

WE ARE CHOIRUS

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Elizabeth Price *The Woolworths Choir of 1979* October 9 - December 1, 2013

In 2012 Elizabeth Price’s video installation *The Woolworths Choir of 1979* earned her the Turner Prize, a prestigious award presented annually to the most outstanding UK exhibition of the year by an artist under fifty. Although for many in Britain the work’s title inevitably recalls a notorious fire that swept through a Manchester store on May 8, 1979, the artist’s central concern is embodied in the word “choir.”

“I’m interested in what happens when things move out of categories, so when social history moves out of documentary category, but still remains social historical, and gets combined with something that is a lot more immersive and emotional, like pop music, which has an immediate physiological and emotional effect.”¹

The Woolworths Choir of 1979, which opens with an architectural survey of a 13th-century Gothic church and ends with a reconstruction of the causes of the fire – all to the accompaniment of a powerfully insistent beat – is an extraordinarily compelling film.

After training at the Ruskin College of Art in Oxford and London's Royal College of Art, **Elizabeth Price** began her career as a sculptor. She made her first film work, *A Public Lecture and Exhumation*, in 2005, and digital video soon became her preferred medium, with the 2007 piece *At the House of Mr. X* setting the tone for her subsequent creations. The artist uses graphic elements, film footage, words and subtitles to guide the reading of the highly original narrative threads she creates. Exercising her considerable powers of analysis and synthesis, she skillfully composes and assembles different documentary forms to create a dramatic and coherently flowing whole.

Made up entirely of archival documents, film clips and images taken off the Internet, *The Woolworths Choir of 1979* combines photographs of ecclesiastical architecture, footage of a 1960s pop music performance and shots of the Manchester fire. According to the artist, it was not clear when she began work on the project what it would become. She undertook her exploration of the notions of assembly and collective behaviour in a video made in 2011. This film, entitled simply *Choir*, was presented first at the Chisenhale Gallery in London, and later as part of a solo exhibition held at the New Museum in New York and the Bielefelder Kunstverein in Germany. The work opens with an analysis of the term "choir" in its architectural sense – a physical space between sanctuary and nave where members of the clergy perform religious rites; it then moves into a celebration of the choir as an assembly of people singing together. Conceived as the first two parts of a planned trilogy, *Choir* now presents as an early version of *The Woolworths Choir of 1979*, in which the artist has extended the meaning of "choir" to encompass any group of people exhibiting the same behaviour.

The Woolworths Choir of 1979 also begins with a detailed description of the choir of a church – a kind of illustrated lecture that defines the architectural feature's various components and labels them on archival photographs and diagrams. Then, to a soundtrack of 1960s pop music – the song *Out in the Streets* by the girl band the Shangri-Las – the artist uses multiple Internet clips of performances featuring synchronized movements and a pounding beat to create an enigmatic choir of her own. This reconstructed choir is reminiscent of the chorus of Greek theatre, whose members recite, comment, dance and introduce the dramatic action: "We are chorus," they proclaim, "and we will show you how it all went up!"

The action here is the tragic Manchester Woolworths fire, which in the space of a few minutes forced a group of people to begin behaving in the same way – out of desperation. Price has structured this third section around an image that recurs frequently in BBC news footage of the event: the waving arms of people trapped inside the burning building, trying to attract attention through the barred windows. These images are shown again and again, accompanied by endless repetitions of occasionally odd eyewitness observations – for instance, “They were throwing the cups down.”

Linking the film’s three sections is Price’s emphasis on the “conspicuous twist of the wrist” that is manifested in the waves of the people trapped in the fire, the ambiguous hand gestures of the Shangri-Las as they perform, and the unusual position of the hands in some of the sepulchral effigies that lie recumbent on the floor of a Gothic church. Price reinforces the inexorable forward momentum of her film by punctuating each short section with a startlingly loud clack, and the whole piece is backed by the syncopated beat of collectively snapping fingers and clapping hands.

LOUISE SIMARD

Head of Multimedia Events

1. Elizabeth Price, in an interview with Matthew Cain of Channel 4 News, October 2012:
<http://www.channel4.com/news/elizabeth-price-wins-the-turner-prize-2012>.

Elizabeth Price, who was born in Bradford, West Yorkshire, in 1966, lives and works in London. She began her studies at the University of Oxford's Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art and subsequently attended the Royal College of Art in London, where she obtained a Master's degree in 1991.

Elizabeth Price won the 2012 Turner Prize for her solo exhibition *Here*, held at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, in Gateshead, and her film *The Woolworths Choir of 1979* was screened at the Turner Show held at Tate Britain, in London, in December of that year. In 2012 she also received one of the five Paul Hamlyn Foundation Awards for the visual arts.

Recently, Elizabeth Price has held solo exhibitions at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, at Bloomberg Space, London, at Bielefelder Kunstverein, at the New Museum, New York, and at London's Chisenhale and Whitechapel galleries. She has participated in a number of group exhibitions, including the British Art Show 7, in 2011, which featured her 2009 video *User Group Disco*. Her work *The Tent* was screened in the film section of the 2010 edition of London's Frieze Art Fair.

Acknowledgements

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PHOTO