

Rodney Graham

Parkett 64 – 2002

# AND I'M WONDERING WHO COULD BE WRITING THIS SONG<sup>1)</sup>

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MATHEW HALE

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*It's because his music is rooted in this lack of consciousness that he admires Syd Barrett so much. He believes that Syd's freewheeling approach to lyrics opened the gates for him; both of them, he thinks, are the creation of their own songs.<sup>2)</sup>*

Once again, in his latest film installation, *THE PHONOKINETOSCOPE* (2001), Rodney Graham appears before us as a solitary man in isolated circumstances. And then, once again, he contrives to remove himself still further from us, while remaining the sole focus of the work. Within the fiction of Graham's work, this does not constitute the solipsism it might in life. We find him marooned in *VEXATION ISLAND* (1997) and then he is knocked unconscious; in *HALCION SLEEP* (1994), he's there by himself on the back seat of a taxi, but he does not wake up; in *HOW I BECAME A RAMBLIN' MAN* (1999) Graham rides towards us from the distant horizon to sing his song and then rides away again, and now in *THE PHONOKINETOSCOPE*, he is sitting alone in a park where he proceeds to take LSD, and then leaves on his own unsharable trip. Of course, all of these works, except for *HALCION SLEEP*, are looped, so

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that Graham will come back to us again, either mentally or physically. But the pattern is clear: caught up in the loops of their own company, Graham's solitaries have a tendency to leave even themselves behind for periods, and journey inwards as we all do, at least, in sleep. Few circumstances in life are so genuinely intimate as that of knowing that one is welcome to watch a person sleep while one is watching them sleep. Graham keeps taking us back to the same impossible, giddy place; leading us right up to the border of someone else's thought; his thought; our own thought; the "Edge of a Wood."

*I'm the 'i' they failed to dot,  
From the land that time forgot.  
I just lost my train of thought.  
I saw someone sitting on a rock.<sup>3)</sup>*

Rodney Graham phoned me up one evening last May and asked if I'd like to work for him for a couple of days. He said he was planning to shoot a new film in the Tiergarten and needed someone to do odd jobs and take some photos. I was delighted, needing the money and being fascinated by his work, but I was also quite stoned when he rang. I didn't tell him, of course; I didn't know him that well. He suggested



RODNEY GRAHAM, *PHONOKINETOSCOPE*, 2001, 16mm film and vinyl record, duration 5 mins., film still /  
*PHONOKINETOSKOP*, 16-mm-Film und Vinylschallplatte, Dauer 5 Min., Filmstill.

that we meet in an hour at his apartment, and then go to a Chinese restaurant to discuss the project. Anxious to sober up as quickly as possible, I took a shower and then hurried down to the U-Bahn. I must have passed six or seven stops before I realized, to my horror, that I had caught the wrong train. I was heading for Spandau, not Rudow, and was going in the wrong direction. In the restaurant, Rodney gave me a detailed script for *THE PHONOKINETOSCOPE*. He had drawn each shot with written notes. He told me he'd never done this before. When he then explained that the film was going to document him taking acid in the park, and riding around on his bike

tripping, I saw the necessity for the crew to know from the start exactly what was expected of them. And I told him why I was really late.

*Who is it that does not love a tree?  
I planted one, I planted three.  
Two for you and one for me:  
Botanical anomaly.<sup>4)</sup>*

Our rendezvous in the Tiergarten was beside a lake overlooking the Rousseau Insel. There wasn't much for me to do while the first shot was being set up: the scene with Rodney sitting contemplatively on a tree



stump, with his bike beside him and a thermos at his feet. The same set-up in which he took the LSD later on. Seeing that I was hanging around, Rodney asked me if I would like to hear the song he had written and recorded for the piece. He gave it to me on a Walkman.

I remember wandering down towards the lake, into the frame of the first shot, as I pressed play. People have tended to write guardedly about Graham's songs in the past, using words like "pastiche" and "generic"; calling them "good enough" songs, if you like (good enough for art). But this one just blew me away instantly. If Graham's drug for *THE PHONOKINETOSCOPE* is LSD, then our drug is his music. With its "Stairway to Heaven" opening and its "Come in Number 51, Your Time is Up"<sup>5)</sup> spaced-out heaviness later on, it made me euphoric; just as it now makes gallery visitors euphoric. And yet, the song is also a sad song.

What struck me most when the filming began was that Graham had himself directed exactly as an actor would be. I don't remember him ever looking through the viewfinder to check a shot even before he was tripping. Having given the hired director the script and agreed on the locations, he then absented

himself as maker and became the subject of the film. Of course, by then taking the acid he moved a long step further away from the possibility of volition. When Graham took the blotter of acid, he did it with a look of such sober intent that, aside from being slightly comic, it reminded me of Henri Michaux, indeed Dr. Hoffman himself, and those other pioneers of psychedelic self exploration. As it is though, the film remains resolutely unpsychedelic in appearance, except for the faintly occult quality of the manifestations of the women. "You're the kind of girl that fits in with my world" intones the song and she does appear, first in the grass as the queen of diamonds and then as the statue of the young queen of Prussia.

There is a beautiful autobiographical passage by Nabokov recalling a bicycle ride: "Along the paths of the park I would skim, following yesterday's patterned imprint of Dunlop tires; neatly avoiding the ridges of tree roots; selecting a fallen twig and snapping it with my sensitive front wheel; weaving between two flat leaves and then between a small stone and the hole from which it had been dislodged the evening before; enjoying the brief smoothness of a bridge over a brook..."<sup>6)</sup> This sequence concludes with the adolescent Nabokov riding towards a young

RODNEY GRAHAM, PHONOKINETOSCOPE,  
2001, 16mm film and vinyl record,  
duration 5 mins., film stills /  
PHONOKINETOSKOP, 16-mm-Film und  
Vinylschallplatte, Dauer 5 Min., Filmstills.



woman who appears to be smiling at him from a distance, but whose smile has vanished by the time he reaches her. They do not exchange a word and he rides on. Graham stops cycling when he becomes entranced by the statue of the Prussian queen. He stares at her for a long minute before leaving and riding his bike backwards across a bridge into the beginning of his loop.

*When I fell off my medication,  
Seems I lost the art of conversation.  
Drape the dump in shades of grey,  
Declare it "I feel fucking awful day."*<sup>7)</sup>

The working title for THE PHONOKINETOSCOPE, the title written on the cover of his script, was *L'Invention du Kinetophonograph (A Space Rock Opera)*. Graham has removed from the title the suggestion that the film will be the story of an invention, which I regret, because the idea remains fundamental to the film's narrative and to our thoughts about the mechanism of the installation when we are using it in the gallery. "The Kinetophonograph" was Thomas Edison's name for the world's first filming and projecting apparatus incorporating synchronized sound recording

and reproduction. This was done remarkably early on, in 1889, and was an heroic act of invention achieved by "the establishment of harmonious relations between the kine-to-graph and the phonograph."<sup>8)</sup> So, Graham has, if you like, slightly dis-invented Edison's Kinetophonograph in order to invent his Phonokinetoscope: not uncoupling his record player and film projector, but disharmonizing them. As Graham himself puts it: "My phonokinetoscope is somewhat more rudimentary than Edison's: not only is there no guarantee of synchronicity, but in fact my unsynchronized loop allows for innumerable sound/image juxtapositions—and thus myriad music videos."<sup>9)</sup> Graham's is a regressive invention, just as his acid inspired "invention" within the film of using the playing card attached to the forks of the wheel of his bicycle with the clothes peg is psychically regressive: a child's way of making a bicycle sound like a motorbike.

This re-imposed split between the two technologies of the work is, of necessity, exactly paralleled in the split relationship between Graham's two performances, on film and on record—and so constitutes a metaphor: a representation of a destabilized mind; the kind of representation that the film itself does



*Rodney Graham*



RODNEY GRAHAM, PHONOKINETOSCOPE, 2001, 16mm film and vinyl record, duration 5 mins.,  
film still / PHONOKINETOSKOP, 16-mm-Film und Vinylschallplatte, Dauer 5 Min., Filmstill.



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not really offer, while the song does. It also mirrors the uncertain relationship between acting and behaving, fiction and documentary, in Graham's performance, once he has taken the drug. During the shoot, there was a curious coincidence that momentarily reintegrated art and life, reality and hallucination. While Rodney was walking around after having taken the LSD, he looked down at his feet and found an identical wooden clothes peg in the grass.

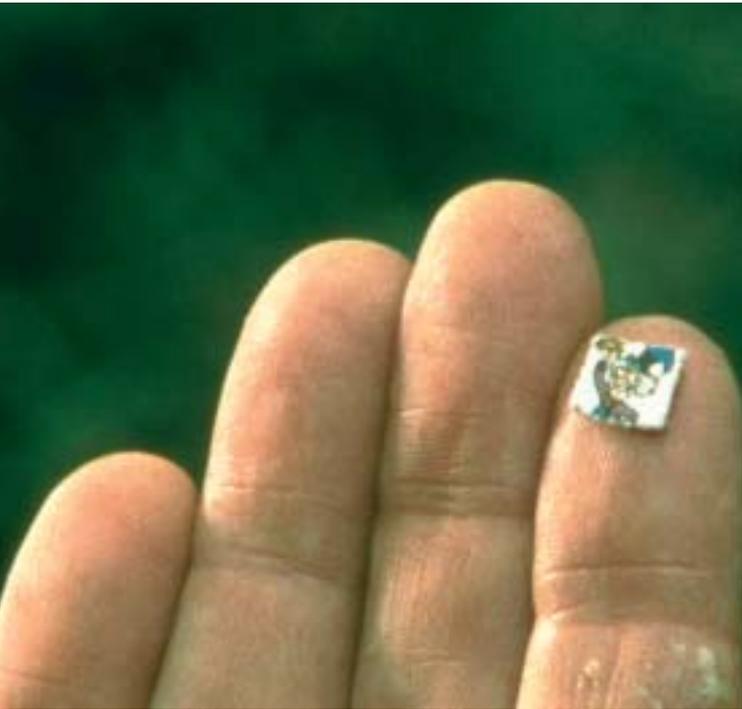
*Who is it that does not love a tree?  
I planted one, I planted three.*<sup>10)</sup>

"From the very beginning, pure and immaculate, the man has never been affected by defilement. He watches the growth of things, while himself abiding in the immovable serenity of non-assertion... The waters are blue; the mountains are green; sitting alone, he observes things undergoing changes."<sup>11)</sup> Graham seems shadowed by two contradictory figures as he sits, still and sober, on his tree stump in that first shot of the day, and both predate the third presence of

Rousseau's Romanticism. On the one hand, the Zen Buddhist as contemplative man described above, and on the other, the figure of Dürer's *MELANCHOLIA*, seated similarly on a rock and with "the utensils of active life... lying around unused on the ground, as objects of contemplation."<sup>12)</sup> The Zen Buddhist's passivity is an achievement whereas the melancholic's inactivity is a curse. The LSD that Graham takes in front of the camera acts as a solvent, placing him somewhere between these two states. He appears to become a passive actor, a mind a little lost within its own achievement, as he follows his own script and is roused into action by the drug, but we cannot know how self forgetting, as an artist, he has become.

The spider at the center of the web of associations from which Graham constructed *THE PHONOKINETOSCOPE* is Syd Barrett, founding spirit of the original Pink Floyd, and the ultimate acid casualty. Turned on by LSD, Barrett invented a psychedelic music worthy of the name, and then collapsed into incoherence. Barrett's song "Bike" gave Graham the line "You're the kind of girl who fits in with my





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and vinyl record, duration 5 mins., film still / *PHONOKINETOSKOP*,  
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world,” for the song for THE PHONOKINETOSCOPE. Shortly after completing the work, and while he was still in Berlin, Graham made a series of 16 monotype portraits of another musician (SUNSHINE SUPERMAN, 2001), the folk singer turned psychedelic pop star, Donovan, a singer-songwriter with whom he was, no doubt ironically, but certainly enjoyably, able to identify. It was Donovan who, famously, gave The Beatles the line: “sky of blue, and sea of green” in all its gloss paint optimism for *Yellow Submarine*. Was Barrett, perhaps even consciously, contradicting this two years later when he wrote the following entropic lines, the last that he was to sing before slipping into mental illness and disappearing from Pink Floyd?

*And the sea isn't green  
And I love the Queen.  
And what exactly is a dream?  
And what exactly is a joke?<sup>13)</sup>*

- 1) Syd Barrett, “Jugband Blues” on Pink Floyd, *A Saucerful of Secrets* (London: EMI Records Ltd., 1968).
- 2) Michael Watts, “Oh You Pretty Thing” in: *Melody Maker*, January 22, 1972. Reprinted in: *The Faber Book of Pop*, ed. by Hanif Kureishi and Jon Savage (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), p. 395. (An interview with David Bowie)
- 3) Rodney Graham, “The Phonokinetoscope,” 2001 (verse 1).
- 4) Rodney Graham, *ibid.* (verse 2).
- 5) Jimmy Page & Robert Plant, “Stairway to Heaven” on Led Zeppelin, *Led Zeppelin IV* (New York: Atlantic Records, 1971) and Waters, Gilmour, Mason, Wright, “Come in Number 51, Your Time is Up” on Pink Floyd, *Zabriskie Point* (Hollywood: M.G.M., 1970).
- 6) Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1966), p. 209.
- 7) Rodney Graham, *ibid.* (verse 3).
- 8) W.K.L. Dickson and Antonia Dickson, *History of the Kinetograph, Kinetoscope and Kineto-phonograph* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2000. Facsimile edition, original date of publication, 1895), p. 14.
- 9) Rodney Graham, “A Thousand Words,” *Artforum*, November 2001, Vol. XL, No. 3, p. 117.
- 10) Rodney Graham, “The Phonokinetoscope,” 2001 (verse 4).
- 11) “Returning to the Origin, Back to the Source,” No. 9 of *The Ten Oxherding Pictures in How to Practise Zazen*, transl. by Dr. Daisetsu Suzuki (Kyoto: Institute for Zen Studies, no date given), p. 42.
- 12) Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London & New York: Verso York, 1985), p. 140. German original: Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963).
- 13) Syd Barrett, see note 1.