

Northumbria University, Newcastle.
Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory. UoA 32.



**Northumbria
University**
NEWCASTLE

SYSTEM





Type of output:
Digital/Visual
Media (Film)

by
Cecilia Stenbom

Left: *SYSTEM* (film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

CONTENTS

SUMMARY	4
INTRODUCTION	5-6
RESEARCH CHALLENGE	7
CONTEXT	8-9
METHODS AND PROCESSES	10-12
DISSEMINATION	13-17
REFERENCES	18
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	19

SUMMARY

SYSTEM, completed in June 2014, is a 10 minute long narrative single screen film, which employs tropes of the psychological thriller genre to reveal real-life perceptions of fear and anxiety in public contexts.

The research aimed to develop a fictional screenplay examining anxiety disorders based on factual accounts of fear and associated coping mechanisms. *SYSTEM* used recognised cinematic conventions and traits of psychological thrillers to connect representations of fear and anxiety with aspects of consumer culture and broader discourses around behaviour and identity.

SYSTEM operates between artists' moving-image work and cinematic practice, simultaneously exploring conventions of plot-based narrative storytelling and forms of documentary filmmaking using real-life testimony and re-enactment.

The screenplay was developed from a series of interviews. The film re-enacts and re-deploys accounts taken from these with an exaggerated sense of apprehension, inhabiting the heightened psychological space of the protagonists. It is structured around cinematic features of the thriller – such as scripted direction, extreme shot sizes, unusual camera angles and tracking shots – to transform the real and mundane environment of an indoor shopping centre into a minefield of terror.

SYSTEM was originally produced for a solo exhibition at Workplace Gallery, Gateshead, UK (2014) and was exhibited in *Aesthetica Art Prize*, York (2015) and *Innsbruck International Biennial of the Arts*, Austria (2020). It has been screened at film festivals nationally and internationally and is currently in distribution with AV-Arkki Finland. The ideas and production processes of *SYSTEM* are discussed as part of a North East Contemporary Visual Arts Network film profiling Stenbom.



Above: *SYSTEM* (film still)

Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

INTRODUCTION

“System stood out for its tight structure, effectively clinical production design and strong performances, creating a satisfyingly unnerving depiction of neurotic sisters crushed by the breakdown of their tightly controlled world.”

Harriet Warman, Sight and Sound

<https://www2.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/festivals/aesthetica-2014-shorts-circuit-york>

“The shopping centre location is at once banal, but also a much-used backdrop for drama and horror to unfold. Stenbom uses the clunking escalators, dingy car park and blue-tinged toilet lighting to her full advantage, accumulating an increasing tension both between the sisters and their interactions with the world.”

Rebecca Travis, *This is Tomorrow*

<http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/cecilia-stenbom-everyday-collateral>

Below: *SYSTEM* (film still)

Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom



RESEARCH CHALLENGE

The aim of the research was to explore symptoms of anxiety through collected experiences, routines and preferences within the context of retail environments from members of the public. It collected accounts from random members of the public in a busy retail environment in order to produce a short film. The film appropriated elements of the psychological thriller genre through its narrative structure and mise-en-scene.



Above: *SYSTEM* (film still)

Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

Right: *SYSTEM* installed at *Everyday Collateral*, Courtesy of Workplace Foundation 2014

CONTEXT

In the context of Stenbom's wider practice, *SYSTEM* sits at a distinct juncture. Whereas previously her work had only been disseminated in the gallery context, *SYSTEM* has been presented equally as a conventional short drama at film festivals as well as moving image artwork in the gallery context.

SYSTEM was developed for *Everyday Collateral*, a solo exhibition at Workplace, that ran from 6th June -19th July 2014, which explored coping mechanisms and methods explicitly used to safely navigate everyday life.

SYSTEM received a £15,000 production grant from Arts Council England through Grants for the Arts.

Right: Invitation card for
Everyday Collateral, Courtesy of
Workplace Foundation 2014



In *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*, Erica Balsom argues that “not only has cinema entered the contemporary art space but also that moving image art practice has contributed and complicated the debate into the future of the institution of cinema.” (Balsom, 2013) Artist filmmakers, such as Clio Barnard and Miranda July, have migrated from gallery-based practices into conventional narrative storytelling in the cinema context. Within hybrid documentary, non-fiction filmmakers, such as Sarah Polley, Kitty Green and Gabrielle Brady, employ tropes used in narrative fiction films such as re-enactment to exploit the boundaries of documentary and fiction.

SYSTEM contributes to this critical discourse through its mixed use of plot-based narrative fiction storytelling, hybrid documentary and appropriation of genre constructs.



Above and Right:
SYSTEM (film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

METHODS AND PROCESSES

This project adopts methodologies from social science as an approach to building content and narrative. The original accounts that informed *SYSTEM* were gathered by inviting members of the public to be interviewed about their own experiences, routines and preferences within the framework of everyday situations uncovering fears and anxieties associated with retail environments.

Out of the accounts gathered, two main types of anxiety emerged: one concerned with hygiene and the other with personal safety. These accounts laid the foundations for a fictional screenplay. The psychological thriller, a sub-genre of the thriller, was especially apt to use as a construct for the short film narrative as it builds suspense through the psychology of its characters rather than an external plot.

Below: Reference stills from psychological thrillers.



The resulting screenplay, *SYSTEM* is a story about two sisters, each with a heightened sense of fear around the public environment. In the film, they navigate an indoor shopping centre, and as the sterile atmosphere of the environment quickly becomes menacing – because of their heightened state of anxiety – their own safety systems begin to fail. The two characters were scripted as siblings since it was important for the story that the two characters shared a close connection and were familiar with each other’s anxieties. Existing retail units were used to further inform the writing process and to exploit the narrative potential of these physical spaces.



Above: *SYSTEM* (film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

Right: Photos from recce.
Photo credit: Emma Dalesman



SYSTEM was filmed in a number of indoor retail units across Newcastle and Gateshead. The fictional scenes in *SYSTEM* were mixed with contextual shots of the public going about their everyday life in the shopping centre – placing real-life with representations side-by-side.



Above and right:
SYSTEM (production stills)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom

DISSEMINATION

SYSTEM been exhibited, screened and disseminated in both art and film contexts, nationally and internationally.

SYSTEM is distributed through AV-Arkki (Finland) <https://www.av-arkki.fi/works/system/> and represented through Workplace Foundation (UK) https://workplacefoundation.art/artists/45-cecilia-stenbom/works/#/image_popup/artwork8517/

Stenbom gave a public artist talk at Workplace in connection with her solo exhibition *Everyday Collateral* that featuring *SYSTEM*, the talk was part of the *International Print Biennale* programme.



Above: *SYSTEM* installed at *Everyday Collateral*, Courtesy of Workplace Foundation 2014

Right: *SYSTEM* (film still)
Photo credit: Cecilia Stenbom



SYSTEM was discussed in the North East CVAN artist film on Stenbom's practice. The film featured an interview with Stenbom by Alessandro Vincentelli, curator of Exhibitions & Research at BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art.

Link to CVAN Film: <https://vimeo.com/111018933>



Above and Right: Stills from North East
CVAN films: Cecilia Stenbom (still),
CVAN 2014

A summary of public screenings and exhibitions:

Screenings (Selected)

Peacock Visual Art (2014), Underwire Festival (2014), Aesthetica Short Film Festival, Artist Film Category, (2014), Glasgow Short Film Festival (2015), London Short Film Festival, Drama Category, (2015), Regent Street Cinema, London (2018), CCA, Glasgow (2018), Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle (2018), The Tetley, Leeds (2018)

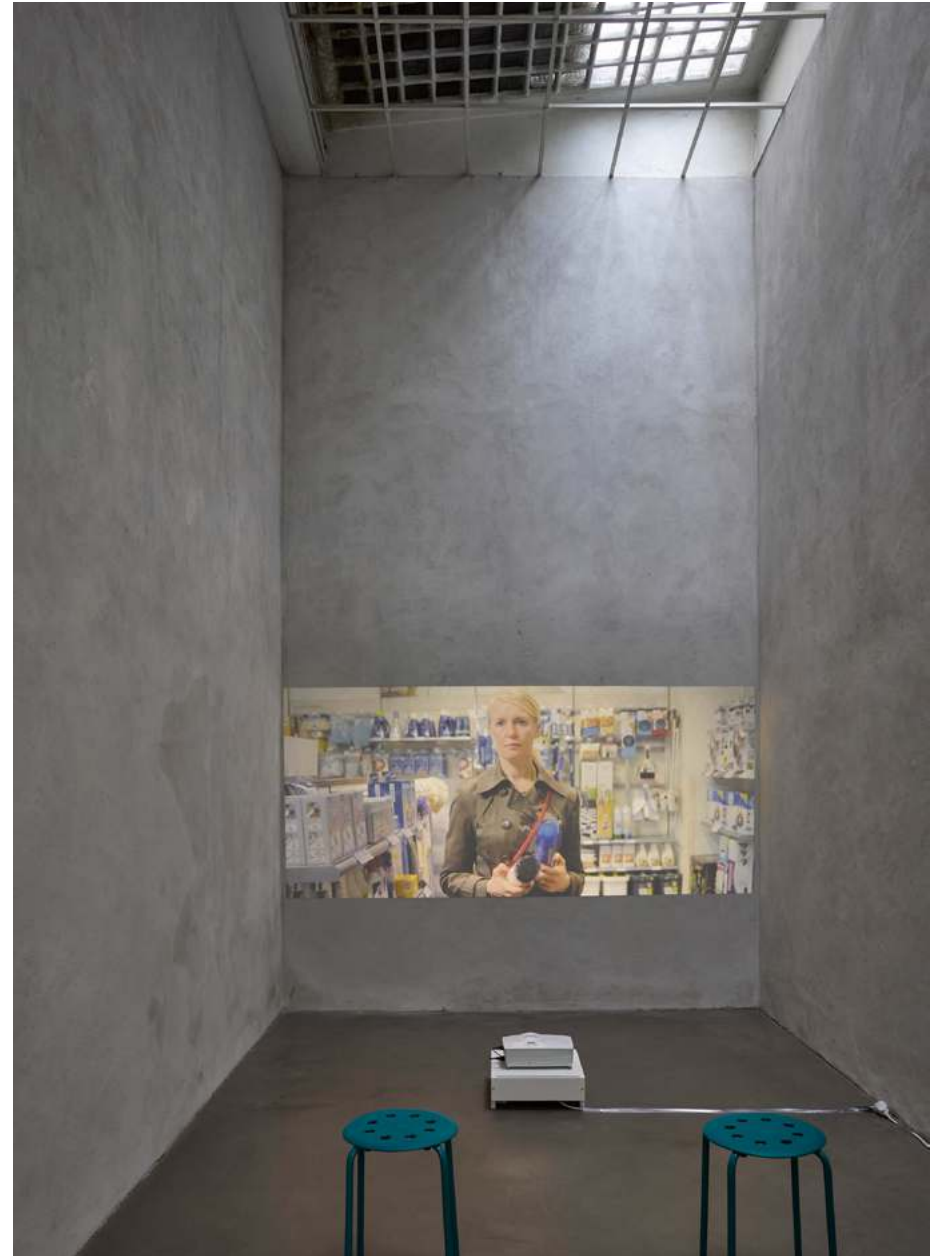
Exhibited (Selected)

- *Everyday Collateral* (2014), solo exhibition at Workplace Gallery, Gateshead. *Aesthetica Art Prize* (2015), group exhibition, St Mary's, York.
- *Innsbruck International biennial of the arts* (2020), Austria.

Nominations

- Nominated for *Channel4 AWARD for innovation in storytelling* (2015)
- Long-listed for *Aesthetica Art Prize* (2015)

Right: *SYSTEM* installed at Innsbruck International, 2020.



Reviews and writings

ORF.at (*Austrian Broadcasting Corporation newssite*)

Review of *Human Capital* at Innsbruck International 2020 with a mention of *SYSTEM*. In German.

<https://tirol.orf.at/stories/3037739/>

[Accessed 06.03.2020]

The Guardian's *This week's art shows*

SYSTEM featured as part of a preview of *Everyday Collateral*, solo exhibition at Workplace

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jun/20/dennis-hopper-bruce-mclean-exhibitionist>

[Accessed 29.09.2019]

Sight & Sound, review for Aesthetica Short Film Festival by Harriet Warman

<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/festivals/aesthetica-2014-shorts-circuit-york>

[Accessed 29.09.2019]

This is Tomorrow Review of *Everyday Collateral* featuring *SYSTEM* by Rebecca Travis

<http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/cecilia-stenbom-everyday-collateral>

[Accessed 29.09.2019]

NARC Magazine

Feature on Stenbom's practice and production of *SYSTEM*

<https://www.scribd.com/document/209837580/SYSTEM-by-Cecilia-Stenbom-features-in-NARC-magazine>

[Accessed 29.09.2019]



Left: Aesthetica Short Film Festival Catalogue 2014

Above Right: The Guardian Guide, June 2014

Other links relating to SYSTEM:

Innsbruck International 2020 <http://2020.innsbruckinternational.com/event/cecilia-stenbom-exhibition/> [Accessed 30.06.2020]

Peacock Visual Arts <https://peacockvisualarts.com/film-screening-qa-with-cecilia-stenbom/> [Accessed 29.09.2019]

British Films Directory <http://film.britishcouncil.org/system> [Accessed 29.09.2019]

IMDB https://www.imdb.com/title/tt3572628/?ref=nm_knf_t4 [Accessed 29.09.2019]

Festival Scope <https://pro.festivalscope.com/film/system> [Accessed 29.09.2019]

Aesthetica Art Prize <https://www.aestheticamagazine.com/profile/cecilia-stenbom/> [Accessed 29.09.2019]

North East CVAN films: Cecilia Stenbom <http://www.cvan.art/news/2014/11/13/north-east-cvan-artists-films-cecilia-stenbom> [Accessed 29.09.2019]

International Print Biennale <http://www.internationalprintbiennale.org.uk/2014/whats-on/2014/06/07/everyday-collateral-cecilia-stenbom.html> [Accessed 29.09.2019]

Everyday Collateral at Workplace: <https://www.workplacegallery.co.uk/exhibitions/59/works/> [Accessed 29.09.2019]



Above: NARC Magazine, March 2014



Right: NARC Magazine, March 2014

REFERENCES

Balsom, Erica *Exhibiting Cinema in Contemporary Art*
(Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013). p.13.

Travis, Rebecca (2014) *This is Tomorrow*.
Available at: <http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/cecilia-stenbom-everyday-collateral>
(Accessed on 07.04.2020)

Warman, Harriet (2014) BFI *Sight and Sound*.
Available at: <https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/comment/festivals/aesthetica-2014-shorts-circuit-york>
(Accessed on 07.04.2020)

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Production team:

Producers: Mark Chapman
and Gerry Maguire
Cinematography: Emma Dalesman
Production Design: Kate Eccles
Editing: Harry Jenkinson
Music: Ziad Jabeto

Cast:

Arabella Arnott
Georgina Wilkes

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