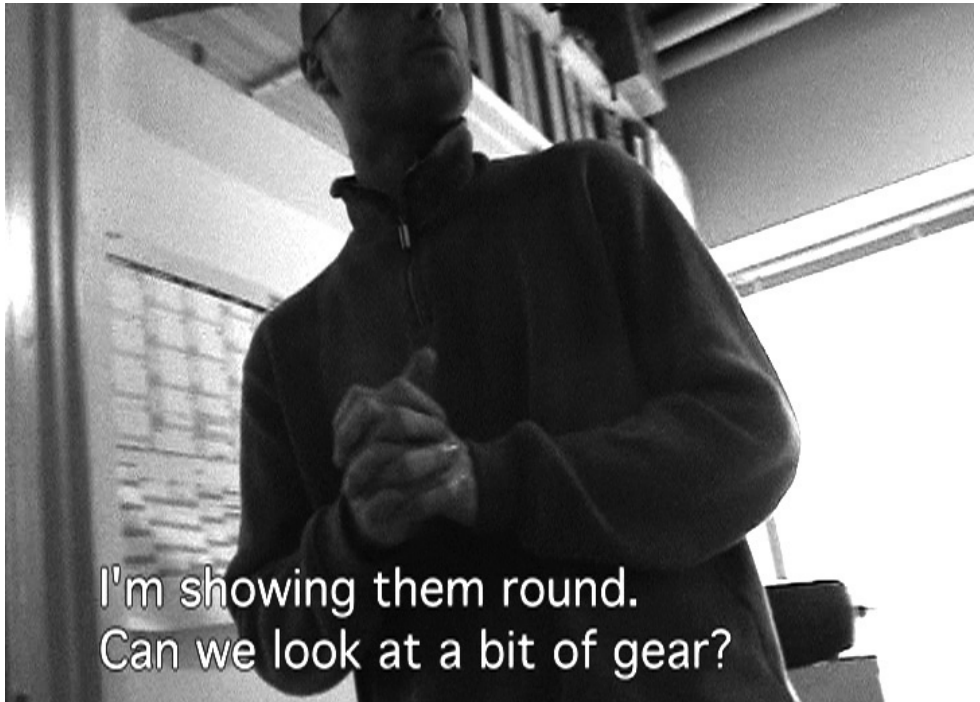
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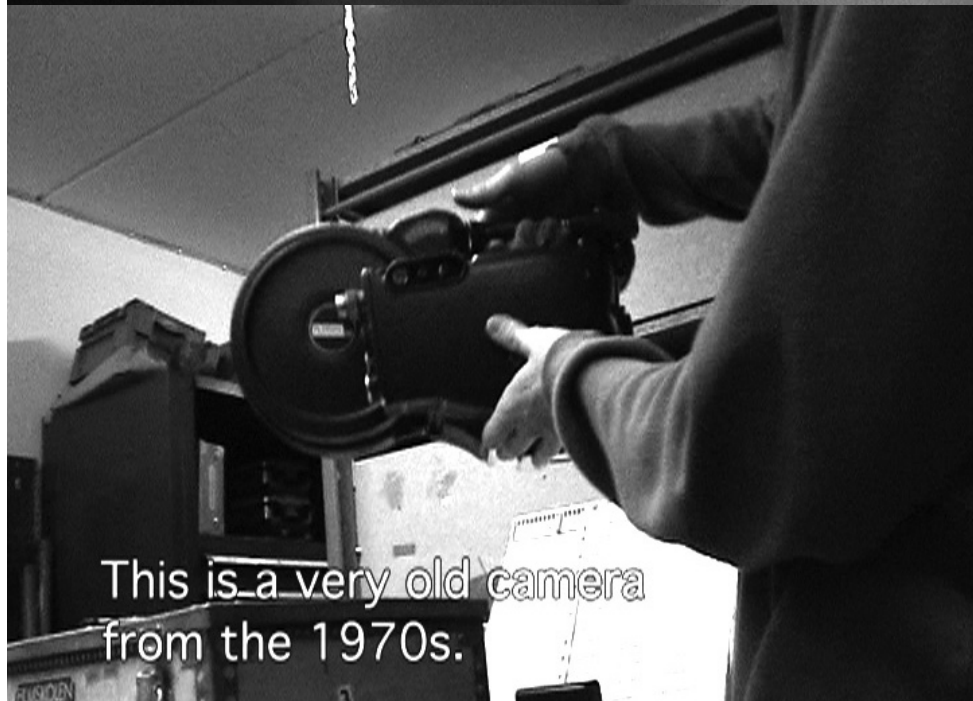
20 min.

Copenhagen 2006





This is our control room.
Like yours at tv-tv.



This is a very old camera
from the 1970s.

Credits

Text by Henriette Heise, Solvej Heise and Jakob Jakobsen 2007

The Exploring and Unlearning Series was produced for tv-tv 2005-2006

The text has previously been published in *Casco Issues X*, Utrecht 2007.

Published by Copenhagen Free University / Henriette Heise & Jakob Jakobsen, 2007

This publication is supported by the Danish Arts Council's Committee for Visual Arts.

Copenhagen Free University
Læssøesgade 3, 4th floor
DK-2200 Copenhagen N

www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk

ISSN 1601-4014

Copenhagen, December 2007

