

Live Illuminated Manuscript 1: Police Control

Thirty minutes of collective reading and listening

Written and constructed by Sally O'Reilly

Music written and performed by Emma Smith

Programme Note

LIM 1: Police Control is a story about a decisive moment in British policing. In the early 1970s traditional methods were being augmented with new technologies and procedures, quite possibly including ideas borrowed from the field of cybernetics. The piece follows the fortunes of three teams of policemen as they pitch some of these techniques against one another in a constabulary inter-divisional competition.

'Cybernetics' derives from the Greek for steersman and, in its first phases, before it branched into chaos theory, artificial intelligence and other specialist areas, the discipline was concerned with the possibility of steering complex systems such as telephone networks. Control over a system might involve maintaining an equilibrium (thermostat-governed central heating systems are an example of this), or producing desirable changes within the system. This latter 'learning' model is employed by the human brain, and by the 1960s some computer programs were also capable of incorporating new information into their processes.

At Modern Art Oxford in 1968 the artist Steven Willats made a large-scale installation of Visuals Automatics, Shift Boxes and Visual Transmitters. Through these machines he aimed to produce positive change by introducing new information into a complex system – i.e., the brain of the gallery visitor. This person would then go on to produce further changes in another complex system – namely, society. Randomly flashing coloured lights would, Willats hoped, provoke creative responses, since people tend to seek logical sequences wherever possible. These people would then go on to exercise this

creative thinking in other aspects of life. The machines also allegedly gave off alpha waves (the electrical impulses that the brain produces), thereby operating at a subliminal level too. All that exists in the MAO archive about these machines are three fuzzy photographs reproduced in an unbound catalogue.

Last year the MAO installation was rebuilt at Raven Row gallery, London. For *Live Illuminated Manuscript 1: Police Control*, however, historical reconstruction is not the goal. Instead, it will focus on the period that followed Willats's MAO exhibition. It would be a few years before the artist embarked on the socially engaged practice he is known for, and this evening we will be speculating on what happened during those few years to bring about the shift from wanting to 'control' an audience to wanting to work with them on producing change.

LIM1: *Police Control* takes its structure from an artefact from another archive: a pamphlet that was handed out to the general public at a police open day in Kent in 1971. This evening we will consider the possibility that the UK police force cottoned on to cybernetics and made it unpalatable for the artist. Or perhaps the artist undertook a residency within the force in the style of the Art Placement Group, and became uncomfortable with the wider implications of these ideas.

Whatever really happened, LIM1: *Police Control* demonstrates how the past is not a lost object to be retrieved, something broken by time's rough passage that we can piece back together. The past does not exist. All that exists are its remnants in the present. We cannot reconstruct a history, even our own, other than partially, since any experience will overflow all possible descriptions of it. So what if we use the archive instead to construct possible or fantastical explanations for how things have come to be?

LIM1: *Police Control* is the first in a series of three musical performances, specially commissioned by Modern Art Oxford for their 50th anniversary, during which the gallery archives will be excavated and constructed upon. Selected items will be brought out for public viewing before and after the performance.