

PROFILE >

Lindsay Seers

Michael Gibbs

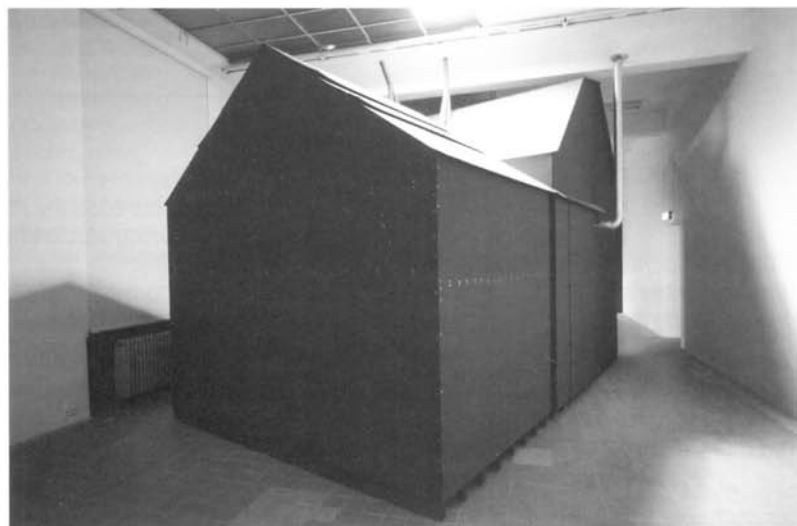
JUST FITTING INTO ONE OF THE ROOMS COMPRISING LINDSAY SEERS' RECENT EXHIBITION, 'Swallowing Black Maria', at SMART Project Space in Amsterdam is an almost full-size replica of the Black Maria, Thomas Edison's first film studio built in 1893.

Covered with black tarpaper and with a retractable ceiling to allow sunlight to penetrate, it functioned as a space for both making and projecting the earliest films using the Kinetoscope, one of which was of an Edison employee sneezing comically for the camera. Sneezing, though, is an act of expulsion, and Seers is more interested in the act of ingestion, of swallowing. The replica that Seers has built serves as a cinema for her film *Extramission*. Ancient philosophers, such as Plato and Euclid, believed in an extromission theory of human perception whereby the eye projected, rather than received, visual impressions. In the film we see Seers enacting this by using a head-mounted apparatus to project a beam of light onto various surfaces. Edited as a television-style documentary, *Extramission*, 2005, relates the bizarre story of how the artist did not speak until she was nearly eight years old. She possessed, it seems, an eidetic memory, more commonly known as a photographic memory. Yet such a memory is not about recording – it is more a kaleidoscopic, unstoppable rush

of impressions. 'I didn't need to speak in those years,' she writes in her recent book *human camera*. 'There was simply nothing to say and no time to say it – that would halt the next unfolding moment.' However, it was photography that eventually caused her to speak. On seeing a studio portrait of herself she uttered her first words, 'Is that me?' At the same time she lost her eidetic memory and, as if to compensate for this and for her uprooting from her childhood home on the island of Mauritius, she obsessively started taking photographs of her immediate environment. Eventually she decided to become a camera herself, to internalise photography again, by making mouth photographs. Enclosing herself in a black sack, she would insert a piece of light-sensitive paper into her mouth and then, emerging briefly from the sack and using her lips as both aperture and shutter, make the exposure before returning to the sack to develop it. Having made thousands of these small, circular, blood-red images, she suddenly stopped when she discovered that another artist, the American Ann Hamilton, had been doing exactly the same thing (although more as a self-conscious exercise in body art).

In the film, Seers' extraordinary biography is narrated by talking heads (including her mother and the 'cultural critic' Guinevere Day), but the cast list suggests that the mother is played by an actress. So how much of Lindsay Seers' story is true? Did she really wander aimlessly around Europe for several years, pursued by a 'stalker' who secretly documented her activities?

Family members and biographical coincidences also feature in her film *Under the Influence of Magicians*, 2006. Seers' Aunt Barbara looks back on her career as the only female ventriloquist in Blackpool and Cyril Critchlow, a former stage magician, recalls the popularity of troupes of 'midget' performers. Ventriloquists' dummies, of course, are also midgets of a sort and Seers has made several of her own,



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including a double-headed Sailor Bill (whose two mouths contain cameras that photograph unsuspecting spectators) and Candy Cannibal, a version of the artist herself transposed into the colours of a photographic negative, with whom she performed on one occasion with her aunt at Blackpool's Grand Theatre. Ventriloquism itself is a form of projection using the seen and unseen aperture of the mouth, but it also involves an identification on the part of the performer, which can lead, as in Barbara Seers' case, to psychic disturbances. We see more of Seers' interactions with her ventriloquist's dummies in her film *Intermission*, where they are shown watching television and taking on the personae of the characters shown on the screen. There is also an element of media archaeology when we learn that Seers created a version of Stooky Bill, the dummy used in John Logie Baird's first public demonstration of television until it caught fire under the strong lights needed for his experiments. The video artist David Hall is another who has referenced this dummy in his 1990 piece for Channel 4, in which he imitates early television and imagines a dialogue between Baird and Stooky Bill.

Magicians of another sort are the subject of Seers' more recent film *The Truth Was Always There*, 2006. Presented in split-screen format, it is narrated by science writer Philip Ball, who introduced Seers to the history of alchemy and natural magic. We learn that the Elizabethan magus John Dee had held the rectorship of Leadenham in Lincolnshire, a village not far from Seers' grandparents' former house, and that alchemical drawings are to be found carved in the walls of the nearby Temple Breuer, an ancient tower built by the Knights Templar. Another local resident interested in alchemy was Isaac Newton, and the apple tree which supposedly inspired him to develop the theory of gravity is still standing in the grounds of Woolsthorpe Manor. The film includes Seers' sumptuous mouth photographs of trees and a remarkable sequence in which her head-mounted apparatus projects an image of a white crystalline tree growing in a field. The accompanying soundtrack of incantatory singing and howling dogs imparts a sense of mystery and tension that contrasts with the reasonableness of the speaking voice.

Seers' interest in the paranormal was already evident in her first film *The World of Jule Eisenbud (Remission)*, 2005, which explores the parallels between her own mouth photographs and the so-called 'thoughtographs' produced in the 1960s by the psychic medium Ted Serios, who claimed that he was able to project his thoughts onto unexposed Polaroid film. Jule Eisenbud, a psychologist at the University of

Colorado Medical School, wrote a book about his inconclusive experiments with Serios. In the film, the story is related by Eisenbud's son Rufus, who claims that his father met Seers in Amsterdam. Jule Eisenbud, however, died in 1999 at the age of 91, so one is left to wonder whether such a meeting ever really took place, or is simply another of Seers' projections.

Seers herself does not speak in her films; rather, she is spoken of by a succession of narrators. It is up to us viewers to piece together the story, to separate fact from fiction, the ordinary from the marvellous. In making the other speak, the artist blurs the boundaries between the normal and the paranormal, between the two meanings of the word 'medium'. But even when she avails herself of the same tricks of the trade as mountebanks and variety entertainers there is always a sense of disquiet, of deep-rooted trauma and impossible desires, as though the truth is always elsewhere.

Lindsay Seers was at SMART Project Space in Amsterdam from 14 July to 18 August. During 2006 she had solo exhibitions at The Collection, Lincoln, and Grundy Gallery, Blackpool. Her work was also included in *Haunted Media* (Site Gallery, Sheffield 2004) and *The Physical World* (APT, London 2003). Lindsay Seers' book *human camera* is published by Article Press, 2007.

MICHAEL GIBBS is an artist and critic based in Amsterdam.



Lindsay Seers
Sailor Bill 2005