

THE STATUS OF THE POLITICAL IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

KLARTEXT!

A SERIES OF DISCUSSIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS, ACTIVISTS, CURATORS AND THEORETICIANS
KÜNSTLERHAUS BETHANIE AND VOLKSBÜHNE AM ROSA-LUXEMBURG-PLATZ, BERLIN
14-16 JANUARY 2005 — WWW.KLARTEXT-KONFERENZ.DE

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Statement

What strategies might pose a substantial opposition to this insidious, "contemporary" plague – this shortness of memory? How as artists and cultural workers can we avoid complicity in the TV-network or mainstream-newspaper politic of consuming, reacting, forgetting, and moving-on-to-the-next so efficiently, like salaried employees sniffing after a yearly bonus? Can we re-examine and re-negotiate ways of talking about unresolved issues, such as discussing feminism – critiquing and expanding the tropes and artistic strategies as in the feminist articulations in the 1970s – without holding such practice in contempt, and without dismissing such persistent issues outright? I'd like to focus on the implications and possibilities in uses of appropriated and re-appropriated material – from literary, theatrical, and historical texts to cinematic clips and references – as one way to propose a significant and workable relation between the retelling (and the retelling of the retelling) of events, keeping very much in mind the agendas which mark the distances and coincidences between the structures of facts, stories and the interests, intentions, and potentialities envisioned by tellers and regurgitators.

Determined to avoid reductive expressions and media representations as predictably unjust as the reality they seek to overturn, I am interested in articulations of restlessness and in an inability to let certain cultural myths and legacies rest peacefully. In re-staging texts such as Jean Genet's "Les Bonnes" and excerpting Marguerite Yourcenar's novel "Denier du rêve" – both using the trope of the (failed) female assassin, of tragic anti-heroines, of isolated and individual action on behalf of a collective, of women acting outside of the familiar dynamic of instigating rebellion and quick sharp punishment as a direct consequence – I am pointing to ways of re-framing the discussions of normative gender / sexuality, what we might once have called representational disparities or unfulfilled potentialities. My project "Corrections and Clarifications", using errors and unintentional lapses printed in news media marks a way to use this material "itself" to expose some of the contributing causes, the convenient prejudices, the unspoken political interests and the barely-disguised agendas. The material I seek to work with – in film, video, and print – is the shifts and expansions through interventions and intersections of the languages of literature and history, the blurring of familiar and imagined stories, stepping between the acknowledgement of the experiential and a dissatisfaction with the conclusive or the purely documentary.

In addressing the cinematic re-make as a tool for re-engagement, as background I'd refer to the example of the intersection of feminist, gay, and race politics utilized to varying effect in subsequent remakes of Douglas Sirk's 1955 "All That Heaven Allows". For argument's sake, Todd Haynes' 2002 film "Far From Heaven" may serve as the fetishistic shot-for-shot example of a film maker seduced by form, to the detriment of any meaningful political engagement with his own present context (the conservative right's successful implementation of such a non-issue as gay marriage in the 2004 presidential election is symptomatic of the state of gay and lesbian politics in the US now). On the other hand, I would name Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1974 "Angst essen seele auf" as an engaged, risk-taking transposition of Sirk's look at post-war US conservative racial and family/social politics onto or via relations between north African immigrants and Germans in 1970s Munich. An effective remake or re-appropriation recalls and engages the originary issues, positions them within a present context, and proposes a continuity, a forward projection, an acknowledgement of the persistent lack of resolution.