

## Getting There: Johanna Billing

Published: 2007, Look Behind Us, A Blue Sky

Like M.C. Escher drawings, Billing's works loop incessantly. They have no beginnings or ends, only twists and coils. And like the famous Norwegian/Swedish architecture contortionist, Billing tends to use staircases as both structural and symbolic elements in her works.

The motif of stairs is a rich one. Traditionally signifiers of a higher plane, when ascending, or a lower plane, when descending, steps are the symbols of mountable hierarchy. They are two-way conduits, going both up and down. Staircases themselves, though, are liminal zones, transitory spaces. Billing's use of stairs aids in creating a narrative loop that operates in the same way Escher used stairs in his drawings – to connect disparate sections and bind them into a seemingly narrative whole.

*Project for a Revolution* is the first video Billing made that employs the loop. Inspired by the Latin root of the word "revolution," *revolutio*, meaning "to turn around" or "roll back," Billing looks at a generational shift. By mimicking Antonioni's famous *Zabriskie Point* film of 1970 she highlights today's apparent malaise amongst her contemporaries. In *Project for a Revolution*, a group of languishing Generation Xers has gathered. One young man that at time sits with the group is shown climbing and descending stairs, so we never know if he has just arrived, or just left the group on the other floor of the building. By defying the paralysis keeping his peers in a quiet purgatory, he literally reaches a different plane. It's a clear example of how Billing uses stairs to both connect and confuse the order of things.

In many other silent works, Billing foregrounds an individual set apart from the rest – participating in, but somehow distinct from, a cohesive group of young people lacking any hint of impetus to *do* something. For instance, in *Where She Is At*, a young woman perpetually mounts the ladder of a high diving board, only to languish at the top. By giving *Where She Is At* its title, Billing forces us to consider the question of where this young lady is, which, in effect, is nowhere: She is in limbo – not diving, but not descending the ladder either. Another case in point is *Magic & Loss*, the subjects of which, laden with the contents of someone's apartment, climb steep Dutch steps to clear out all of his or her possessions. The rhythm of their climbing keeps in check the tempo of methodic, silent packing. And *You Don't Love Me Yet* opens with a man proceeding up a steep escalator, presumably heading to the recording studio where he joins others in singing a song. But because the video loops perfectly, viewers would see his ascent not necessarily at the beginning, but at various points throughout their experience of the piece.

All of Billing's videos include shots of people en route to the works' main settings. They often show the protagonists driving, walking, or biking over to where a strange, collective yet somewhat private action is to unfold. The stairs in these works are not only structural lubricants, or conduits for action but also dividers; They separate a personal state from a more public one and provide a remove from street level. Ultimately, the fine balance between these two functions becomes a cycle with no end, leaving viewers in a state of perpetual discontinuity and anticipation, forever climbing the same steps.

-Chen Tamir