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Zero Figures

Mary Helena Clark
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Mary Helena Clark's found footage film, *Engram Set*, is named for a theory of memory proposing the *engram* as the neural substrate for storing and recalling memories. Richard Semon, who coined the term in 1904, theorized that experiences leave lasting traces in the brain. Bundles of sensory, emotional, or conceptual associations are understood to help reinforce a memory trace. Clark's film questions the relation between the physiological body and subjective experiences like memory, language, pleasure and pain. The basic unit of *Engram Set* is the cut. In roughly one-minute cycles the different sources of footage — coin minting, Brainy Baby®, Einstein the African Gray Parrot, esophageal coin removal — are cut together, along with occasional flashes of a spectral reflection in a CRT monitor screen, identical to the one on which the video is played. Clark uses all the tricks at her disposal to maximize the friction and fusion at work in each cut. Each cycle intensifies the sense of entanglement, coalescing into an impression of EinsteinParrot-BrainyBaby®-CoinMint-EsophagealCoinRemoval as one creature, ingesting and excreting.

The single photograph presented by Clark shows the insides of a Honeywell thermostat, more or less at life size. It is an image of potentiality and of suspension. The thermostat can serve as a stand in, or model, for the body — the chemical and mechanical coming together — but it also serves a very basic creaturely, mammalian need for warmth, for temperature regulation. The thermostat both proposes itself as a kind of body, and as a mediator between the body and external conditions.

Recreation, Clark's wall-like structure built from Styrofoam boxes, also suggests protection from outside forces. Porcelain sockets, equipped with low-watt LED bulbs, are installed inside each box and daisy chained together such that they draw on a single power source for their varied illumination. The stacked containers form a networked partition, establishing a variable boundary. Many of the containers were delivered to the artists home, keeping cool two injector pens filled with an immunosuppressive drug taken as part of the course of treatment for an auto-immune condition. Additional boxes were sourced through a medical subreddit devoted to those navigating the same condition. Like the thermostat, these boxes are temperature regulators, keeping the medication they hold stable just as the medication itself stabilizes the health of the patient.

Nina Könnemann's *Video is a Box* cuts together scenes from the interior of a lockbox phone charging station with a catalog of confrontations with strangers — mostly men — captured over the course of Könnemann's fifteen years as a filmmaker. Könnemann's absence in the cellphone scenario is the exception, with most encounters filmed by her on a camcorder or DSLR, often outside, often at night. When Könnemann is behind the camera we see how those caught in her viewfinder guess at her motives: their eyes flit between her face and the lens; they fight, or flirt, or both; they experiment with their presence in front of the camera; they strive for the upper hand. The camera seems to have an intrinsic power, to register as in control of the situation, pulling the strings. Nonetheless, in the catalog of incidents collected together here, Könnemann does not seem particularly in control. It's as though she is tugging at the video frame from behind the camera, and the subject, caught in the frame, is tugging at it from the other side. What we see on screen feels alternately like a battle, a negotiation, a dance.

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In Könnemann's sculptural work, *Lithic Reductions*, the noise of everyday life — its compromises and confrontations — fades away. Könnemann presents an appealing arrangement of oddments, leftovers from another world. The arrangement feels attentive and orderly, but intuitive rather than scientific; more like someone admiring their collection of found treasures than cataloging specimens. To make her *Lithic Reductions*, Könnemann smashed discarded sinks and toilets, sometimes with a sledgehammer, sometimes dashing the bathroom furnishings against asphalt. From the debris, Könnemann selected fragments to serve as *lithic cores* which were then further worked using a variety of knapping techniques. Although Könnemann's *Lithic Reductions* do recall Stone Age artifacts, their more immediate point of reference is the devoted community of flint knapping hobbyists, dedicated to recreating such artifacts. Whether in Kubrick's *Space Odyssey* or an anthropology textbook, the emergence of tools is often positioned as a civilizationally decisive moment, an inauguration of the human requiring a particular kind of causal thinking, coordination of the body and domination of nature. The allure of prehistory is the promise that it can tell us humans about our origins, and therefore about our true nature. The speculation on and recreation of Paleolithic practices and lifestyle is supposed to function as a kind of stabilizer, a ground zero for constructing our individual and collective human lives. If Stone Age flint knapping can be understood as civilizing a bit of nature, making a stone into a tool and thereby drawing it into the human world of technology, Könnemann is perhaps doing the opposite: subtracting the civilizational layer from her porcelain fragments.

Lakshmi Luthra's *Primitives* are also concerned with notions of origin, both in terms of the neurological ur-structure that supports familiar visual experience, and the drawings of children. In her book *Analyzing Children's Art*, Rhonda Kellog uses her vast archive of children's art to trace the psychic and artistic development of children from infancy to eight years of age, schematizing the forms that appear in their drawings. The developmental sweep of the book suggests that children are assembling and refining a picture of their own bodies through the loose, shifting assemblages of circles and arcs, hooks and lines that make up their earliest drawings. The form-finding aspect of children's drawing finds an echo in the schematization of space that supports machine vision. These systems are trained on collections of images corresponding to a particular object or event. They catalog the basic forms and patterns — sometimes called visual primitives — that reoccur in an image set, identifying these with the phenomena in question. Characteristic arrangements of visual primitives become the basis for probabilistic object recognition.

This technique for engineering machine vision has its roots in a model of human vision, which in turn draw on the study of the visual systems of animals. In 1959, Torsten Wiesel and David Hubel conducted a pivotal study concerning information processing in the visual system of cats. Initially intended as a step toward understanding the neurological underpinnings of human visual experience, Wiesel and Hubel's experiment provided a framework for advancing machine vision. Their key discovery was the way these visual primitives serve as building blocks for the perception of more complex visual information. In a sense, what computer vision systems are programmed to do is reverse engineer this animal neurophysiology of vision: they start with a complex visual representation, break it down into visual primitives, and then determine a likely correspondence between the particular arrangement of primitives and a particular phenomena. This labelling process can be utterly inconsequential — the resulting identification stored in a data bank somewhere and forgotten; or it can be used to monitor and discipline the behavior of workers; or egg on consumption through aggressive targeted marketing; or it might be the first step in an utterly devastating chain of state sponsored actions (bombing, arrest, deportation, and so on). The source of this ever-expanding flow of information is the so-called visual primitive — its capacity to represent the abstract grammar of our faces, gestures, actions. Rendered abstract, they, and we, are all the more subject to manipulation and control. Luthra has taken up the language of visual primitives not to merge with or emulate how the machine sees, but to keep turning over the question of perceptual reciprocity between the human, the animal and the machine, to keep the door open for a different account of the senses, and for a different mobilization.