THE STATUS OF THE POLITICAL IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

KLARTEXT!

A SERIES OF DISCUSSIONS WITH INTERNATIONAL ARTISTS, ACTIVISTS, CURATORS AND THEORETICIANS
KÜNSTLERHAUS BETHANIEN AND VOLKSBÜHNE AM ROSA-LUXEMBURG-PLATZ, BERLIN
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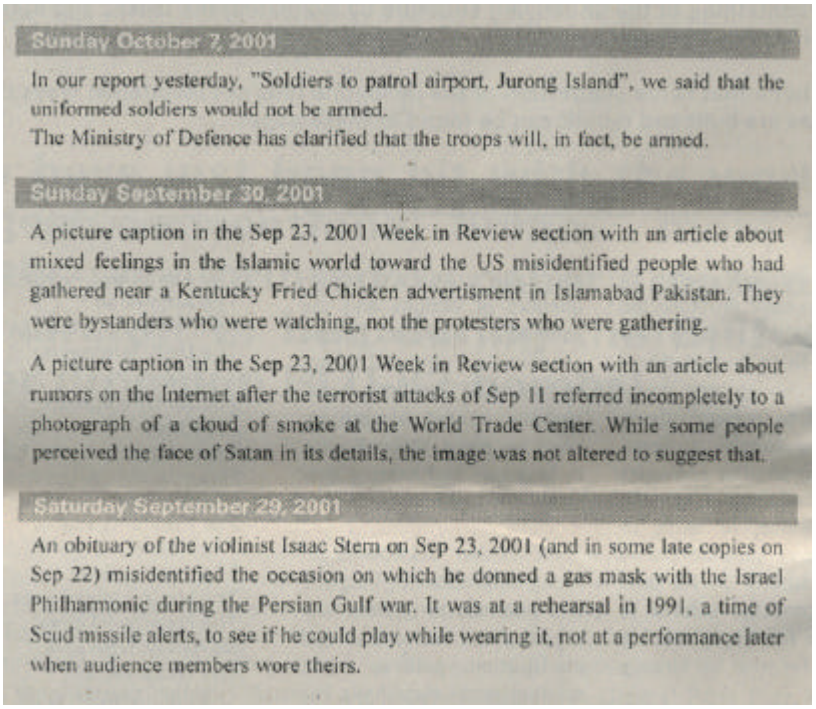
Kim Paice interviews artist Anita Di Bianco, 27 July 2005, New York City

Kim Paice: Anita and I met last autumn during the heat of the election season when I was organizing an exhibition of agitprop and conceptual art with Martha Rees.[1] Feminist philosopher Chris Cuomo introduced us around the time that *Women of Ohio and the World* (WOO) agreed to co-sponsor the show and, fortuitously, I was able to include two of her works, the newspaper project *Corrections and Clarifications* (2001-2005) and the video *Pressed into Palm* (2003). Since that time we have engaged in dialogues in New York and Cincinnati.



Sunday October 7, 2001

In our report yesterday, "Soldiers to patrol airport, Jurong Island", we said that the uniformed soldiers would not be armed.
The Ministry of Defence has clarified that the troops will, in fact, be armed.

Sunday September 30, 2001

A picture caption in the Sep 23, 2001 Week in Review section with an article about mixed feelings in the Islamic world toward the US misidentified people who had gathered near a Kentucky Fried Chicken advertisment in Islamabad Pakistan. They were bystanders who were watching, not the protesters who were gathering.

A picture caption in the Sep 23, 2001 Week in Review section with an article about rumors on the Internet after the terrorist attacks of Sep 11 referred incompletely to a photograph of a cloud of smoke at the World Trade Center. While some people perceived the face of Satan in its details, the image was not altered to suggest that.

Saturday September 29, 2001

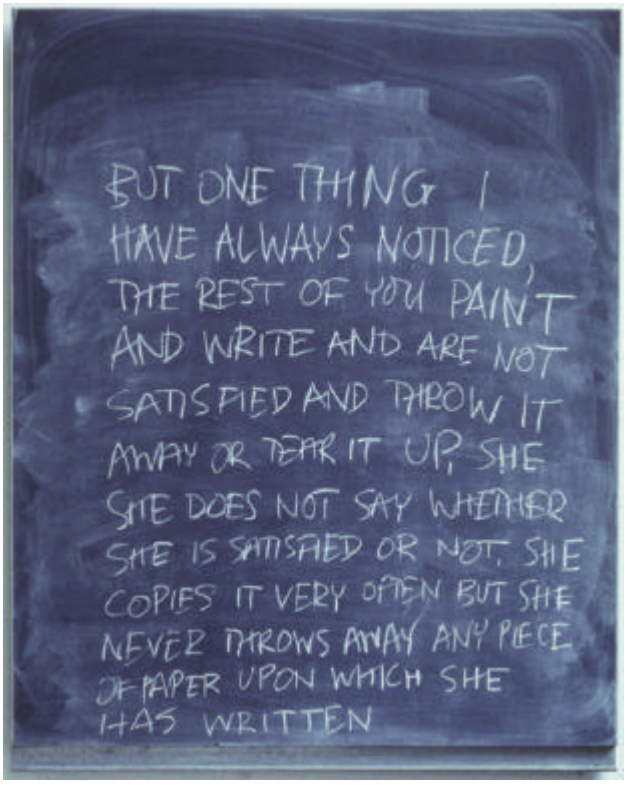
An obituary of the violinist Isaac Stern on Sep 23, 2001 (and in some late copies on Sep 22) misidentified the occasion on which he donned a gas mask with the Israel Philharmonic during the Persian Gulf war. It was at a rehearsal in 1991, a time of Scud missile alerts, to see if he could play while wearing it, not at a performance later when audience members wore theirs.

excerpt of newspaper project, Corrections and Clarifications, volume 1, 2001

[1] Paice, K. 2004. This show was co-sponsored by The Comet, The Empire Working Group, Mike Ballou/ Four Walls, and Women of Ohio and the World. It was open to the public from 30 October to 30 November 2004.

What I would like to dwell on today as we present a small part of our discussions, and it is certainly one element that drew me to your work, Anita, involves the imitative act, your taste for the possession and expulsion of narratives, and what this kind of practice means today. You successfully manage to trespass as you thieve and appropriate texts, using widely varying kinds of sources. Offhand I think immediately of your work with several historical novels, international newspapers, love letters that you have "taken" straight from the social imaginary and even disrespectfully *lifted* their sentiment and breadth from the realm of cliché, but also of your use of Jean Gênet's "Les Bonnes" ("The Maids," 1947) as basis of your digital film *Disaffection and Disaffectation* (2003). There's quite a lot of variety in this material. We should explore that variation. So, how would you describe your work in video and what the practice of appropriation offers you? We should also discuss why appropriation is a significant mode in art making today.

Anita Di Bianco: I have a kind of intuitive resistance against applying the term *appropriation* to what I do, because the activity it names is nothing new or distinct from other *legitimate* creative practices. It's certainly not postmodern, and arguably not even modern. Hollywood studio directors have been remaking each other's films from the beginning, novelists have been re-writing each other's stories, and re-writing their own over the course of the decades that make up a writing life. What is Marguerite Yourcenar's imagined memoir of a Roman emperor [*Memoirs of Hadrian*] if not a sort of re-make? She wrote that novel in 1951 from notes she had made at 21, and then found decades later in a trunk she had left in Switzerland before emigrating to the U.S. The lines between historical fiction and literature are not so clear; and there is the same overlap in film, look at the work of Straub-Huillet [Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet]**.** Many of the artists and writers I'm interested in are re-workers of styles and mythologies, and are themselves dedicated, in one way or another, to excavating texts; sometimes that entails writing, telling, sometimes translation, sometimes elaboration, or combinations of all four. An example, in *The Making of Americans*, is Gertrude Stein *inventing* or is she interpreting and translating the idiom of her country into written language? Unfortunately Stein's style has often been categorized as intentionally esoteric, non-representative of a larger or spoken culture. In this case, casting her as an *inventor* is in effect more to marginalize her than coming out of any impulse to give the *auteur* her due. Actually I think she was focused on portraying that English language and European culture particular to North Americans.



Irregardless, 2001, text from *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* by Gertrude Stein

Writers whose works, and ways of writing, I hold dearest, like Yourcenar, Stein, e. e. cummings, [Andrei] Byeli, [Osamu] Dazai, Bob Dylan, Jorge Luís Borges, Flannery O'Connor, Anna Akhmatova, [Louis-Ferdinand] Céline are all working with sediment, layering, re-ordering, re-fashioning, weaving. And *expulsion*, as you said, some with seemingly unconsidered or unedited rawness. Much trickier than debating authorship or authenticity is assessing whether one has found a way to actually *do something* with the source material, otherwise it's gratuitous quoting, borrowing its only authority and substance from that of the original work. What I always say when regulatory standards or ethics are applied to artistic practice is that everything can be done well or badly, meaning that following such rules can't be expected to guarantee *quality*. Anyway, there is a lot to say about taking, there are subtleties. Apparently Gênet's habit of stealing from the homes of his hosts created a kind of formal social expectation, it was a bit of an insult if he left without taking anything—does it matter if that's *true* or not?

KP: Such a practice *of taking* seems to be a way of unmasking or at least of pointing up the presence of ideological and social hierarchies in a consuming society. I think that's an element of

what Jean-Paul Sartre says about Gênet's work.[2] But working and reworking as you do suggests much about the violence in propriety and property. Not only is it a matter of who writes a text, but also of who owns a text. This is to say that appropriation offers a kind of counter-modeling of propriety. It's an arena in which you can be playful too. It seems that games with found narratives take us quite a distance toward leveling the type of authorship that might otherwise dog narrative and *auteur*-ish texts.

AD: Playful is probably a euphemism for the chaos, desperation and randomness of the processes of adaptation and association. The re-writing I did of Gênet for *Disaffection and Disaffectation* was less strictly for proprietary effect than because, for example, Genet's *Monsieur* in my version was modeled after a certain *professor* of indeterminate gender. Let's just say that we all needed things we could work with, and insofar as that video was shot in a bedroom in Glasgow in a week with two actors and myself, the presence of hierarchies and authority was constantly being shifted and tested. We ran out of patience, surrendered in every direction—still we weren't leaving that room until it was done! The 50-minute video elaborates that claustrophobia, alternately intensified and dissipated. The relation between Lucy and Hanneline, who play themselves, each other—and also Madame in my version—echoed, departed from, returned to, mimicked, even disregarded the relations between Gênet's Claire and Solange. It follows certain impulses of the original text, but I don't have any reason to simply make a video of "The Maids," or to film a straightforward theater production of *his* play.

[2] For an in-depth analysis of this aspect of Di Bianco's work, see my essay on appropriation and contemporary video art, forthcoming: Paice, K 2006, *n.paradoxa: international journal of feminist art* vol. 17.

video still, Disaffection and Disaffectation, 2003

The idea was to layer and complicate the original text backwards and forwards, structurally, reducing the number of actors from three to two, and the camera had to be implicated in that triangle, its short distances and quick pans are direct quotes from, and games with, the script. The production value of that video is implicit, and I think quite consistent, in all of its exaggerated, uncontrolled aspects. What I mean is that the smell of the fresh flowers in the set was as suffocating as the lurid combinations of hostility, envy and adoration. There is a saccharine crudeness to Lucy and Hanneline's misappropriations of Gênet's lines, to our awkward timing and staging, the layers of which alternate between two women reenacting the roles and the play for each other, and two actors playing "The Maids" for a director. The French filmmaker Arnaud Desplechin is recently quoted as saying, "Enough of timid movies!"[3] Do you see what I'm getting at?

KP: Bringing this kind of play into your work has the potential to dislodge discourse and free up narrative and visual, symbolic and imaginary kinds of signification for reinvestment. Moving from

what are often unexpected sources, you thieve casually and yet you achieve results that are clearly politicized. Perhaps something of the work's edge comes from the sense with which, even while rewriting or, as Jacques Derrida said regarding Gênet's work, writing *two texts at once* (Derrida, J 1990), your films and videos explore symbolically loaded themes, such as the female assassin, and run the gamut of themes from the entrenched and the plainly dominant to extremely subtle social divisions. To what extent does your source material and its geographical or chronological reference points indicate a political or philosophical agenda?

AD: Politics and ethics are not the same thing. These hot July days, like today, bring me to that hot August *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975).[4] The tensions of this city were stretched tight across the chest of Sonny Wortzik's [Al Pacino's character's] familiar cotton/poly long-sleeved button-down, every time he flailed his arms on the sidewalk in front of that bank, dancing and taunting the *first* chief hostage negotiator, "Kiss me…I said, kiss me. When I'm being fucked I like to get kissed a lot."

The clarity of the indignance and disgust exhibited certain 1970s NY film characters, writers, directors is still impressive, and increasingly humbling, during this long particularly long moment. They weren't discoursing about *public and private space*, they were *doing it* with their bodies and voices, and with such a local elegance. Here we are: every inch of this city, horizontally and vertically, is being sold off for useless and aggressive speculation. *"Attica! Attica!"*[5] Can we ever forsake Pacino, as one of two bank robbers holding hostages at gunpoint inside the bank vault, in a controlled frenzy on the hot pavement outside the bank, in full view of the gawking, cheering Bay Ridge crowds, snipers on surrounding rooftops, goading the police. We're in the middle of a sort of mayoral campaign right now, again [Michael] Bloomberg is funding his campaign with private funds, in the past few weeks has managed to completely erase any record of his recent defeats in constructing a stadium on the west side of Manhattan and the loss of the NYC 2012 Olympic bid. Does anyone remember what Robert DeNiro's Travis Bickle was

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[3] Lee N. 2005, 22.

[4] Al Pacino's character Sonny Wortzik in Sidney Lumet's film *Dog Day Afternoon* was based on John Wojtowicz's real-life attempt to rob a Bay Ridge Brooklyn branch of Chase Manhattan bank in August 1972. The robbery became a hostage situation, and John and Salvatore Naturale held nine bank employees in the bank for over 14 hours. As in the film, Wojtowicz needed money for his lover, Ernest Aron, to have a sex change operation. Wojtowicz ended up with 20 years in a federal penitentiary, and Naturale was killed in the standoff. Wojtowicz served seven years of his sentence and, for the rights to his story, received $7500 plus one percent of the net movie profits. As promised (also in the film script), $2500 of that went to Aron for the operation.

[5] Pacino's rousing battle cry in *Dog Day Afternoon* refers to the riots and rebellion—uprising, hostage taking, demands for improved living conditions, education, and effective job training—of inmates at Attica Correctional Facility in Attica, New York, on 13 September 1971, which met with violent militaristic response of the National Guard that was ordered by Nelson Rockefeller to crush the riots. In responding to the dissenters the state killed 43 hostages and inmates.

asking the secret agent during the campaign speech scene in *Taxi Driver* (1976)? Before Dinkins, Giuliani, Bloomberg—

KP: —illegitimate bidding on Vanderbilt Yards and the MTA's selection of Bruce Ratner, today. Would it be accurate to say that you are looking for evidence or traces of power dynamics and structures or for the elements of a film or text that might reveal them? Do you see drawing on these films as a way to map the place that you're from and its current history, immanent power relations, and so forth?

AD: NYC mayors, Roman emperors, US Supreme Court judges—What stands out about those particular films [*Taxi Driver*, *Dog Day Afternoon*, *Serpico* (1973)] is that they were predicated on the shared consciousness of a fundamentally corrupt system, an acknowledgement of how alienated the city and federal administrations were from the daily life and aspirations of its inhabitants. When Sonny Wortzik says, "We're dying here" on the phone to the TV cameraman in *Dog Day Afternoon*, or to his loved ones, we knew what he meant, what he *still means*, right? The phone conversation between Sonny Wortzik and the TV cameraman is a discussion of the city labor crisis, of unions and pay scales and worker solidarity. Where [in popular culture] is that discussion now? It's scary how naïve it feels to even ask that question. Sonny Wortzik was essentially a gay Vietnam vet robbing a bank, forcing the police to holster their weapons during a hostage standoff, "Put your guns down, put 'em down, you want to kill me so bad you can taste it." And demanding of an FBI agent "You know, the guy who kills me, I hope he does it 'cause he hates my guts. Not 'cause it's his job." He was a very unlikely hero. Identification between screenwriters and directors and audiences and actors is not based on these issues now, is it? It's a film about the tensions and collisions of so many non-functioning systems.

KP: I agree. As *lattice of non-functioning systems* is an excellent way of thinking about this film. But not all your references involve 1970s film although that decade is, of course, crucial for rethinking boundaries between subjects and events, between fact and fiction, narrativity, Watergate. Are there elements that are held in common with films of the 1970s and the texts of Gênet or Yourcenar that you've worked with recently? The character of your video *Pressed into Palm* is a reworking of the protagonist of *A Coin in Nine Hands*. From Yourcenar's anti-fascist novel, you excerpted a very brief event in which Marcella ponders action, an event that is portrayed in real time and using a voiceover, with an actor in contemporary garb, etc. You tap multiplicity within the sequence rather than relying on multimedia or using either rapid succession or alternating banks of images as in multi-channel video or multi-screen film-works. Whereas your *Disaffection & Disaffectation* remains a linear work it generally follows the narrative lines of Gênet's play.

AD: I've been thinking about the house that Marguerite Yourcenar wrote in on Desert Island in Maine, and lived in with Grace Frick, and which is maintained as it was, with her library divided into centuries, one in each room. Yourcenar's novels *Memoirs of Hadrian* and *A Coin in Nine Hands* (*Denier du rêve*, 1934) are precise reminders that this kind of serial authority always ultimately fails, plays itself out. The character of my video *Pressed into Palm* (2003) is a reworking of the protagonist of *A Coin in Nine Hands*, Marcella, a re-arrangement of the lines, thought processes, and her preparations to action, determined to stop Mussolini's rise to dictatorial power by assassination during a 1933 speech in Rome. Yourcenar's precise, matter-of-fact diagramming of the cycles of the acquired and negotiated power of men reflects an immense command of history and literature, and I just want to read this from the Afterward Yourcenar added in 1959, because her reasons for re-writing her earlier novella into that novel very elegantly suggest their indirect relevance for 2002-3, and what I wanted to propose in my re-construction of Marcella:

> Marcella's gesture had to remain a quasi-individual, tragically isolated protest; her ideology had to show the influence of those anarchistic doctrines that once so deeply marked Italian dissidence; Carlo Stevo had to keep his political idealism so limited and futile in appearance; and the regime itself had to keep its alleged positive and triumphant aspect, since it deceived, for such a long time, not so much the Italian people as the outside world.[6]

[6] Yourcenar, M. (1982), 22.

video still, Pressed into Palm, 2003

Yourcenar's distancing suggests that it's a repetitive and predictable phenomenon, while the interiority she lends Marcella, or the emperor Hadrian, suggests that we are all implicated in these systems. My admiration for her *oeuvre*, or for Lumet's 1970s films with Al Pacino, or for Martin Scorsese's films from the 1970s, or Michael Cimino's 1978 film *The Deer Hunter*—are maybe not such disparate interests after all. As I said, they share a fundamental recognition of corrupt power structures. What impresses me about the novels of Yourcenar or about some of the films of Straub-Huillet and Rainer Werner Fassbinder—their extremely varied intentions notwithstanding—is that the rightful indignance and raw disgust of such individuals is broadened into a systemic approach.

KP: Would you say that indignance has a particular draw or that it occupies a particular place in your work?

AD: Well, it's tricky, I hate to be put in a predictably reactive position—that's exactly what's so boring about so many *females* in film and on TV. *Betty Talks Part I* (2000), was my first collaboration with the

Italian actor Elisabetta Milani. Her toughness and humor inspired that work, which was an Italian-spoken 16mm film re-make of the notorious "You talking to me?" scene from Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. One of my many justifications for the re-use of that re-used scene was that we intended to create a situation in which Milani was given—and also took—the space to improvise her own lines, the parameters of her moves and her timing. The working title of that film was "Betty talks to herself in the mirror," borrowing the one-line direction for that scene from the *Taxi Driver* script. That kind of simplicity and single-mindedness is an irresistible challenge. Like later with Gênet's play "The Maids," which has been quoted up and down in theater and cinema, I was curious if I could use such a *common* text to speak my range of concerns—while quoting so strongly and directly from the past. From the discredited, bastardized past, at that. And in *Betty Talks* I was interested in the process of creating another production triangle of Di Bianco, Milani, and Claire Pijman, a Dutch cinematographer who is a force to be reckoned with, and what that might mean for each of us.

KP: How does your handling of that scene distinguish *Betty Talks Part I* or, let's say, does your handling of this scene distinguish your work from other *uses* of that scene? Such works are myriad. Douglas Gordon's *Through a Looking Glass*, 1999 comes to mind as one relatively recent and internationally-known example. We might also consider your work's specificity in relation to video art, more generally, and then among practices in which producers regard cinematic appropriation as a common language.

AD: *Betty Talks* is in some sort of cosmic dialogue with the other uses of that scene—the elements of a disparate conversation. When I showed Stan Douglas that film in Amsterdam in 2001, he tactfully commented that this was what the big guys were doing. The implication being: how do *you* plan to pull it off, or enter that arena? But at least, and of course, he wasn't asking *why*. What was most important for me about that film was the integrity of the body and voice of Elisabetta Milani, which is what remains so impressive about the original film scene. Elisabetta, *Betty,* standing within the film frame—and for this reason the medium needed to be film not video—occupying and disrupting it from within, with a seductive mixture of defiance and mischief, calling it a bordello, suggesting ways to put it in order, re-organize, re-systematize it according to another logic. As she says in the film, "I'm not going anywhere, I'm not moving a millimeter."

Betty Talks, 16mm film still, 2001, cinematography: Claire Pijman

KP: A bordello?

AD: Bordello, whorehouse, *Sex and the City, Desperate Housewives*, and so on *ad nauseam*, the acceptable and market-tested tropes of female victimization and self-loathing, the reduction of personhood to sex-value. What is *Jeanne Dielman* about? I take these things very seriously, like Salt 'n' Pepa:

> I'm not one for playing high-pole
> Like the house of ditty 90210 type of ho
> I treat a man like he treats me
> The difference between a hooker and a ho ain't nothin' but a fee. (Salt 'n' pepa 1993).

KP: What resonates here then is the notion that an actor, Milani in this case, can so completely reinvest the cinematic scene with *another logic*, as you say, a radically preferable logic.

AD: Casting is not incidental to the conceptual frame of my work. I called Milani, whom I had met six months before in Milan, and told her the idea for the film, the reasons I had for re-making that scene and the reasons I would only make it with her. [But it wasn't luck or coincidence that we saw eye to eye politically, since the circles we both associated with in Milan were exactly that.] I was also interested her re-take of Italian-American culture, not for the purpose of authenticity, but as another shift in production, a linguistic element in the whole mess of binaries.

KP: It's hardly news that acts of naming involve violence. When I ask whether you consciously appropriate the violence within texts *per se* and whether you have specific ends in mind when you take up what your audience may construe as *violent*, I am not speaking of a quest for violent imagery but of your embrace of narrative events that call out the inscription of social values and the way that they are named. I am raising two rather different questions. I want to examine your uses of such ostensibly violent material on par with your general sensibility about thieving. It seems that you're commenting directly on the violence of society's systemic workings and on its hunger to consume.

AD: I'm not trying to be unnecessarily provocative or coy, but I don't really think of a *woman on film* with a loaded gun as a primarily violent image, or of a woman who is planning to assassinate Mussolini, or of two maids murdering their mistress as such. Of the many representational elements and strategies at play, the implied violence is only a vehicle to reveal structures of power and the proposals of individuals within corrupted systems. One wouldn't say that Flannery O'Connor or Alfred Hitchcock seem inordinately interested in portraying violence - or that *film noir*, which almost always build to or from a murder, is a primarily violent genre. The murder in *Rope* (1948) is purely symbolic, an obvious and tool for the plot, to elaborate the relations between three men. A dramaturgic prop. I like that quality of obviousness, what else can we call it? To quote Haruki Murakami quoting Chekhov, "If a pistol appears in a story, eventually it's got to be fired."[7] There are two points: one is that the pistol isn't always a pistol, the second and more important is that with texts and scripts and films I think we're talking more about the elements, motivations, intentions of dramaturgy, rather than a logic, morality, or functional parallel of real life. Chekhov was talking about *necessity* as a creative force, about *necessity* making things exist, in the realm of fiction but projecting them forward into life, or as a functional parallel. Not about the *necessity of* making things exist. For me there's a blurring between usefulness and uselessness, I'm interested in both. And *Betty* never fires that pistol.

KP: I am compelled by the potential of suspense, too, not by its traditional seductive role in Hollywood dramaturgy, but by its disruptive potential. We can take Richard Serra's sculptural

[7] Haruki, M. 2005, 266.

props opening onto his seventies works, such as *Prisoner's Dilemma* (1974) as examples of works that involve unconventional kinds of suspense. In the latter, we see the medium of video used to explore what seems to be a decision about a game show on television, tacitly a kind of innocuous and plausible mode of entertainment. However, this work also involves a decision that involves the same game theory that was at the time being used to consider the first strike in nuclear war. Serra said the work was about President Nixon and about the believability of *versus* the verity afforded by the television medium. So the work is as much about suspense as it is about power. It deals with the processes by which they intersect. Let's talk about the role of power and powerlessness in your films. In fact, it strikes me that these works don't really involve powerlessness even though it is a kind of question that remains on the surface of them, suspended there, as it were. One might say that your films act as screen between subjects and events, on one hand, and powerlessness, on the other hand. I am thinking of your reworking of the anti-Fascist novel *Denier du rêve*. I don't think we could really say that this film shows us a woman's powerlessness, but rather her—

AD: —Her paralysis? Well, what is at stake for this character is precisely the potential she has or may have of changing her rôle. I'd prefer to locate my strategies of *implied* violence or recrimination somewhere between Delphine Seyrig in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 quai du Commerce 1080, Bruxelles* (1976) and Quentin Tarantino's Uma Thurman in *Kill Bill* (2003). Jeanne Dielmann and The Bride—assassins. In that list we have to include *Her Highness* Jackie Brown, mastermind, who never gets her hands dirty. There's the scene toward the end of *Jackie Brown* (1997) when Pam Grier is sitting behind the desk of the bail bondsman, practicing at repeatedly drawing a loaded pistol from the desk drawer, pointing it each time at the spot Ordell Robbie (Samuel L. Jackson) will stand in a matter of seconds. Like *Betty Talks*, it's a performative gesture, an active reference to her own 70s characters, *Coffy* and *Foxy Brown*. But this time *Jackie* already knows that she won't have to fire that weapon.[8]

[8] Thanks to film scholar Olga Solovieva, for our discussions at Yale University about Tarantino's films, during which she pointed out these parallels.

video still, Disaffection and Disaffectation, 2003

Though some are successful, it's a genre of tragic anti-heroines, of isolated and individual action on behalf of a collective, acting outside of the familiar dynamic of instigating rebellion and meeting with quick sharp punishment. Where all these disparate films, plays, and historical novels intersect for me is in that territory of systemic power relations, which are not simply reducible to specific traits, biological or otherwise. What I'm saying is that in spite of that, they can be mapped with surprising and disarming clarity.

My all-time favorite assassin is Lyubov, a truly desperate, redemptive protagonist from an amazing Russian film by Andrei Nekrasov called *Lyubov i drugie koshmary (Lyubov and Other Nightmares,* 2000). Lyubov's moral, sexual, and biological (in terms of gender identification and lack of ancestry) ambiguities are elements inherent in the cinematic assassin, *the woman with the weapon.* A mongrel, a bastard, an illegitimate genius, someone with little or nothing to lose. For me, this characterization leads quickly into issues of authorship and theft, dispossession and disruption. An assassin is always lacking a lineage.

Lineage is one of the unsolvable problems of patriarchy—bastards and orphans are a thorn in its side, right?

KP: We can speak of the patrilocal, the patrilinear and your work on *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* certainly involves these kinds of patternings of knowledge. Can you say a bit more about the kind of ambiguity that you're engaging? Is it in any way a romantic understanding of androgyny, a refusal of categorization, and then, what are its limits?

AD: Is there any way that an interest in symbolism can be un-romantic? What appeals to me about a writer like Flannery O'Connor, for example, are the depths of moral ambiguity in her stories, fables, allegories, whatever they are. She was a fanatic Christian, but whatever her intentions, stories like "A Good Man is Hard to Find" are compelling on the basis of their dramatic structure, their exacting fiction, not on some presumption of benevolence or the enforcement of righteousness. For my purposes she's in the same category as the novelist Haruki Murakami, and also Fassbinder or John Cassavetes—writers/filmmakers who use very strict or formal systems of identification only to turn them inside out, in effect disarming you very casually. Things *happen to their characters, which* are suspended entirely within the logical frame of their writing. That's certainly romantic, and transformative.

KP: It's materially structured as well. From here can we follow this thread to think the extremities of identity and counter-hegemonic constructions of it in film?

AD: What is richest for me about Al Pacino's character Sonny Wortzik in *Dog Day Afternoon* is not some kind of underdog Italian-American vigilantism, or Robin Hood complex, but rather what is revealed so elegantly about the borderlessness of his own masculinity. As it turns out, Sonny is married to a woman with two children, and simultaneously the husband of Leon, desperate for the cash for a male-to-female sex change, and whom the police bring to the scene of the bank robbery from Bellevue hospital after a suicide attempt. The high tension between these roles is propelled neither by camp nor by what we call sexual identity, and it isn't even the central tension in the film. It's a total panic and an indistinctness that contributes and highlights and problematizes, and leaves no easy escape, much like that denied to Petra von Kant**.** It heightens and tugs at some fundamental kind of identification, but doesn't deign to be *about that*. I admire that facility for distancing, on the part of the director and actors, the confidence of resisting an eventual reconciliation. These things are irreconcilable.

KP: There is a pattern of play between crimes and reconstructions which directs us to question identification: the Papin sister murders rewritten by Gênet and the Brooklyn bank robbery rewritten by a screenwriter, by Pacing and Lumen. We might also think of Pierre Huyghe's *Third*

***Memory* (1999) at this juncture. Do you see limitations or advantages to his way of reworking *Dog Day Afternoon*?**

AD: For me, the most interesting part of Huyghe's work is the archive of newspaper articles about the actual event and the film, and the subsequent letters that John Wojtowicz, the real bank robber, wrote from prison. He was honored by Pacino's performance but was upset about a few aspects of the production; one was the representation of his wife as a nag. *Those* elements of both real and fictional consequence and construction start to force the wedge or gap of theatricality. A substantial and conflicted narrative emerges from those articles and letters, ultimately this is of more consequence than Wojtowicz's somewhat detached verbal commentary in Huyghe's video re-enactment, which has the unmistakable feel of contemporary art. And video re-enactments of real events make me nervous, they're embarrassing to watch, you never—or always—know where to look.

KP: Huyghe consulted Wojtowicz for his version of what became story, his memories of the event and thus questioned the nature of an event being for and told by an individual. And then Huyghe exaggerated distancing, retelling by reading this information through documentation and still other reworkings of the *event*, itself called into question, Lumet's film, and so forth. From this process Huyghe arrived at the notion of a third term or memory. He imaged a kind of scene, right, in excess of history or of today or of any individual's events past or present.

AD: Absolutely. And I find a lot in Huyghe's layered approach to interrogating and re-working places and events. I like very much the subtlety and absurdity in his work for the Dia Center [*Streamside Day Follies* (2003)] and the theatricality of his work in general. But for me the evidentiary basis of that film [*Dog Day Afternoon*] has little to do with the particularities of the bank robbery—even in Lumet's film *itself* the specifics of where they were all standing in the vault fall away for me in favor of other frictions and revelations, which certainly were to some extent reflections of Wojtowicz's life. Lumet's film and Pacino's character both have very romantic aspirations and implications, for NYC politics, for masculinity, for class solidarity.

KP: Yes. I see how insisting on such lack of resolution forces a kind of wedge into the spectatorial experience. It's very Brechtian the way that you also insist on the now-time and never let spectators slip comfortably or seamlessly into another time or place. Also relevant is that you and I share a passion for Fassbinder's films, their Mannerism as well as their excesses. Obsession, no? … [laughter] **We've laughed about the feeling of desperation that he captures so perfectly by exaggerating it ridiculously in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant (Die Bitteren Tränen der Petra von Kant*, 1972). I recall that someone recently referred to your work [*Disaffection and***

***Disaffectation*] on "The Maids" as a digital Fassbinder. You are invested in his approach to rethinking or reworking historical cinema.**

AD: As background I'd refer to the example of the intersection of feminist, gay, and race politics utilized to varying effect in the subsequent remakes of Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* (1955). Fassbinder's work allows ambiguities and complexities of dynamics between individuals, and between actors, and between the two categories. It's theater, of course. Yet it's also a kind of earnest interrogation. You have the sense of his clear vision rather than his insistence on a certain lesson or conclusion. It's the difference between jumping off into the deep and safely quoting. His works exude destruction and self-destruction rather than self-satisfaction or left elitism. Todd Haynes's 2002 film *Far From Heaven* was the fetishistic shot-for-shot example of a filmmaker seduced by form, to the detriment of a meaningful political engagement with his own present context, which I suppose is something about either the ruptures or the constants in the instrumentalization of gay politics in the U.S. But these socio-politically charged topics and situations can't be expected to make their own good films, nor do good intentions and so-called shared values on the left make politically or artistically astute films. This is where I'd call on Todd Solondz's most recent film, *Palindromes* (2005), American Baroque, excessive, perverse, pathological, morbid, politically volatile, stylistically beyond even High Mannerism! We should be forever indebted to him for the relief it gave us from trying not to understand the Terry Schiavo case—how could he have known it was the quintessentially pro-life moment in the country whose leader, now, in this war- and occupation-time, unashamedly professes to "embrace the culture of life"? The stage was set. Fiction is a lucky thing.

KP: Are there other artists or theoreticians with whom you identify or whose work you respect a great deal?

AD: It's a very long list. Straub and Huillet are filmmakers I admire greatly, their patient and insistent way of working with texts, on duration and montage—they're absolutely uncompromising within the terms they have set for their own work—and in the range of their source material. I'd point particularly to their film *Class Relations* (*Klassenverhältnisse,* 1983), based on Franz Kafka's *Amerika* and also to *Too Early Too Late (Trop tôt, trop tard*, 1980-81), whose footage in France and Egypt accompany the text of a letter sent by Friedrich Engels to Karl Kautsky and an excerpt from Luttes sociales en Egypte by Mahmud Hussein. Their persistence is like Gertrude Stein's, the kind of work whose existence is a kind of lifeboat; I don't know how to explain that.

I'd mention one show from last season in New York that has really stayed with me, Jan Mancuska's "True Story" at Andrew Kreps. It was a succinct, sculptural use of a short descriptive text, managing to introduce the elements of montage and timed shifts in narrative perspective.

And Austrian documentary filmmaker Ulrich Seidl, whose recent film *Jesus, Du weisst* (*Jesus, You Know*, 2003), looking at the current relation of Austrians to Catholicism, is but a few shades off of Solondz's *Palindromes*. Seidl's feature *Dog Days* (*Hundstage,* 2001) was apparently shot over the course of three summers in Vienna, since he refused to shoot if the temperature was less than something like 95 degrees, for the purpose of enforcing actual and insufferable sweating while they all worked—actors and technical crew, I suppose. Like in John Waters's early films, this kind of rigorously formal structuring of what amount to one's uniquely abject or base perversions impresses me.

KP: Perspectivalism seems a consistent concern in your work. We may even speak of it as feminist in spite of the fact that many producers eschew such terminology nowadays. Plainly, no one has resolved the question of whether it is possible to disrupt the symbolic order with art and it seems to me that such a question is vital to your work. Perhaps this query does not deal with the role of feminism only, but with the degree to which you think that an upheaval in discourse and resistance to authority or, put another way, the vanquishing of hierarchies is relevant to your work. I see disruptive and anarchic priorities in your work.

AD: How I wish I could address your question about the symbolic order, even inadequately. For better or worse, ascribing feminist aims or effects to artists and their production seems much more complicated than it once was. For example, Tarantino's roles for women are far more self-actualized, redemptive, transgressive, and dynamic than, say, Jane Campion's. How many more times do we have to learn that you can't play piano with your hands cut off, or walk with your feet bound? Mary Wollstonecraft articulated against women's containment brilliantly more than 200 years ago, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in the last century: feminism has always stated clearly that its proposed struggle was foundationally grounded in other struggles against arbitrary power relations. It was in this vein that ironing, tampons, knitting, and unpaid housework entered the artistic and public discourse in the 1970s. I am indebted to the sensibility of that work and the sheer endurance and risk-taking of its practitioners. 1970s feminist art practice and 16th century Italian Mannerist painting must be the two schools that mean the most to me. But to speak to the continuing use of the materials and processes of domestic labor within contemporary art now, the visualization of these *female* activities or even the thinking of women's work through these activities doesn't make the same point now.

video still, Disaffection and Disaffectation, 2003

KP: In *Disaffection and Disaffectation* the characters Lucy and Hanneline displace the maids that Gênet envisioned and who displace the Papin sisters whom the Surrealists and Lacan praised before Gênet. I wonder whether such rhythmic displacement, like the thematized insincerity, of each woman may conversely point up the very real conditions of femininity and of the social order on which the play's meaning depends. It seems to me that Gênet is hunting down the conditions that hold such order in place: "Filth cannot love filth," observes Lucy, just as Solange had remarked before her in "The Maids." There is a symbolic order—hierarchies of class, gender, and so forth—with which subjects must contend. Still more architecture undergirds the characters Petra and Marlene in *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. The turning over of power even within each woman is painfully visible, so much so that as results of looking we may experience guilt and disgust.

AD: I won't make grandiose representational or political claims for these characters or for my interest in them, in or for their abjection and utter desperation, their intolerance and cruel pessimism. I don't know

why, but that's an inspiration, admitting to and finding enthrallment in a shared state of dejection. I'm sure I am contradicting myself, but artistic impulses are so rarely neatly progressive, consistent, or analytical. The proposals of these characters exhibit the signs of a desire for a cessation or a resolution, but they are not written to get there, does that make sense? It's not because that's my cynical idea about reality, it's just an attempt to map my interest in fictions, in entering exaggerations and in clichés, as you said earlier. Of course what is appealing about the lesbian and incestuous subtexts in *"*The Maids*"* is the gross admission of inacceptability that the play itself is—I find much more transformative potential in such a commitment than in a clamoring for legality and equivalence, for an impossible place in an impossible social order. In that sense it is convenient that Gênet himself was contemptuous of femininity, and demanded that male actors play all the roles in *"*The Maids.*"* This starts getting at the question of filth, of the revulsion within attraction, of precarious closeness and treacherous similarity.

KP: Shall we end here with dirt and treachery, precariously poised for the next round?

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