A focus on the brain also occurred in Atkins’s very strange video pilot Material Witness OR A Liquid Cop, which is shown on a large plasma screen in front of which a viewer can sit in a dining room chair – an odd domestication of an ostensibly immersive screen experience. A computer-generated figure sits in front of a televised screen, a stand-in for the viewer within the film, although his unseeing and unchanging gaze made him seem ultimately inconsequential. This figure is sometimes substituted for another whose face, seemingly more ‘human’, although as substantial as The Man From U.N.C.L.E., is fully covered in a hand-stitched balaclava, which sometimes seems to extend out of the frame but often becomes a hollow into which the televised images of inhuman views of earthbound and intergalactic landscapes are projected. While Chris Marker’s La jetée, 1962, explored the indexicality of the photographic image using the temporality of science fiction, Atkins’s film seems to ask where the cut can be found in the flow of digital images in which the human is but another image. Is it to be found in the acausal space generated by the gattural paranoid soundtrack which buzzes in one’s ears through the headphones, the text of which you can read afterwards in the little book that accompanies the exhibition? Snippets of this soundtrack occasionally appear on screen in the form of brief subtitles or singular words that hark back to the materiality of print technologies, but these interventions were too few to make an impact that might halt the stream-of-consciousness soundtrack and the flow of images.

Less is more in Sworn’s As the Mark Stays, which takes a sci-fi thriller approach to examine the impossibility of classifying photographic remnants of dislocated parts. Sworn’s protagonists, Anne and Weston, are portrayed as silhouetted shadows which gesticulate frantically to each other as if their words were not enough to convey the difficulty of their jobs in a bureau which is responsible for classifying the photographic images according to the types of image, gestures, and objects they portray. If, as some theorists would argue, the photographic image destroys the symbolic distance necessary to process the world, this film is beset with an intensity to find words that can account for the elusive images contained in pictures whose worlds have vanished. As well as this mismatch between classification speech and images, another more poetic strand operates in this embryonic narrative in which one of the female characters attempts to find evidence of essences that cannot be framed as premised in the final shots, where she uses her fingers as loopholes through which to view the skyline. Of all the works in the exhibition, this film, while generating a sense of mystery and creating evocative images, needed a much longer format for its narrative potential to be realised. This is not to say that further prize money should go to this film but rather that in film, regardless of digital economies of speed and accessibility, time is ultimately money.

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On the Edgware Road
Serpentine Gallery
London 6 to 28 March

‘We are connecting with our community, which we always do, but this time in a different way.’ These were the words of Julia Peyton-Jones, Serpentine Gallery director, during her speech on the opening night of the exhibition ‘On the Edgware Road’. These words, accompanied by a short but frantically delivered speech by Hans Ulrich Obrist, preceded the main event of the night: a 45-minute talk from William Wells, director of Cairo’s well-regarded Townhouse Gallery, partners in the initiation of the Edgware Road Project.

‘On the Edgware Road’ is an exhibition of artefacts from the first three years of the Serpentine’s Edgware Road Project. Through a series of artist residencies, this project employs artists as mediators between the public of Edgware Road, London, and a networked idea of art practice. The project is based at the Centre for Possible Studies – currently on Gloucester Road, although this is its third location – where artists mix with local business owners and residents in an effort to imagine new futures for the Edgware Road area.

The tone of the evening was consistent throughout and Wells, standing in front of a microphone in a darkened auditorium in front of the attendees, gave an impassioned speech about his initial doubts about going into partnership with the Serpentine, and his surprise at the success of the relationship and the project. The directorial staff glowed with satisfaction at having successfully engaged with a non-art audience and provided real social engagement for a community of marginalised citizens (a task usually accomplished by grassroots and artist-run projects), but how readily or in what conditions of production visible in the works displayed?

Interestingly enough, the exhibition ran as a two-part show, with materials simultaneously displayed at both the Serpentine Gallery and the Centre for Possible Studies. However, despite this ‘outside-art’ collaborative ethos, the Serpentine displayed only the relatively polished works of the resident artists. The Centre for Possible Studies exhibited a compelling installation of peripheral materials from a variety of the workshops and projects undertaken on and around Edgware Road. However, the average art attendee remains unaware of this while pacing quietly around the Serpentine’s much more typical exhibition. Emily Wardill’s feature-length Full Firearms, 2011, for example, was screened in a large, purpose-built screening room and offered a fragmented narrative of blissful HD sequences all enjoyed from a bank of plush chairs. Wardill developed the characters and plot through a series of improvised workshops with the Migrants Resource Centre, a close collaborator with the Centre for
Possible Studies. Hiwa K’s sculptural installation _It’s spring and the weather is great so let’s close all object matters, 2012_, was also produced as an outcome of a sustained interaction with the Edgware Road community. The installation functioned as a proposal for a performance at Speakers’ Corner by Chicago Boys: while we were singing, they were dreaming... a band and neoliberalism study group conceived by Hiwa K while he was in residence on Edgware Road in 2010, and whose debut performances were held in a local café.

I mention these two works in particular because they represent an accurate sample of the works displayed in the Serpentine’s half of ‘On the Edgware Road’. Conceived as sincere and effective communications with a demographic beyond art’s usual reach, the works instigate conversation and debate between disparate parties and, inevitably, are effective at bridging the gap between neighbours from different backgrounds and of different political inclinations. However, it seems that the efforts of the Edgware Road Project have been concurrently facilitated and undermined by the institution. Despite the claims of the directorial staff that rarely, if ever, do outreach programmes flourish for as long as three years, this is by no means new ground for an arts institution. On the contrary, this is an outstandingly typical display of institutional prowess and a textbook execution of the ethos that by funding well-intentioned initiatives one can simultaneously look generous and propagate quality art for one’s displays, without being expected to actually let these communities past the bookshop. II

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**On the Edgware Road**

_Serpentine Gallery_ London 6 to 28 March

Well-used amplifiers and scuffed musical instruments are secured on old ladders, repaired in a makeshift way with microphone and guitar leads; Hiwa K’s _It’s spring and the weather is great so let’s close all object matters, 2012_, is a welcoming tableau. In Susan Hefuna’s _Edgware Road@ (several locations)_ (2010), four videos memorialise the divestiture of passing lives with long unflinching takes of sites on the road. This is a _mise en scène_ that proposes the impermanence and revision needed as new voices come within earshot or unexpected hecklers give speakers a hard time. Both works suggest an elevated position: a ladder can raise you over head height but it is not a permanent place, while several of Hefuna’s shots survey life on the street from an apartment view, aloof and distant. The material from Edgware Road that is displayed in the Serpentine Gallery is unglued from the lives of communities – it is global as well as local.

At street level on the Edgware Road it feels like the only thing to notice is traffic noise. If photography suggests time to linger on an arrested image, this droning sound is best suited to address provisional information streaming past. Objects, ends, journeys, records are not the stuff of the immanent social practice forming a place. On Edgware Road there is an irresistible flow of life. It is from this situation that ‘On the Edgware Road’ finds itself to be an exhibition. Longevity has emerged as a prerequisite in pursuing communities...
in projects, working with geographical boundaries like the Edgware Road. Already over three years in operation, from an occasional offsite base that operates under the moniker Centre for Possible Studies, the project has so far only mapped and researched its zone of involvement: the point is in what is not here. These documents are of actions that took place elsewhere, or that will resume though changed by this moment of temporary rest. How will the subjectivity of the artists and the subjectivity of the communities drawn around the actions converge? Is the image on the cover of the catalogue wraps uncomfortably onto the spine, as if the girth of the publication could not be determined. It is issue 001.

Neither an event nor a passage, ‘On the Edgware Road’ invites its audience to track past social practices occurring in a multiplicity of frames. This is exhibition as the receiver, not the beacon, of new cultural knowledge. The rich civilisation of the Edgware Road maintains its dignity too. The exhibition is of parallel experiences, irreducible to a final statement, similar to the gesture of Alan Kaprow’s 18 Happenings in 6 Parts, 1959, an enduring and worthwhile paradigm for conceptualising space for autonomous personal production.

A central cinémathèque in the gallery screens longer film works. The established formal language of cinéma vérité – sharp edit, hypnotically inflicted camera and ambient soundscape – asserts that these videos are neutral documentaries of the project. Elsewhere, first person narratives and field recordings – with lots more traffic noise – maintain this idea of authenticity. However, tethered to works by particularly short headphone leads, the audience cannot step back to reflect on cinematic language.

‘On the Edgware Road’ brings the relationship between acts and works to street-level. This is explicit in Ranie Stephen’s film The Three Disappearances of Soad Hosni 1959 – 1991, an exhausting montage of moments from VHS tapes connoting collective memory from 1959, the year of the actress’s Golden Bear nomination, to the year her body was found, beyond Edgware Road, at the foot of Stuart Tower in Maida Vale.

The happenings grouped around this exhibition are not snapshots of goings-on, a collection in a personal album. This would imply a single thing that would become comprehensible if it were brought, in an instant, to a stop. What is presented is what can happen if a photo album falls into the path of a passing lorry, turning the once pristine and ordered content into chaos borne up by the tailwinds of other vehicles. A handful of images are salvaged but the rest are finally pounded into the tarmac as undifferentiated as grit, much as ordinary lives can become atomised grist in the momentum of global political turbulence. Going beyond the event, as Hans Ulrich Obrist puts it.

What is there? The exhibition rejects interpretation and takes a literal approach. When Stephan refers to 70 videos of Soad Hosni films, 70 videos are arranged on the wall; when the tents of Cairo’s Tahrir Square are evoked, there is a real tent; and the collection of books that is the Bidooun library is a collection of books attached to the wall. CAMF’s open publishing project mines cuttings from domestic indigenous histories, and Ultra Red use direct quotation.

It is given to the communities of Edgware Road to initiate the imaginative and communicative circuit of an artist’s exchange. When you know you are in deep then a relationship is a long-term thing.

Andrew Stooke is director of the Oliver Holt Gallery, Sherborne.

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