

Liz Jobey, "Sound and visionary," *FT Magazine*, September, 2015



# Sound and visionary

Rachel Rose, winner of the Frieze Artist Award, talks to *Liz Jobey* about a season of new works. Portrait by *Carl Bigmore*

If there is one thing about her current success that the American artist Rachel Rose will recognise, it is the mutability of fortune. It is a central idea of her recent video work, *A Minute Ago*, which turns on the fear most of us share about the sudden arrival of catastrophe. Hans-Ulrich Obrist, co-director of exhibitions at the Serpentine Galleries in London, says he couldn't get the film out of his head.

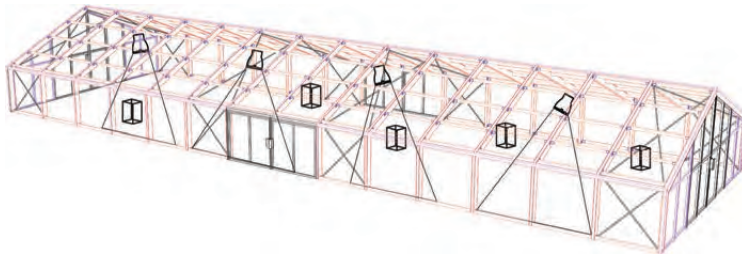
Like Rose's other films, *A Minute Ago* is a collage of found and original video footage cut together with segments of recorded sound. It opens with an idyllic summer bathing scene by a wide river in Siberia (she found the clip on YouTube). As children run in and out of the water, screaming with pleasure, their idyll is cut short by the arrival of a storm of giant hailstones that strafe the crowd like a nuclear shower. Their panic is translated in crude subtitles, which supply the emotional narrative of the film: "It was a perfect weather a minute ago."

From the devastation, the film cuts to the calm perfection of Philip Johnson's Glass House in Connecticut, monument to the ideals of the late American architect, whose ghostly image shudders in and out of the frame. In Rose's work, the Glass

House becomes a symbol of human vanity and vulnerability, and eventually it, too, shatters in a pixelated storm of glass. As the image dissolves and fragments, the subtitles echo the language of disaster: "If we die, know that I love you..."

"It was one of the most powerful films I've seen lately," says Obrist, who was on the selection committee of this year's Frieze Artist Award – which went to Rose – and who is curating a new installation of one of Rose's earlier video works at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery this week. Rose has designed what Obrist calls "a space-wrap" of sound, which will encircle the gallery. "Each time she uses the space very differently," Obrist says. "She transforms it. That's something the show will emphasise – that the sound is as important as the moving image. Occasionally the sound leads, and occasionally the moving image leads."

I meet Rose on a flying visit to London from New York to consult with Obrist and to set up her new work for Frieze, a commission that comes with the Artist Award and will be at the fair during Frieze London (October 14-17). Her proposal had been to bring the park inside the fair and to give humans a chance to experience their surroundings in the ►



A working drawing of Rachel Rose's Frieze Project tent, showing internal lights and speakers (W 3.34m x L 9.32m x H 1.41m to the peak)

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

◀ way that the park's indigenous creatures do. The new work, created with the help of a sensory biologist, a sound engineer, a lighting designer and Frieze's architects, involves a tent-within-a-tent, modelled on the Frieze London tent but smaller. When we spoke, the final list of animals hasn't been decided but will probably include a fox, mouse, newt, robin and stickleback.

Rose had barely slept since her flight landed and had brought her "one clean T-shirt" for the photo shoot. As we sat in the greenhouse that is the Wallace Collection's restaurant, she looked about to expire with heat and stress. But when she began to talk about her work, it is as if the temperature had dropped by 10 degrees, and she spoke in measured tones with no hint of fluff.

"I'm going to speak about it broadly," she begins, when I ask about the Frieze project. "It's very basic. You go in the tent, there'll be theatre lights and there will be PA speakers. The lights will be distributing light within the spectrum that a particular animal, say a fox, sees within. Then with the sounds: songs that we know and recognise [will be] filtered through frequencies that a fox would hear within. Every day it will be a different animal. So it's subtle, and it's showing you the apparatus.

out of the tape [rotoscoping is a technique animators use to trace around and take out an element in a single frame of film]. Then when I shot at the Glass House, I replicated [the original footage] filming with a Red [a high-quality digital movie] camera, using the camera angles, movements and time of the original interview. So, when I sutured Johnson back into the frame that I had now shot, it's two moments in time physically moving, collaged together."

**R**ose started out as a painter. Her undergraduate degree at Yale was followed by an MA in Art History at the Courtauld in London, and an MFA at Columbia in New York. It was only then, in 2012, at the age of 26, that she moved to film. "Before I started making these works, I knew nothing about film. I didn't have any idea of how to use a camera, or edit." Most of what she learnt came from reading Walter Murch, the Oscar-winning film editor and sound designer, whose *In the Blink of an Eye* is something of a bible for editors. "Walter was my secret teacher," she says. She recognised Murch's search for "a tool that could include what he was thinking

Take mice, for example. "Their hearing is sensitive to ultrasonic frequencies much higher than those we can hear," says Stevens. "Mice make very elaborate songs to one another – they actually sing to each other in mating – we don't hear it because it's beyond our hearing range."

Foxes also hear much higher frequency sounds. "They can listen out for mice and other prey," Stevens says. "And they've got much better night-time vision – like cats. You have a bit of a trade-off, being able to see colour in the daytime and a very high sensitivity to light at night."

Birds can see ultra-violet light waves that we can't. "In this case," Stevens says, "you're not just adding in one extra colour [to the light spectrum], you are increasing the number of colours you get by a whole dimension."

Sound engineer Tim Goalen has the challenge of how to render animal perception in a way that could be understood by humans. "We started off quite scientifically accurate," he says. "But it seemed more important to be emotionally accurate to the experience of the animals, rather than sticking to anything too specific."

Two weeks after Frieze, Rose's first solo US show opens at the Whitney Museum in New York. Her



Scenes from Rose's 2014 video work *A Minute Ago*, including a Siberian hailstorm and interiors of Philip Johnson's Glass House in Connecticut

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It's not trying to trick anyone into anything. It's not the sounds they express," she emphasises, "it's the sounds they intake. If you were listening to Justin Bieber on your boom box in the park, this is what it would sound like."

She has been interested in park design for some time, she says, particularly the relationship between park design and film. "As someone who makes videos, I think very much about where film comes from, and [considering it] over a larger span of time we could say it comes from the novel. And the novel co-emerged with the idea of the garden circuit, especially in England. So thinking about the park is something I do in all of my work but this time it is more specific."

The idea of scenes plotted along a timeline is obviously fundamental, and time, like sound, can be mixed and intercut. "I'm thinking very literally of time as a material," Rose says. "When something was shot, the speed at which something moves, how long you watch a thing for, how long you watch it in relation to watching other things: this is all a material."

She gives an example from *A Minute Ago*, which I try hard to follow. "I took an interview with Philip Johnson originally on VHS and I rotoscoped him

about and what he was feeling; a tool for that deeply ephemeral, immaterial state. And I think I felt that painting was not the tool for me. It's fortunate that I happen to have stumbled across this thing, which is totally the tool for me. But I am obviously exploring other methods as well."

Obrist thinks this is typical of her peer group. "It's got to do with the boundaries of knowledge," he says. "She is of the first generation of artists who grew up with the internet. Ever since her childhood, she has had access to digital technology and that leads to a breakdown of boundaries of knowledge, to the way she just navigates these fields and goes beyond them. There is no more fear of pooling knowledge. And in a way it's true for both projects, for the Frieze project and the Serpentine project, she connects to so many different disciplines."

For Frieze, Rose consulted Dr Martin Stevens, Associate Professor in Sensory and Evolutionary Ecology at Exeter University. "What I've done," Stevens explains, "is given [the Frieze team] information on the five different animals they're interested in: how their senses work, the kinds of information they can potentially find with their senses, and then highlight some interesting areas where those sensory systems diverge from ours."

new video will respond to Renzo Piano's spectacular new building between the High Line and the Hudson. "We are projecting into a glass window-wall, so that the projector's light meets the sun's rays on this semi-transparent screen. And depending on the time of day, different parts of the video will be transparent or opaque to the view outside. The idea is to oscillate between the sun and the projector, between feeling weighted and weightless."

"Today," Obrist says, "I suddenly thought of her incredible determination, it reminds me when, 20 years ago, I worked for the first time with [the artist and film director] Steve McQueen in a museum context in Paris. I did a show with him at the Musée d'Art Moderne, and I kept thinking, this is going to go far beyond the museum, and I have this feeling with Rachel. It will not be her only world." **FT**

Rachel Rose's Artist Award commission is part of Frieze Projects at Frieze, October 14-17, [frieze.com](http://frieze.com). "Palisades" is at the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, October 1-November 8, [serpentinegalleries.org](http://serpentinegalleries.org). "Everything and More" is at the Whitney Museum of American Art, October 30-February 7 2016, [whitney.org](http://whitney.org). The FT's Frieze supplement is published on October 10