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Lutz Bacher

P.S. 1 CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER, NEW YORK
Liz Kotz

TUCKED AWAY IN A SIDE GALLERY of P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center, the nine panels of Lutz Bacher's obscure but essential early work *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview*, 1976, constituted the core of her first museum retrospective. Intended as a publication maquette, the original pasteup (owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art) is composed of eighteen 8½ x 11" sheets of paper collaged with xeroxed photos and texts, typed text on notebook pages, handwriting, and tape; in the version exhibited here, these pages were reproduced as photostats on nine 20 x 24" panels. The look is stark and fragmentary. Amid the high-contrast snapshots of faces, texts cut in, stutter, and break up. The typed Q&A self-interview is ostensibly about Lee Harvey Oswald and whether his widely varying appearance in different photographs indicates subterfuge or cover-up. But neither the questions nor the "answers" are particularly concerned with Oswald, assassinations, or even that type of American conspiracy-theory mythology. Instead, the conversational back-and-forth ruminates on photography and history and the impossibility of finding truth in an image—or in a text, as the work is also about resisting the transparency of the "artist interview" format: "Where it first was interesting to me was . . . let me start

again . . . I had a newspaper photograph of a man's face—some other man not Oswald—and under this man's picture is the caption 'escaped psychopath.'" And further in: "It should be that more pictures would tell you more but what happens is they tell you less and less."

It is this precarious joining of image and text that animates many of Bacher's signature works based on found word and picture combinations, from the "Jokes" series, 1987–88, featuring 1970s politicians and celebrities with nasty and apposite one-liners; *Jackie & Me*, 1989, a first-person photo-text narrative that assumes the voice of paparazzo Ron Galella; and the "Playboys" series, 1991–94, drawings and paintings based on Antonio Vargas's sensuous pinups; to more recent pieces, including *Bien Hoa*, 2006–2007, based on found pictures by an amateur photographer and Vietnam War soldier, as well as many speech-based videos that were not in this exhibition. Necessarily presenting one specific cut through the artist's prodigious output, the retrospective spanned video installations, paintings, drawings, photographs, and somewhat inscrutable objects, made between 1976 and 2008. Over and over, these projects explore how the most basic cultural processes go awry, as different semiotic elements, rather than creating an anchored, integrated message, instead interrupt and complicate one another, mess each other up. In *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview*, materials are cut apart, misaligned, overlaid, broken by gutters, and surrounded by large black swaths, all obscuring readability and evidencing a punk-fanzine-like fascination with negation, image degradation, and copier dirt. The effect is totally mesmerizing, like a strange fluid where various random stuff emerges from and submerges back into a hazy, cloudy suspension. Reflecting on their medium or, more specifically, the structural relation between their subject matter and their materials, Bacher's works are not simply about the transmission of a message or even the noise and disruption

along the way; they reveal new rhythms or coherences within recording and transmissive media.

Over time, Bacher has translated such discoveries into myriad other materials. Having started working with video in performances and in pieces using found or appropriated footage, in the early '90s she began shooting video—lots and lots of video. After all, a camera is just another way of collecting stuff, examining it, seeing what's there. This exhibition focused on a series of video projects made between 1997 and 2003: *Olympiad*, 1997, with its breakdown from fascist monument into abstraction; *Closed Circuit*, 1997–2000, a condensed silent portrait of Bacher's late dealer Pat Hearn made by digitally animating video stills; the elegant *Blue Angels*, 1998, a two-channel projection of military planes, shot from a San Francisco rooftop; *Manhatta*, 1999–2002, with its rerecorded and glitchy aerial footage of New York City; and the epic, elegiac *Crimson & Clover (Over & Over)*, 2003, shot at CBGB during a sound check for the memorial service of Colin de Land (who was also Bacher's dealer). In *Crimson & Clover*, Bacher's restless camera scans the stage, focusing on details that are periodically obliterated by glare and eventually fixating on a glowing line, simply light reflected off an amp, as the haphazardly rehearsed song (performed by Angelblood) starts and restarts and seems to last forever, constantly interrupted by technical adjustments. Projected onto a white scrim with two speakers facing out, the thirty-minute tape is a single camera roll, a tour de force of composed accident and synesthesia whose unmannered and fluid beauty is the result of years of frequent shooting. Even without the backstory, it is a deeply romantic and ecstatic work.

Organized by curatorial adviser Lia Gangitano, the exhibition at P.S. 1 was deliberately nonsequential, defying the compartmentalized layout of the second-floor galleries. Sound bled from room to room, and assembled works could be approached singularly or as part of a



Opposite page, from left: Lutz Bacher, *Jokes* (Mel Brooks), 1987, 38 x 60". From the series "Jokes," 1987–88. Lutz Bacher, *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview* (detail), 1976, nine black-and-white photostats, each 20 x 24". This page, left: Lutz Bacher, *Playboys* (Peace), 1991, graphite and silk screen on paper, 44 x 36". From the series "Playboys," 1991–94. Right: Lutz Bacher, *Olympiad*, 1997, still from a black-and-white video, 36 minutes.



larger mix. Amid such heterogeneity, I found myself wanting to bring in some more traditional art-historical tools, such as chronology, periodization, and a consideration of medium, to illuminate some of the through lines operating in such a varied and little-understood artistic project. Yet grounded as they are in all kinds of concrete and strange instances, Bacher's assembled pieces continually swerve away from explication—just as her subjects seem to be caught at the moment they disappear. And in fact, a sense of disruption and layering was key to this exhibition. At P.S. 1, the endless cycle of the *Crimson & Clover* sound check periodically merged with the soaring roar and mundane conversations of *Blue Angels*, bathing the entire

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space in a collaged sound composition. Bacher's work is all about such chance encounters and juxtapositions. There is tragedy and humor, beauty and loss.

Even so, compared to two recent, more cacophonous museum outings by the artist—at the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (2008) and the Kunstverein München (2009)—this exhibition was a relatively conventional retrospective. (The show's title, "My Secret Life," is no doubt tongue-in-cheek and a bit bittersweet; in the absence of a major survey of her work, youngish art school grads have recently been "discovering" Bacher in various more or less subcultural venues such as Participant Inc. and Taxter & Spengemann, both in New York, and San Francisco's Ratio 3.) Thus it provided the first stab at something like an

overview of a still-elusive body of challenging, important, often haunting work. For part of what it offered was a very different narrative of what has happened in art since the '70s. On view just across the river, the "Pictures Generation" show at the Met subtly framed or contextualized Bacher's retrospective, since her own early work is roughly contemporaneous with that of Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine, and the early Pictures moment. The Met show, of course, delineated a far more dominant history of "post-modernism" and photo-based artmaking since the '80s, one with the all too familiar recapitulation of the CalArts and Hallwalls scenes. While based in photographic and reproductive media, Bacher's work goes in other directions entirely, sliding off the image and proliferating into video, sound, object, and room.

Yet Pictures is only part of the historical backdrop. Bacher's work first appeared publicly in the 1976 San Francisco exhibition "Photography and Language," and its catalogue, and was disseminated partly through her collaboration on the little-known Bay Area publication *Theory and Flesh* in the mid-'80s. Combining then-recent critical theories, from semiotics to French feminism, with often aggressive vernacular imagery, this critical and affective project still undergirds Bacher's investigation of the strange psychological undertow of contemporary culture. Dubbed a "mysterious California conceptualist" for her profusion of methods and materials, her subversion of a signature style, and her adoption of an ambiguously gendered name, Bacher seems to take up a set of materials and let them unravel, rather than staking out a position or setting out to decode cultural meanings. Many of her better-known projects are made from stuff scavenged from thrift stores, materials from the '70s such as pulp fiction, porn, and off-color joke books, the detritus of the post-counter-culture moment. By using these materials, mostly unaltered or transferred to different media (e.g., a book page blown up to gallery-art size), Bacher probes not just their

peculiar pop-cultural imaginaries but the question of "voice," of whose voices or selves these are—since her own work is all about ventriloquism. Different characters, from Pat Hearn to Jane Fonda to the Vargas girls to Walter, the unknown photographer/author of the original *Bien Hoa* prints, are all surrogates for the artist herself—and for us. There's a formulaic description of Bacher's work that circulates widely, that it is about the construction of identity, especially female identity, in the media—and while that's not entirely untrue, it says little about the formal specificity of her work or its peculiar turns to abstraction, fragmentation, and distortion.

There's something not quite graspable occurring among all these bits and pieces that lets them cohere in new ways, move along, and pull us with them. The artist's book that serves as a catalogue of sorts for the Saint Louis and P.S. 1 shows, titled *Smoke (gets in your eyes)* (Regency Arts Press, 2008), for example, is a xeroxed compendium of artworks and ephemera—random newspaper clippings, family photos, e-mails, notes on dreams, social-science questionnaires—presented without explanatory text. Relentlessly leveled in this quasi archive, they are all equally blank, equally meaningful. From the sublime to the mundane, there is real beauty in chance and accident—and the abstraction and distortions of photocopying processes continue to mesmerize. Just because things are mundane does not mean they are meaningless. On the contrary, over and over, Bacher fixes on the significance of infinitesimal gestures: the repetition of a phrase, a slight hesitation, and all that remains unknown—that slim figure, retreating from view, who may or may not be Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis; the pixilated narratives of *Closed Circuit*; and the planes we can barely make out despite their shattering roar. □

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