

Fences Make Senses and Basement Pool

By George Barber



Project Details

Name of Researcher:	Professor George Barber
Name of Output:	<i>Fences Make Senses and Basement Pool</i>
UCARO link/s:	https://research.uca.ac.uk/1961/
Output Type:	Q – Digital or Visual Media; artist’s films
Year and mode of dissemination:	<p>2015</p> <p><i>By The Way</i>, solo show at Young Projects, Los Angeles, 5 June – 1 November 2015, including <i>Fences Make Senses and Basement Pool</i> installation alongside other works by Barber</p> <p><i>Fences Make Senses</i>, solo show at Waterside Contemporary, London, 12 September 2015 – 12 January 2016, including <i>Fences Make Senses and Basement Pool</i> installation</p> <p><i>Akula Dream</i>, solo show at Chapter Arts, Cardiff, 1 October 2015 - 10 January 2016, including <i>Fences Make Senses</i> installation</p> <p>2019</p> <p><i>Basement Pool</i> screenings at National Film School, DIY Space for London and Close Up Festival, London, 3 April - 3 September 2019</p>
Key Words:	Video art, installation, mixed genre, narrative, essay film, single-screen works
Funding:	Wellcome Trust Small Arts Award, 2014: £30,000

Synopsis

Fences Make Senses and Basement Pool is an output comprising two, related, artist's films. The films have been shown together as a twin installation in two of Barber's solo exhibitions, as well as being exhibited and screened separately.

The output is part of Barber's *The Mindset Suite* series of films. However, unlike other works in the series, it is only shown in installations or gallery exhibitions of *The Mindset Suite*, and not as a single screen piece or as part of the *Mindset* feature film. The work resulted from research at the Centre for Blast Injury Studies at Imperial College, London. The films collectively propose that poetry can be as effective as documentary in communicating the tragedy of war, politics, and environmental crisis. The series investigates the hidden ubiquity of military thinking and the state of constant war in the modern world, despite Western governments' insistence that we live in a period of peace. This output develops the research by

investigating the refugee crisis, a problem that arises directly from conflict. *Fences Make Senses* depicts the plight of refugees who cross the Mediterranean in frail vessels only to face bureaucratic contempt on arrival. *Basement Pool* deals with consumerist alienation, a superficial problem in contrast, but tellingly juxtaposed with the refugee crisis in news coverage in 2015 which saw footage of drowning migrants alongside media stories of rich Londoners objecting to their neighbours' basement extensions. As with Barber's other films in *The Mindset Suite*, *Fences Make Senses and Basement Pool* blurs film-making boundaries, hybridising the video art tradition with techniques of mainstream narrative film-making for cinema or television.

Supporting information presented here includes evidence of the research aims, context, processes and insights, illustrated with images from the films and their dissemination. The films are submitted and should be viewed alongside the portfolio.



Fences Make Senses still

HAVE
YOU BEEN
EVERYWHERE
YET?

TURKISH
AIRLINES





Basement Pool still

Context

George Barber's *The Mindset Suite*, of which this output is part, consists of 7 films. All the works have been informed by research Barber undertook at the Centre for Blast Injury Studies at Imperial College, London. The Centre investigates the issues surrounding blast injuries through unique multidisciplinary collaborations of military medical officers and civilian engineers and scientists from around the world. Barber approached the centre with his Wellcome Trust-funded proposal and was invited to attend numerous lectures and events and to discuss the results of war and conflict with amputees, scientists, military doctors, students and engineers. Using this research, Barber employed a variety of methods to critique how power shapes society and how conflict, and its destructive consequences, becomes the norm.

Fences Make Senses, as one film within *The Mindset Suite*, is an artistic response to migration, which is often a consequence of war and is a serious international problem. There are currently more than 50 million refugees worldwide, more than the number at the end of World War Two.

Fences Makes Senses attempts to evolve an alternative to how the crisis is usually represented. Barber moves beyond the documentary/TV news format, trying to find a more affecting approach that avoids the compassion fatigue generated by established representations. *Fences Makes Senses* represents the migrant crisis through an unusual drama work/installation, in the tradition of an essay film reminiscent of Jean Luc Godard's mix of the philosophical, political and personal. It stretches the conventional documentary approach by employing professional improvisers to act out situations routinely faced by refugees (such as buying a clearly dangerous boat, or being turned away at a border for having the wrong papers). The film avoids interviews with or footage of refugees but instead transposes their problems to improvisers, who have never faced such issues. Putting the words and feelings into the wrong mouths brings across the tragedy more vividly, distancing and making strange the refugees' experiences.

Basement Pool tackles the theme of alienation and estrangement through a subject that is opposite to the refugee experience. A man receives a letter informing him that his neighbours want to build a new basement containing a swimming pool, sauna and gym. He begins to worry that having his neighbours working out and obsessing about their bodies, dressed in leotards and swimsuits right next door, will infect his mind. He fears the contagion of consumerism filtering through the walls of the properties, and he worries that he might become mindless. This problem is trivial and superficial in contrast to those faced by refugees. Barber was prompted to make the juxtaposition by news coverage in 2015 in which drowning migrants appeared alongside stories of rich Londoners objecting to their neighbours' basement extensions.

Together the two films raise huge questions, subverting the claims made by governments, scientists and big corporations to address global problems (including the climate emergency, conflict and migration) and revealing the countervailing economic forces that divert attention to mindless consumerism. There is a constant need for artists, thinkers, politicians and the public to understand that the underlying structures of society and politics change very slowly, despite positive messages from governments, and this output responds to that need.

Fences Make Senses and *Basement Pool*, like the other *Mindset Suite* films, were supported by a Wellcome Trust grant of £30,000.

REFERENCES

- Slater, P. (1970) *The Pursuit of Loneliness*. UK. Penguin.
 Figgis, M. (2017) *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*. UK. Faber & Faber.
 Finger, A.K. (2006) *Das Gesamtkunstwerk der Moderne*. Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
 Sterritt, D. (1999) *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Research Questions and Aims

Research questions:

Can a video artwork that transposes the plight of refugees and re-stages their experiences with improvisers change how people view their problems?

How can video art combat compassion fatigue?

How can video art combat capitalist alienation?

How can video art reset reactions to politics and conflict by short-circuiting the media forms by which they are commonly represented?

Research aims:

To find an artistic mode to respond to the European migrant crisis that started in 2014, as an alternative to documentary and news coverage.

Research Methods and Process

Fences Make Senses and Basement Pool is a radical attempt to break the spell of indifference to global issues and to combine a variety of forms in video. Barber has combined narrative, poetry, music, abstract filmmaking, animation, voice-over, actors and improvisers to create new space between mainstream media and artist's moving image. The research methods allow a move away from the dominant and common forms of documentary or broadcast TV through which the migrant crisis is usually encountered.

In *Fences Make Senses*, holiday advertisement sequences of beautiful tropical water are contradicted by a voiceover discussing how refugees should swim ashore to avoid detection. There is a sales pitch in which a man sells a children's dinghy to a group of refugees, and an incident where a border guard tells a migrant that, on his government's scale, they don't have enough points to be considered a refugee. A man in tears, who cannot speak sufficient English, is asked to step away from a border booth. Finally, in a completely different vein, a sequence describes the ease with which biscuits travel the world, around 200 billion a year transported by international air freight, all in comfortable racks with copious packaging. Meanwhile human refugees hidden in trucks are close to suffocating. By using unexpected scenarios and forms, *Fences Make Senses* creates deeper empathy for refugees.

Barber's use of improvisers as a practice method dates back

to his work *Gibberish* (2008). In *Fences Makes Senses and Basement Pool*, and other outputs in *The Mindset Suite*, the technique has become more refined and political. Barber took a group of experienced improvisers and prompted them to rehearse, to think through, and act out the sorts of incidents refugees regularly experience. In doing so, he invites identification with the refugees; the viewer watching rehearses what they might feel in these situations.

Basement Pool uses monologue to explore the anxiety of a man who is unnerved by his neighbour's plans to excavate a pool and gym under their house. The protagonist quickly proceeds to comedic despair as he contemplates how his health might be affected by the mere thought of the neighbours next door swimming and looking at their bodies all day long. This indulgent and superficial angst creates a stark contrast to the problems of refugees, who are swimming simply to reach a new home.

For the installation at Waterside Contemporary, the gallery extended the milieu of *Fences Makes Senses*, with tarp-covered pallets, inflatable boats, battered suitcases, fuel cans and ropes. Between these were positioned the benches on which viewers sat to watch the film. *Basement Pool* was installed in an adjoining small room, mimicking a private gym with coloured tiles and folded towels. The film was shown on the screen of a cross-trainer, and the viewer had to climb the machine in order to view it.



*Waterside Contemporary
Fences Make Senses installation*

Research Insights and Contribution

New insights:

Fences Make Senses and Basement Pool, within the wider context of *The Mindset Suite*, contributes an innovative treatment of issues clustered around militarisation, conflict, global politics, and the environment.

The research methodology is a coherent assembling of different artistic and representational elements: CGI, found footage, poetry, writing, myths, and the ideas of undervalued critical thinkers such as Philip Slater.

The output demonstrates that a poetic approach, incorporating personal thoughts, real testimony, specific details and voice-overs that make unusual analogies, revitalises representations of the global refugee crisis. Documentaries and TV news approaches are important, but an artist's research and alternative formal solutions can also contribute to widening debate. As with all the works in *The Mindset Suite*, *Fences Make Senses and Basement Pool* seeks to avoid common formal approaches to serious issues and instead re-frames them in a darkly comic or alternative world, based on a dialogue between broadcast news approaches and contemporary video art, and resulting in an innovative hybrid.

Fences Make Senses and Basement Pool highlights how alienated society has become and how self-contained and unconnected wealthy Westerners are. The refugee problem may be as serious as it was after World War Two, but there is no concerted effort to solve it. Everybody is too busy with their own problems and while one group of people builds swimming pools underneath their houses and uses machines to burn calories, another group gets plenty of swimming and exercise, abandoning sinking boats and walking across continents carrying their children. Together the films combine into a melancholy survey of the blindness of the Western body politic.

Critical reception of *The Mindset Suite*, including *Fences Make Senses and Basement Pool*, has been positive and has earned Barber a nomination for the 2021 Derek Jarman Award. He has recently been awarded an Arts Council grant to continue the research.



*Waterside Contemporary
Fences Make Senses installation*



*Waterside Contemporary
Basement Pool installation*

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Dissemination:

Barber's solo show at waterside contemporary was reviewed in 'Art Agenda', the review section of *E-flux*:
<https://www.art-agenda.com/features/238075/george-barber-s-fences-make-senses>

Waterside Contemporary exhibition coverage:
<http://waterside-contemporary.com/exhibitions/fences-make-senses/>

In 2015 Barber's work was documented in a 6-page interview in *Art Monthly*, Issue 390:
<https://www.artmonthly.co.uk/magazine/site/issue/october-2015>

In the same year, a double page feature on his work and influences appeared in *Frieze*:
<https://frieze.com/article/life-film-1>

Art Monthly published an interview with Barber by Maria Walsh in October 2015:
<http://waterside-contemporary.com/artists/george-barber/text/Art%20Monthly-oct15-George-Barber-interview.pdf>

Fences Make Senses is discussed in 'Dream Myself Outside', text by Martin Herbert, October 2015:
<https://research.uca.ac.uk/5279/1/Dream%20Myself%20Outside%20-%20on%20George%20Barber%20by%20Martin%20Herbert.pdf>

Culture Colony published an interview with Barber by Richard Bowers in 2015:
<https://issuu.com/ccqmag/docs/ccq7/23>

Research Dissemination and Recognition

Influence of the research:

In 2019 the BFI National Film Archive acquired *Fences Make Senses* for its collection, alongside Barber's complete output to date.

In 2019 the Tate Britain Library Archive also acquired Barber's works for its collection, alongside supporting materials, including early work, drawing, paintings, writings, family photographs and memorabilia from Guyana, his birthplace.

Barber was a key interviewee in a BBC documentary about video art entitled *Kill Your TV: Jim Moir's Weird World of Video Art*. Numerous extracts of Barber's work were shown in the series, which was screened on BBC4, November 2019.

Barber's research undertaken at the Centre for Blast Injury Studies at Imperial London has led to further outputs, including *Dude Down*, about IEDs and mines, which was shown at the 2016 BFI London Film Festival, the 2017 Alchemy Festival in Hawick, Scotland and the 2017 Split Film Festival.

Barber has been nominated for the 2021 Derek Jarman Award for a body of work including *The Mindset Suite*.



*Young Projects installation with
Basement Pool (left)*



*Young Projects installation with
Fences Make Senses (left)*



Young Projects installation



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FRONT COVER
Fences Make Sense still

BACK COVER
Basement Pool still

