Screening Room no.1 part A: *Machine White Sun*
A conversation between artist Esther Gatón and residency 11:11 facilitators Alex Bell and Giulia Shah

Giulia: Hi, Esther, so nice to have you.

Alex: Hi, Esther.

Esther: Hi Giulia. Hi, Alex. Thanks for inviting me to be part of this.

Giulia: We're really excited. Esther Gatón you are going to be the first artist showing video work in 11:11's online screening room. This month; the first two weeks we will be showing one of your video works *Machine White Sun*, and in two weeks on the 15th of April, we'll be showing for two weeks —*the softest mud that sees*. Really excited to talk to you more today, specifically about *Machine White Sun* and other things that surround your practice.

Esther: Yeah, it is super exciting for me too because I only exhibited these films in my degree show at Goldsmiths. So it will be the first time that they can be seen online and more available. It's been around a year since I made them so I feel that I'm sort of capable of talking about them now. So yeah let's see. Thank you so much for your invitation.

Giulia: We've been following your work for a while, and we met through a previous [11:11] resident Erika. And recently saw your graduation show at Goldsmiths which you luckily managed to have open to the public. We loved your videos. We were really surprised to see videos from you as I was more familiar with your sculptural and object based work.

Esther: It's interesting because I began doing videos in a very unconscious way. In 2019—what happened was—most of my practice was sculpture and installation, it was always very site specific, and also very connected to not only the site but a specific light or a specific moment of the day. I was

the one who was taking the pictures and videos of my installations so I realised that in some ways I was sort of already working on the screen. In this same time I also began to take pictures and videos of many things that were surrounding me and used this for the sculptures as references for materials or combinations. So I feel that I arrived to video very naturally. It felt very natural to look at things and make compositions and then build a sort of story through the images. Following matter mostly. I feel that that is very clear in *Machine White Sun*.

Giulia: At Goldsmiths you showed the two video works [*Machine White Sun* and *—the softest mud that sees*] on two separate screens in one space. They are also very much separate works, but very much related. Could you talk a little bit about the works and how they were shown.

Esther: Yeah, so I consider them two separate pieces. But the truth is that they happened one after the other and they are very connected, in terms of how they were produced. I was without a script. I would go to sites and film and really wait and see what I was finding. In the first one, in *Machine White Sun*, I was following fluids, water in general. Connecting the images through that sort of unfixed matter or substance. Whereas in the second one, it could be said that I think it's a bit more complex, there is an interest in light and artificial light and environments that are in between fake and real. I feel that I was using video to bring all those worlds together.

Alex: I'm really interested in finding out more about the choices of footage that you use in your films, because in all of your films that I've seen, there's a combination of different types of footage. I really like the juxtaposition of them and how you work with them. Do you have a favourite type of footage to work with in your films?

Esther: My own footage, I feel, is very hooked in conventional—or not conventional—but aestheticised ways of looking because of my background of studying art and composition, and photography. So I feel that I take images that are sort of beautiful in a conventional way. Whereas, I find it very interesting to take material from YouTube from people that, for

instance, don't have training in filming. I love how here the ways of looking are very revealed. Like for instance with touristic videos, and you see zooms, and they're like operations that become very interesting. It feels like the mode is very connected with the camera. Like, the device is sort of an extension of the person. I feel that it's really good to extract or use these visions. It feels like it makes my language more complex to have access to videos that have different intentions and are sometimes not that aware. Although at the same time I also use videos that are much more aware, for instance the NASA footage or commercial videos, because I also like that other language that by contrast is very technical and they know how to keep you hooked on the screen, right. So yeah, I just feel that everyone is filming and that is really fantastic.

Giulia: There's also a different intention to all those videos. There is a different reason or end result. There's the documentation of something, there's the scientific aspect, like with the NASA videos, there's the leisure aspect and then there's the aspect of memory that comes with tourist videos or other documentation of memory. So I'm quite interested in these different ways of looking, but that also relate to different aims or goals or reasons.

Alex: I'm super fascinated about how you talk about this, this kind of layering of voices through visual aesthetics within your films. Because it makes me think back to previous conversations we've had about your own sense of self, and how you are trying to disrupt the idea of the singular self or the singular vision or voice? And do you think that this also has something to do with this interest in using other people's footage?

Esther: Yeah, I actually hadn't thought of that but it makes total sense. That challenge of the self or the idea of the self is one of the things I think I learned from swimming and from water. Like how it kind of connects the environment so much. When you're swimming, you're so aware that you're part of that and then inevitably, when you get out of the pool you know that you're in the air now, right? So in some ways, it makes you really aware of being part of a bigger thing. And also how your desires and intentions are

really shaped by the environment in many ways. So I guess that seeing all these other voices, like you were saying, has to do with that. With— well probably these voices are gonna say it better than me, than me trying to impose my style or something on top of the whole story.

Alex: There was also a really nice part of the writing Rita did to go with this film… It was just this film in particular [that Rita's text accompanied], just to check that it wasn't the two films together?

Esther: It was only *Machine White Sun*, yeah

Alex: There was a part of it [I really liked], because [it was written] in these small chapters about these different aspects - which I really like that way of writing, it's very interesting. One was about this idea of wetness being this kind of feeling of the boundary of different states of wetness affecting you - like water doesn't do anything, but you feel it's wetness. Which I've been thinking about ever since I read that text and been thinking about fluidity in general and how that relates to the body. I feel that very much within the film, it makes me have this really physically emotional reaction to it. Like that visceral feeling you get with liquid and I wonder if that's maybe to do with your body knowing that it's made up of liquid. We are giant water balloons in a way with brains and so I think about this fluidity in the body and these boundaries, especially, and how blurred they are within this film. The sound I think also has something to do with that.

Esther: Yeah I totally agree. I was attracted to fluids in a very very intuitive way. As a sculptor—someone who's trying to do forms—looking at something that doesn't have a fixed form is fascinating. That's what fluids are... so there's something very attractive. But at the same time, as I said, I was swimming which probably has to do with it—not so much intentionally. I was learning a lot about water and I came across all these theories about the aquatic ape, which are very interesting, about humans coming from water. And I... remember reading Moby Dick and how in the beginning of the books he talks about how all humans go towards water. How when you

build any settlement, you go towards the water. It's very beautiful. It's like when you begin to walk you move towards water.

So I feel that with the film I'm in really a passive position. I really like looking and like enjoying it and that's what I want to share. That's why many of the shots are quite long because it's about letting the water [be] fluid. I feel that inevitably it becomes very bodily. It becomes like an experience of reacting to it. I'm curious about this thing that you mentioned Alex, about to what extent the body knows that there is something [...] I mean in the end the eye is extremely powerful. It's like when I don't want to eat something I just hide it right. What you see has an impact on the rest of your senses.

Giulia: I thought it was interesting what you just said about thinking about sculpture and how freezing fluids is something that is difficult or impossible to do - Alex and I have also dabbled in that a bit - but I was thinking when you were talking about this, is video or film or even the camera then in a way a tool that is able to frame and sculpt those fluids? I'm thinking about the film framing this material that's fluid and it not being able to be captured in an object or like a physical shape but when it's captured within this frame of the camera it's in a way made static or more into an “object”.

Esther: Yeah absolutely, it's true. There's a bit of a betrayal in that—like filming fluids is ungraspable but you're trying to make it, you know, into a thing. At the same time, film is very ghostly and that's what's fascinating about it. Sometimes when I'm watching something I'm like ‘oh my why doesn't this freeze’. I feel that when you make a video it feels like you have created something very ghostly - like you know that there is something there but it's not. I'm probably saying things that are very simple, but it's how it feels to me—like the fact that it's not heavy, like it doesn't have a weight makes it into a phantom. So it plays with things that are behind our vision or in a way that cannot be looked at directly. So yeah maybe the use of video for filming fluids, yeah there's some connection between the medium and the thing that is being registered. I think they get along sort of well because they are both escaping from us all the time.

Giulia: I think what you said very nicely, is this idea of things that are behind our vision. You sent us the video that was part of your exhibition that was recently on in Spain at Cibrian. In this video, as well as your other videos, I get this really strong feeling of being able to get fragments or snippets of seeing into the backstage. Things that I wouldn't usually see or as if you're giving a little ‘in’ to the truth of how things are actually—or structured. Like invisible structures are actually existing that we're not able to usually see when we're looking at the screen. I was thinking a lot about that when I was watching your video at Cibrian Gallery where you get these really cinematic filmic views of the gallery space. The camera has these really slow panning shots, and then you get pulled out of it because you get these images of the security cameras in the space and I'm seeing you pulling a person with a camera in their hand really slowly over the ground to pan the shot. It's very funny but also pulls you back into reality and then it goes back to these really beautiful cinematic shots that are quite dark. I see these little light fragments and then it goes to you with a light in your hand making the flares of light.

So there are these little snippets of what you talk about... this in-between the true and the false, and the stage, and the idea of the camera being there to document and the camera is also there to create an illusion. But also it shows me that those things are intertwined - there isn't a truth and there isn't an illusion, those things are together when you are using a tool like a camera, whether it's for a still image or a moving image. So yeah I think there's really this play between the ‘back’ and ‘front’ stage - I didn't know how to otherwise talk about it - what we believe to be true and what we believe to be fiction and how these things are constructed.

And I think that [these themes] also comes back in your use of materials in your sculptural work, that I'm now at the moment less familiar with because we've been really getting into your videos, but this kind of insight in realising how things are built and constructed around us, and our environments are constructed and not natural. That's just some things I was thinking about. And the idea of suspense I was really interested in that

you're using in your film as well, to create an emotion that is—I don't know, I don't want to call it fake, but you're simulating this emotion right.

Esther: Yeah, thanks Giulia. I really really liked how you connected those different videos with the sculptures because I feel that it's absolutely right. In the video, *—the softest mud that sees*, I went to film a special effects business. And it was fascinating because I realised how in some ways they are the ones that build the image. The directors come with the script and all that, but they are the ones that choose that they need more violence or more explosions. Nick, the director, he was extremely nice to me, he told me anecdotes like for instance they were recording this Roman film and there wasn't enough violence so they invented a type of grenade that is not real but could have existed with the technology that they had at that moment, so that they could have explosions, grenade explosions. So that is a very funny example but it kind of shows that all these industries of fakeness and effects have so much power in the symbolic sphere. And the other thing—it's not as obvious—but another thing that appears in the same movie is this pink lighting. It's the pink light that is usually displayed in butchers stores. So it's a pink light to make the meat more appetising. I think that in some countries it's illegal because it's considered fake advertising. So I really like how special effects happen in reality…

Going back to the video at Cibrian... in the end I was thinking ‘well what is the show’? I mean, isn't it a construction? Truth is something that is all the time constructed. It really lasts very little. Every truth is sort of like fast and then it goes away. So I enjoy using that. And using the suspense is like this very cinematic technique. How is it called when they suspend their disbelief? When you watch a film you're ready for that. You know you're gonna believe in aliens, in anything. So it's kind of like using that state of the spectator. I feel it can be very productive. Specifically in this film. I mean it was—well—I guess it was one of the consequences of lockdown because Cibrian gallery is located in the north of Spain. It's not in a big city so we were very well aware that not many people were going to be able to visit it and we decided to make a video but I really didn't want to make a documentation of the show. I was thinking in the end we have the screen

and this screen is a different space so maybe instead of trying to translate the physical space into the screen why don't we use the screen itself and use the exhibition as a video set. It was real fun, it happened sort of naturally. It felt like this place was acting in some way. So yeah, I feel that from the special effects factory I learnt to do this.

Alex: The two films that you're showing with us online, definitely for me, have a humour to them that comes through especially in the quiet observational footage that you capture of everyday life or the mundane. I also see this in the film that you made at Cibrian gallery in amongst your installation there as there are a lot of very funny moments in there too. That film in particular reminded me of something I've heard you talk about before, which is this rethinking of the word ‘exhibition’ as a verb. And to me, the film is doing something like [that]; it feels very cinematographic, there is this feeling of suspense and it definitely feels like, as a viewer, I'm very active within the installation via this film. Can you speak a bit about your relationship to the camera, how you play with this in relation to exhibiting or exhibition as a verb?

Esther: I think that sometimes we take things for granted. I have realised that “exhibiting” or “images” are words that we use all the time and I feel that I haven't done the exercise of really trying to know what they mean. Something that I enjoy a lot is going through the etymology of words because this allows me to really understand what the meaning is. Or not really but kind of trying to peel that and find the potentiality.

So with exhibition in itself - I'm gonna read what I found because I feel it's gonna be easier: ‘The word proceeds from Latin expositĭo, exposi- tionis, and exponere. It´s formed from the union of the prefix “ex-”, which means outside, or beyond, and “ponere”, to put. Thus, exposure referred to the action of putting something outside, to expose, and also, to abandon.’ There is a very interesting origin, because in Latin, this word had a very specific sense, which was the abandonment of unwanted newborn babies in the street, so that others could collect them. I was impacted by this. I know, it's very dark but it kind of feels like exhibiting doesn't need to have to

do with an exhibition space. I like how in this case something is literally very visceral, or very intimate. And also it's not only putting outside, it's also to prepare itself so that other people collect it and bring it away, so it gives the other a role. It's not like whatever you're exhibiting is yours, It's something that you give away, right? So when I approach my work with this in mind it feels really good because it feels very connected to reality, or in some ways—it feels that you have the chance, not to give solutions of course, but to share something and to share it not as a truth that other people need to learn and repeat, but to serve something that other people will collect—like you take my baby and you raise it as you want.

So, I very rarely give very specific explanations of my practice, because I think it's more useful for the viewers to experiment. I share things that fascinate me or things that intrigue me or something. But I think that it is more fair to let people read whatever they need to read in the work, without me being like ‘fluids mean this’ and ‘it's important because of this’. It's like... well really fluids can mean many different things. For me it's really enriching to talk with you and realise how you see things that I haven't realised but they actually make a lot of sense.

Giulia: I came away from your work, the two video works that I saw at your Goldsmith's graduation show, with a new perception or an altered perception of what reality is and might be. It's something that I question a lot, this idea between what is real and what is fake? And whether that's even an important question to ask as one can't exist without the other? And maybe this opposition between the two, and seeing fiction and reality as a dualism, is sort of more problematic than viewing it as these two things that are interwoven.

Esther: There are some very interesting and funny books around this topic. There's one that's called "Learning from Las Vegas", it's a classic architecture book. I'm gonna read out the authors so I don't pronounce them wrong. It's from 1972 by Denise Scott Brown, Robert Venturi and Steven Izenor. It's available free online for anyone who wants to check it out.

What happened was that these architects who had been raised in Modernism, realised that Las Vegas was a city that was not unplanned. It was a stop in the desert that became extremely rich, and where architecture was the cheapest thing because it was all about attracting the attention. So all these logics that had informed architecture until then were absolutely dismissed in Las Vegas. They wrote this amazing book by going there and studying signs; where the building becomes the sign. And I feel that in our generation that, as you say, that's sort of the norm—like we all live a bit in Las Vegas. Like advertising is just part of the environment in some ways; everything is trying to capture your attention. I feel it's nice to sort of look at that without trying to moralise it… being able to accept that the boundaries between real and truth are sort of very non-existent... At the same time, I mean, this is a dangerous comment to make because I do believe in reality. I do believe that there are real things. I feel it's more about how reality is shaped or disguised in some ways.

Giulia: While you were speaking about Las Vegas, I was thinking about the final scene of your film, as they both make me think about ideas around mortality and desire and there is an element of environmentalism in there I guess. It's a really sort of beautiful, yet funny, and also a bit frightening scene.

Esther: The ending of that film feels like ‘yeah there is some war that is ending’. It's not a very dramatic end. It feels kind of silly or something with the Tina Turner music. It's like we're all gonna disappear and that was it. And how it's not glorious or anything. And then this teenager—I feel again it's very beautiful—I didn't set that up, I found him. So he begins kind of showing off. So I think you were right Alex how you felt [the ending] it was optimistic, and I sort of agree with that because [there’s a] sort of a ‘wanting to be alive’ in this guy, but in the end I feel that what I like about it [the ending] is not optimistic in a very heroic way, because he's not a hero, he's just a teenager who is trying to look hot or something… it's really just that and that's the end of it. It kind of makes the film very mundane which I think

is what I like about it. There's this great moment but it's really just a teenager trying to be cool right. It's an everyday thing.

Giulia: That was such a nice chat, we'll talk again in two weeks about —*the softest mud that sees*. It was really nice chatting to you tonight.

Esther: Yeah thanks Giulia, Thanks Alex and thanks everyone who's listened. This was lovely, bye bye.