



## Essay by Ole Hagen

Lindsay Seers

### *It Has to Be This Way*<sup>2</sup>

**A young woman, personally involved in the occult and the academic study of Queen Christina of Sweden, travels through Ghana in a colonial costume. A British couple, having abandoned their families in Europe, get involved with diamond smuggling in West Africa. An artist obsessed with the transformative powers of photography tries to make sense of her own life through restaging episodes in the life of her missing step-sister. It is a narrative illuminated by the feint light of a great pink diamond; staged within the architectural shadows of the famous slave fortresses of Ghana.**

*It Has to Be This Way*<sup>2</sup> is the continuation of the artist Lindsay Seer's filmic, photographic and psycho-geographic tracing of her missing step-sister Christine Parkes. Christine disappeared after suffering severe memory loss following a moped accident in Rome, where she was researching the life of seventeenth century Swedish monarch Queen Christina. In a parallel to the method of orientation Christine used following her memory loss, Seers is guided in her artwork by the chance selection of photographs from the sisters,' as well as her own, photographic archive. *It Has to Be This Way*<sup>2</sup> follows the part of this process that leads Lindsay Seers to restage Christine's earlier travels through Ghana in 1996. Just like her sister before her, Seers also insists on wearing a colonial costume with a camera embedded in her soldier's hat. In doing so Seers is also revisiting a personal trauma: her mother having abandoned her and Christine to settle in West Africa with her step-father. It is soon evident that tracing the outline of this private trauma automatically intersects with the traumatic past of a country encumbered by the muted history of slavery, a country whose numerous colonisers and exploiters not only include Sweden, but also the small kingdom of Denmark.

What constitutes the artistic practice of Lindsay Seers is not mere storytelling, but a matrix where there is no formal separation between the conceptual investigation of the act of photography, the camera as apparatus, the common desire for film and photography to act as evidence of events, and the complex historical and personal synchronicities of events themselves. What we are witnessing in the work of Lindsay Seers is not so much a detached systematic outline of these relationships, but the actual unfolding of a creative process, where the act of observation and understanding influences the outcome of events themselves. Through Seers' photographic explorations the past is constantly reconfigured, as if it contains an infinite virtual potential for different outcomes, which are all already embedded in one another.

The protagonists in the narratives that unfold not only include personal relatives and historical figures, but also buildings, places and the documentary structures of photography and film itself. In this matrix where the historical documentary gaze is as much strived for as it is impossible to achieve, Seers is forced to find new ways of embodying the act of photography and to enlist the metaphysical allies of chance and chaos in order to find her own position. Both the fact that Seers sometimes gets other people to select the photographs from which she starts her detective journey or selects these people themselves on the basis of discovering dead bumblebees in the vicinity of the sites of her first encounter with them, testifies to this alliance with the magical or virtual. The use of bees in this process relates to an image from one of Queen Christina's manuscripts studied by Seers' missing step-sister.

*It Has to Be This Way*<sup>2</sup> was started with a bumblebee found in the garden of the National Gallery of Denmark when Seers went to meet curator Marianne Torp, who was then asked to select the nine images from the Seers/Parkes archive. The archive from which the images were selected includes material on Seers' mother Pamela Parkes' life in West Africa, the later travels of Christine Parkes in Ghana and her research into the Baroque period in Europe, as well as some miscellaneous material from Seers' previous investigation into the disappearance of her step-sister. The nine photographs selected by Marianne Torp were: two photographs of forts; two of fetish temples; a fetish shrine; a postcard from Pamela Parkes addressed to Lindsay Seers; a photograph of Pamela with her brother Terry onboard a yacht; and lastly an image of Christine in colonial costume. The structure of the narrative in the current work shown in *It Has to Be This Way*<sup>2</sup> emerges from this material.

The entwining of such an eccentric method of randomness in a practice that otherwise appears conceptually based becomes a central issue in Lindsay Seers' work. When she investigates an event, she does so on the presumption that historical and fictional ways of looking at events are intertwined, that there is neither a purely fictional documentary nor a fictional fiction. If all events, large and small, in both history at large and in the history of our lives, are interconnected and contingent on the observer, then wherever we enter a narrative we are always in the middle. In this case, chance can be the key to the role of the observer in a given narrative. It is not as important what the chance element are as long as they allow the storytelling protagonist to make a concrete choice of direction, without which any viewpoint would become impossibly blurred and chaotic. Chance is only visible to us when it occurs within the order of a strict system. An algorithmic system like a computer is a binary system of zeros and ones. It has function and direction but is meaningless without interpretation in accordance with the original input from the human agency outside itself. In ancient rituals of divination different systems were devised that placed this larger agency outside the human, within the notion of the indeterminate whole. To appeal to this indeterminacy is to appeal to the magical, but it demands a less than arbitrary system of divination that allows for patterns and regularities to emerge that again allows for human agency and interpretation.

An example of a completely digital system would be the hexagrams of the *I Ching*, which, as Leibniz pointed out, corresponds to a numerical system from 0 to 111111. John Cage famously converted the divinatory use of the *I Ching* into using chance as a creative impulse, in order as he said to 'imitate nature in its manner of operation'. Lindsay Seers uses less strictly formalised systems than the *I Ching*, but they have a similarly digital function in that they allow her the agency to build on selections 'made by nature'. In Lindsay Seers' case the magical or indeterminate is allowed to impact on a system of documentary tropes. A pattern emerges in which certain personae are selected to take part in a narrative on the basis of chance encounters, i.e. a magical impetus. However, it soon emerges that the textual, linear and rational systems that constitute historical as opposed to magical consciousness perfectly determine and fill the gaps of this original impetus, like any self-sufficient 'digital' system. This makes us look again at the supposed distinction between the factual and the fictional. We may realise that any tautological system that has its own vocabulary, such as psychoanalysis, science or Marxism, is able to explain the causality of our actions within its own terms. In this sense, explanatory systems are auto-biographical, if by autobiography we mean the inscription of a subject into a narrative structure, and even more so when each case study of a specific subject conforms to the 'autobiographical' character traits of an abstract theory.

In this scenario, Lindsay Seers' work both honours the sense of infinity – there is always a larger narrative impetus behind the local personality of a structural tautology – and finitude – the attempt to make human narratives and directions possible and meaningful within a local framework. This tear between the magical and the rational, the non-linear and the historical is both dramatised as internal conflict within the characters that appear in her work and played out in the causal connections between the characters. Through the use of repetition, doubling of voices and simulations, characters enacting the life of other characters, narrative patterns start to emerge. As viewers we can follow these patterns in Lindsay Seers' films either through a textual linear method, ordering images according to a storyline with a historical context, or through a magical method where details within an image or a sequence of

images form a world with a logic of its own, each image always pointing to another image.

Once this link to the virtual is established, Lindsay Seers conducts an inside examination of the tropes that make up the documentary image and discovers the creative impulse within all documentary efforts and history writing. Seers uses different voices to show different facets of one and the same narrative, only to discover that no one subjective voice is in control of the impulse of history. This is even more clear as she considers how the structural devices themselves – the camera, archival books and footage as well as both the novel and the architectural space of the final art work – resist autonomy within the overall matrix of the event as they reconfigure each other.

The central voice in the present work issues from the audio recordings of Pamela Parkes. In hypnotised passages in particular, what emerges is her own guilt over leaving her daughter Lindsay behind when emigrating to Africa and her lack of acknowledgement of the implications of her new husband Sid's trade in diamonds. The mother identifies with her daughter's anger and resentment, which she partly directs against herself.

These personal synchronicities are embedded within the historical guilt that envelops Europe's colonial past in Africa. In the West African Gold Coast, which roughly corresponds to present-day Ghana, the Danish involvement took place under the Danish West Indian Company. Slavery and colonisation are associated with atrocities, forceful usurpation, the unjust appropriation of wealth and natural resources, and the breakdown of local identities.

Instead of providing a neutral platform for the viewer, Lindsay Seers' installations place the filmic imagery within the structures most appropriate to the narrative constructs. These structures are both factual and theatrical, thereby embodying the dual aspect of the evidence and the artefact. For *It Has to Be This Way*<sup>2</sup>, Seers has provided a structure that resembles the colonial slave fortresses of the Ghanaian coast. It is impossible for the viewer to enter this emotional landscape without making their own identifications and associations, without being an implicated participant within the unfolding of history, its apparatuses and institutions as well as its human narratives. The personal and the collective, the factual and the fictional, are all but different features of the monstrous unfolding of the virtual event, a spectacle with no safe platform of observation.

Ole Hagen, April 2010

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