

HIGH WINDOWS

DEAD BIRDS

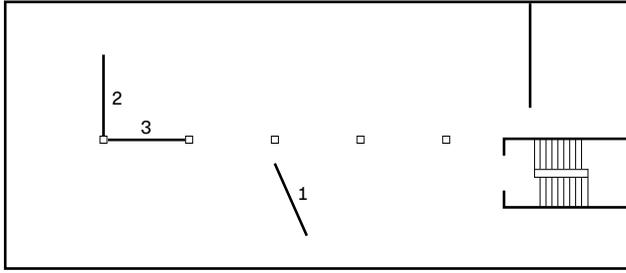
Taking a cue from Philip Larkin's poetry collections, *The Less Deceived*, *The Whitsun Weddings*, and *High Windows*, Stephen Sutcliffe's new works have been a long time in the making and are a set of reduced and distilled video collages. These extend Sutcliffe's longstanding obsessions with cultural confidence, social class and meditations on death and failure, and are presented in dialogue with selected videos, spanning from the early 2000s until the present.

Sutcliffe has had an ongoing engagement with literature in his practice, a strand pushed, and also complicated in this new body of work. There are immediate affinities in tone and approach between Sutcliffe and Larkin: the attempt to render a time through the lens of private experience, and the movement between troubled realism, dejection and wit. Working with the format of the short-form collaged video, Sutcliffe both channels the structure and mood of his literary references and extends them into his own distinctive language and time.

In the biography of Larkin, as with many of the writers who have influenced Sutcliffe's work, including East German author Uwe Johnson, there is a strand of withdrawal; an active seeking out of remote places, and a form of "leaning into bleakness". There is an ambivalent life-work connection in this approach: non-participation combined with a desire for the unaffected and social portrayal of a time – an attitude and relation with visibility which would be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain in the present. Sutcliffe's new videos *I am (for the birds)* and *General Knowledge* continue this logic of ambivalence, works that reflect with melancholy and absurdity on cultural belonging and entrapment.

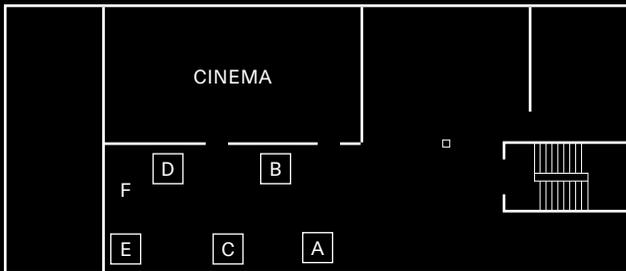
High Windows, Dead Birds marks the most comprehensive presentation of the artist's work to date, and the first in a German context, encompassing the new videos and retrospective elements, alongside spatial interventions in response to Künstlerhaus Stuttgart.

Level 4 HIGH WINDOWS



- 1 *Scenes from the Life of an Impatient Man*, 2015, 2 min 11 sec
- 2 *Plum*, 2012, 4 min 23 sec
- 3 *I am (for the birds)*, 2019, 2 min 35 sec

Level 2 DEAD BIRDS



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| <p>A <i>AB...</i>, 2015, 55 sec</p> <p><i>Brighton Beach</i>, 2015, 51 sec</p> <p><i>The Garden of Proserpine</i>, 2008, 2 min 08 sec</p> <p><i>Deleuze un Album</i>, 2009, 23 sec</p> <p>B <i>Come to the Edge</i>, 2003, 1 min 36 sec</p> <p><i>Goose Weather</i>, 2010, 4 min 33 sec</p> <p><i>O come all ye faithful</i>, 2007, 47 sec</p> <p>C <i>Said the poet to the analyst</i>, 2009, 1 min 19 sec</p> <p><i>Transformations</i>, 2005, 1 min 56 sec</p> <p><i>Vacillation</i>, 2008, 35 sec</p> <p><i>We'll Let You Know</i>, 2008, 58 sec</p> <p>D <i>New Numbers</i>, 2012, 9 min 51 sec</p> <p>E <i>General Knowledge</i>, 2019, 3 min 24 sec</p> <p>F <i>Guide for the Adolescent Tomcat in Dealing with Humanity</i>, wall painting, 2019</p> | <p>CINEMA</p> <p><i>Despair</i>, 2009, 17 min 22 sec</p> <p>Henry Green, 11 min 16 sec</p> |
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Fatima Hellberg and Stephen Sutcliffe in conversation

There is something in your filmic language which is reminiscent of structures and techniques employed in literature. The videos often contain elements of the texture, rhythm and atmosphere of specific writings. Can you say something about how this interest developed and where you see the role of literature in your work?

I sometimes think my videos have stood in for my inability to write. Literature is something I admire very much but find almost impossible to generate. I like to transfer techniques from text to video to complement the spoken word, which is often the starting point for what I do.

The structural aspects of poetry in particular appeal to me because they offer ways to distil a complex mix of feelings, experience and information into forms which themselves open out. In this respect, I prefer the understated to the anthemic.

Many of the literary references in this new body of work, including Philip Larkin, Uwe Johnson or Henry Green, were writers that have a certain bleak and mordant quality to their writing. There are also similarities in biography – a seeking out of a relative invisibility, both in how and where they decided to live. Is there a particular quality that draws you to these writers?

The literary influences on the new work I'm presenting at Künstlerhaus function less as direct references in terms of their subject matter and more as craftsmen of a particular approach. That said, I have always been drawn to artists who spoke from off-stage, as it were. I like the fact that Johnson, a recent discovery, and Larkin both left their respective 'scenes' in London and Germany to make work in self-imposed isolation. I find making work very private and often work from home to avoid bumping into other artists in studio situations.

What does your artistic process look like? When you start a new film or body of work, do you have a particular approach or way of working?

For every work I make, I collect a huge amount of material which I feel is somehow linked to what I'm thinking about. Much of this is discarded as I produce numerous versions and combinations: I don't actually know what I'm trying to make until it is made. The amount of research I undertake, and the amount of time I spend working things out, is inversely proportional to the apparent outcome, which I want to seem as casual and unforced

as possible. As Dolly Parton said, 'It takes a lot of time and money to look this cheap'.

The references and tone of your works often seem to gravitate towards a state and outlook at odds with paradigms of positivity, extroversion and productiveness. The fascination appears to gravitate more towards reluctance and a form of "misery" that also has a certain integrity, at times even pleasure to it. This form of non-participation and unwillingness to show up and deliver on expected terms seems to me to speak also of a form of resistance... how do you see this?

I am from the North of England, which is known for a certain type of humour based in adversity, so I think it is culturally inured in me to some extent. This type of humour permits survival and interrupts power dynamics even if, in itself, it doesn't resolve or tackle the underlying issues or problems. Humour is like poetry in that it works by using the structural expectations of language and culture to confound meaning and open it out to other interpretations.

Your work tends to be very distilled, reduced and packed into a short format, but still sort of leaking meaning, a form of limping logic which artist Cerith Wyn Evans has described as "off pointness" – precise, and committed, but still a bit off. When do you know that a piece is working for you?

I love the distilled form, whether its trailers for films or poetry (which Alan Bennett described as being "supreme, as it makes less mess"). Sometimes a work starts from a misinterpretation. I never can go direct to something I want to say, but in trying to do so I find I am describing something else perfectly. I tend to think it is going well when I start to enjoy the process, but my process stands in opposition to ideas of completeness and that makes it difficult to 'finish' works.

It seems to me that your work is touching upon certain profound and existential questions. Strands of social class, of mortality and death, but it tends to unfold in the small space, the small as a pathway to the systemic. Can you talk a bit about the attitude or approach that comes back in your work?

Ian White once said he had 'outed' me as having an interest in class. I get uncomfortable about appropriating class as a subject. It was not ever something that I was happy about presenting in my work as a 'thing'. On one hand, I think that my discomfort goes back to my early life, which was characterised by a denial of class overwritten by Thatcherism, and on the other, it is a politics

which wants to refuse the instrumental use of my biography as a 'USP'.

What is the role of ambivalence in your practice?

I don't like to commit to a definite meaning in any of my works as, firstly, I am not overly keen on didactic pieces and, secondly, because I have conflicted opinions on a lot of subjects. Sometimes I don't believe I have any viewpoints on anything.

This show and the new works, including *General Knowledge* and *I am (for the birds)* have been made with Künstlerhaus in mind. Can you say something about your approach to this show?

After a period of making longer works, which involved collaborating with other people – theatre directors, actors, technicians – I was interested to go back to working on my own on shorter pieces, which Künstlerhaus was very supportive of. When plans for the show were initiated, I was reading a biography on Larkin which really details his tendency to isolate himself from the 'scene' in order to develop a voice at his own pace. Both of the new works I've produced were inspired by a visit to Hull where Larkin lived. I visited the library and office he worked in, taking photos for reference. The installation in the downstairs gallery is inspired by the aesthetics of those spaces. Furthermore, *I am (for the birds)* has in part been inspired by items Larkin kept on his desk, whilst *General Knowledge* alludes more to a kind of arrogance that is discernable in Larkin's letters. Equally, the new videos are infiltrated by the present time, and ideas connected with imposters, false representations and exhaustion.

Your work has often been shown in contexts and alongside practices that could be described as queer or feminist. Do you see these strands and approaches as relevant in relation to your filmmaking?

My aversion to the anthemic tropes of film-making and documentary, and my production process, do have affinities with these methodologies.

There has been an ongoing strand in your work of a certain Englishness. Do you feel that your perception of this strand in your work has changed in the light of recent political shifts within the UK?

My work frequently points out the hypocrisies of Englishness, especially disingenuousness

in the presentation of self, and this has a marked relevance to the way that politics and debates are currently being conducted.

Scenes from the Life of an Impatient Man, 2015, 2 min 11 sec

A video collage to accompany the poet Christopher Logue (1926-2011) as he recites a part of his autobiography *Prince Charming*, in which he imagines scenes for a series of short films.

Plum, 2012, 4 min 23 sec

A meditation on disingenuousness.

I am (for the birds), 2019,

2 min 35 sec

On his desk at the Brynmoré Jones Library at Hull University, Philip Larkin kept a framed photograph, like an executive toy, of Guy the Gorilla with whom he identified as a fellow prisoner in drudgery. Guy was a famous exhibit at London Zoo. "His appearance was fearsome, yet his nature was very gentle; when small birds flew into his cage, he was often seen to lift them on his hands and examine them softly." Guy died in his early 30s in 1978 of a heart attack during an operation on his infected teeth. His tooth decay had been caused by the fact that visitors were allowed to feed him sweets.

Famously, in 2018, a fake excerpt from Michael Wolff's biography claimed that White House staffers created a 'Gorilla' channel for Donald Trump to watch.

A

AB..., 2015, 55 sec

An alphabetized re-edit of an interview with Anthony Burgess inspired by Walter Abish's *Alphabetical Africa*.

Brighton Beach, 2015, 51 sec

A redacted version of a video in which a publisher attacks an anti-war protester (and his dog) who is disrupting his client's photo opportunity at a Labour Party conference.

The Garden of Proserpine, 2008,

2 min 08 sec

Stephen Sutcliffe's videos merge together film footage and audio recordings from his own extensive archive. *The Garden of Proserpine* combines an excerpt from an episode of Monty Python, a looped instrumental section from a track by The Smiths and a reading of Swinburne's poem 'The Garden of Proserpine'. Sutcliffe's method of constructing his films involves a process of association for each piece of material. He layers and collages, linking by association, establishing complex relationships. Here Proserpine's garden, as described by Swinburne's poem, becomes entwined with the setting of the Monty Python scene. Together with the music, the film seems to suggest that the men are battling one another

in order to reach the eternal sleep to which the poem refers.

Deleuze un Album, 2009, 23 sec

A video portrait of the philosopher.

B

Come to the Edge, 2003, 1 min 36 sec

Come to the Edge uses a recording of the poet Christopher Logue reciting a poem originally written in 1968. The reading is combined with video footage shot in a sixth form college common room. In the footage, a good-humoured scene is suddenly transformed into something altogether more sinister as the group of schoolboys enact a ritual humiliation upon a seemingly older, mustachioed boy.

Goose Weather, 2010, 4 min 33 sec

Based on the opening passage from Edith Sitwell's *English Eccentrics*, a book which, amongst other strange characters, describes 'ornamental hermits', Sutcliffe uses George Harrison's album cover from *All Things Must Pass* as a visual counterpoint to a choral rendition of Sitwell's text.

O come all ye faithful, 2007, 47 sec

Christopher Logue reads from his poem 'O Come All Ye Faithful' (1996), which finishes with the

Stephen Sutcliffe
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DEAD BIRDS
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Künstlerhaus Stuttgart
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Stephen Sutcliffe (b.1968, Harrogate) is an artist who lives and works in Glasgow. Recent solo exhibitions include: Talbot Rice Edinburgh, Hepworth Wakefield (2017), Rob Tufnell, London (2015), Tramway, Glasgow (2013), Stills, Edinburgh (2011), Whitechapel Auditorium (2010), Cubitt, London (2009) and Art Now, Light Box, Tate Britain (2005). Group exhibitions include: Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, Germany, Cubitt, London, Museu Coleção Berardo, Lisbon, Portugal, Gaudel De Stampa, Paris (2015). In 2018 he participated in the Manchester International Festival in collaboration with Graham Eatough on a film for the Whitworth Gallery, for which they won the Contemporary Arts Society Award. He has been shortlisted for the Jarman Award twice and in 2012 he won the Margaret Tait Award. Sternberg Press are publishing *Sutcliffe at Fifty*, a book on his work, and Book Works *Much Obligated*, a form of autobiography, this year.

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emphatic line: "Love comes again." A tentative happy ending is suggested, but then Logue glances anxiously off-camera, asking: "Did I read it right or should I do it again?" Like a worried internal monologue, beneath his reading plays a hushed litany of obscenities, cut and pasted from the *The F*cking Fulfords*, a 2004 documentary about a foul-mouthed, and cheerfully destitute, aristocratic English family. Hopefulness is always talkative and fretful; his speakers are all haunted by the same worry of failure.

C

Said the poet to the analyst, 2009,
1 min 19 sec

Anne Sexton's poem is a meeting between two people who interpret words for a living. Sutcliffe's film gradually reveals a place in which to contemplate this.

Transformations, 2005, 1 min 56 sec
A video to illustrate one of Thomas Hardy's more optimistic poems.

Vacillation, 2008, 35 sec

Colin Wilson described a moment of gleaming realism in his 1956 book *The Outsider* by referring to WB Yeats' poem 'Vacillation'. He also posited the idea that if outsiders could not find an outlet for their creativity, the results

could be sinister. Sutcliffe's *Vacillation* marries these two strands by collaging a reading of the poem with a morphed montage of murder scenes.

We'll Let You Know, 2008, 58 sec

The piece opens up on a young Ian McKellen, sitting centre stage and waxing lyrical on the correct approach to the presentation of Shakespeare. His mannered platitudes are skewered by a hectoring voice off-screen: "Begin as soon as you like, would you?" Oblivious, McKellen slides into yet another anecdote, while the off-screen voice jabs: "Be as quick as you can, would you please?" In his film, Sutcliffe questions a culture of class aspiration and intellectual complacency, undermining the apparent self-confidence of the ambitious young actor.

D

New Numbers, 2012, 9 min 51 sec

This video is ostensibly a reworking of the closed circuit TV scene from the 1967 film *Charlie Bubbles*, employing a structure suggested by Robbe-Grillet's book *For a New Novel* by recounting each character's separate memories of a drunken return home (minus the drunkest who remembers nothing). Christopher

Logue's Poem 'He was a youth from the suburbs' from his 1969 collection *New Numbers* is repeated from different points to suggest a possible internal monologue for each of the cast, whether they are reading a magazine, reminiscing an affair or recounting a formative experience.

E

General Knowledge, 2019,
3 min 24 sec

A reworking of the London weekend television logo, which was a kind of ribbon that spelt out the initials of the company. In this work, however, the ribbon gradually ties itself in tighter and tighter knots as a contestant from the BBC TV programme *Mastermind* tries to answer general knowledge questions. This particular contestant was the Rev. Robert Peters, a notorious imposter and serial fraudster. His answers are constantly interrupted by an anti-Brexit protester. This work references earlier videos such as *A Policeman is Walking* (part of the longer work *Despair*) and *Brighton Beach*, which also involves the intrusion of an activist.

CINEMA

Despair, 2009, 17 min 22 sec

A video inspired by and titled after the 1934 Vladimir Nabokov novel, a story of mistaken physical resemblance, murder and identity theft. Nabokov's themes of power and delusion, doubling and game-play are anchored in this collage through a prismatic treatment of visual material and sound.

Henry Green, 11 min 16 sec

Much of Henry Green's writing loops back to the point of human unknowability. Green's work was shaped by his conviction that we can never really know what anyone is thinking or feeling. In this conversation, recorded for BBC 2's *Bookmark* programme, he speaks of his work, and reluctance as attitude and method – the reluctance to pin down his characters, and himself. The literary scholar Nick Shepley, in *Henry Green: Class, Style, and the Everyday* writes that "the search for an identifiable or classifiable Henry Green retreats into the shadowy distance as the layers accumulate." His take on literature, and language – as a form that contains its own estrangement and its inability to fully grasp or contain, yet as a form that he loved greatly, is a stance that resonates with much of Sutcliffe's work and attitude.

