

## Surrounding Water

A video installation of Bie Michels

Featuring interviews with local residents:

**Alex** comes from eastern Congo. He was forced to flee the war and came to England. Immigration Services placed him in Hastings where he has lived for about eleven years. Since being here, Alex has got his diploma and now works for the Council. He has written a book about his story.

**Brett** is a well-travelled fisherman of about 45 years old. Brett has fished in many places around the world including many times in Norway. Like Lee, he has tried his hand at other jobs but is now a fulltime fisherman. He owns a boat together with another fisherman.

**Dave** (Dodger) is a 25 year-old fisherman from St Leonards. Married with no children, Dave has fished since he was a child and owns his own fishing boat.

**Lee** is a 42 year-old fisherman from Hastings who is married with two children. Lee's family has a long tradition of fishing. Lee had tried to do other kinds of work, but 'came back', preferring to be a fisherman. He has his own boat.

**Nadia** is a Christian woman from Kuwait, an Islamic country. Ten years ago, problems with her family caused Nadia to flee from her home and come to England. She was placed in a flat in St Leonards where she now lives with her son.

This video is not a documentary. It is part of an ongoing process to intimately investigate the complex relations that people maintain with objects. It is a philosophical exploration expressed through artistic form.

In a port people and objects arrive from, and go to, many different places. This situation of constant travel presented Michels with an opportunity to ask questions about the object's ultimate significance: when is the object at its most powerful: when it is possessed or not possessed? When it is lost or when we still have it?

In a port there is also the presence of water, that big living 'thing' that has a huge influence on our lives. Because of the long history of refugees and asylum seekers trying to cross the Channel from France (Dunkirk/Calais) to the UK (Dover/ later dispersed by the Immigration Office to i.a. Hastings), she spoke with local immigrants about their experiences of displacement. The reality of their lives contrasted sharply with the traditional lives of the local fishermen; with their roots deeply fixed in one place; their old traditions and dealings with the sea, and all the objects they need for their way of life.

The film is projected onto an ice cube during the opening weekend, slowly melting away. This connects to her own ideas about the relationship between time and the object and its value by focusing on the disappearing and appearing of the 'thing': the value of something or somebody that becomes clear when he/she/it isn't there anymore. Here too, I am looking to the presence (possessing) and the absence (losing) of objects.

In the ice cube a black object is imprisoned. The water, in the form of ice, seems to become more of a material object, but an object that can enclose, in the same way as a force of energy or a simple bottle. Also the projection onto it seems to become more tactile, with the ice that 'drinks' the colours. The object inside is a replica of the missing weight of the old clock of St. Mary-in-the-Castle (Hastings). This object is black, like a hole. It appears to be a void. As the ice cube melts away, the weight-object becomes 'material' again, but it stays as a black shadow in the middle of the projection on the wall behind it, where it continues to appear as a gap.

*“The thing can be thought of as the object with the screen removed. In the absence of the screen, all that made the physical thing into the object of a subject is stripped away. The thing appears in all its strangeness, ineluctably itself, other than us, existing in a way that must baffle our comprehension. This has not been the case with the object, which is attached to the subject by a sightline, as a boat is moored to the shore. The thing severs that line and is cast adrift, a winking sardine can on a sublime sea. We lose not property but le propre; we lose not what we own but the sense that we are our own. The object gazes back – and if we see that gaze in a certain perspective it does not constitute the subject but causes it to dwindle to a vanishing point. The subject is annihilated; indeed, the object too disappears as object.”*

*Lacan, explained in Peter Schwenger (The Tears of Things. Melancholy and Physical Objects, The University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis 2006, 35-48 )*