

LUZ BACHER'S EXCRUCIATING INTIMACY

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In her recent installation *Jim & Silvia* (1990-1993), Lutz Bacher has brought together two enigmatic projects which probe how the personal is recorded, memorialized, and made public. Bacher's work performs a kind of autopsy on the structures of contemporary American identity, pushing shaky systems of meaning to a point of decomposition and near collapse. In a body of conceptual art dating from the mid 1970s to the present, spanning video, sculpture, installation, photography and painting, Bacher has worked with fragmentary accounts of subjectivity, desire, and survival. Culling provocative remnants from the cast-off documents of American popular culture — pulp sociology texts, televised trial testimony, medical videotaping, tacky joke books, pin-up photographs — Bacher enacts a project of analysis and mourning.

Presented this spring at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, "*Jim*" is comprised of eight wall-sized drawings of the human face. The abstract black line figures are scrawled onto the white walls of the Matrix project space, evoking the

"primitive", the drawings of children or the insane, and the literal defacement of the museum. "*Sylvia*", more modest in scale, consists of handwritten sheets of paper salvaged by the artist from a dumpster at an East Bay recycling center. Presented on five adult-sized versions of children's tables, the torn-out pages from a notebook are fragments of letters and diary entries of a cranky and probably deceased woman named Sylvia, including a section of her will.

The diary, the letter, the handwritten will, the giant drawings of the face: all are hauntingly personal. Sylvia's writings give us fragments of a not very happy life, embarrassing in its banality yet filled with bitter pathos. Invited to sit, read and handle these crumpled sheets, viewers in effect take on a sense of her frustration and disappointment. The "*Jim*" faces which surround them are cartoon-like in their apparently simple rendering of human emotion: happy, sad, morose, giddy, fearful. Taken together, the pieces explore the nature of the human mark — handwriting on the page, scrawling on the wall — as efforts to record personal experience, to

memorialize the self in these incomplete gestures.

Working with the human face as, in Bacher's words, "the mute bearer of all meaning" (1) the installation stages a drama of what philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have referred to as "the abstract machine of facility" (2). In their system, the face is a surface, a "white wall" onto which inscriptions are made. It is the ground zero of all signification, the anchor of both language and subjectivity. In Bacher's reading, "*Jim*" is a cipher for the male face, monumental and strangely phallic, dwarfing the intimacy of the "*Sylvia*" letters. A latter day battle-of-the-sexes played out on the field of scale, the two pieces echo each other, as "*Sylvia*" provides a narrative, a history, for the mute emotions of the more spectacular "*Jim*". Yet the identity of these characters is slippery, especially in the hyper-abstract faces, which simultaneously suggest both the maternal face, that original "source" of presence, and that of the sucking baby — a subterranean mother/child dyad that reverberates through Bacher's other works as well.

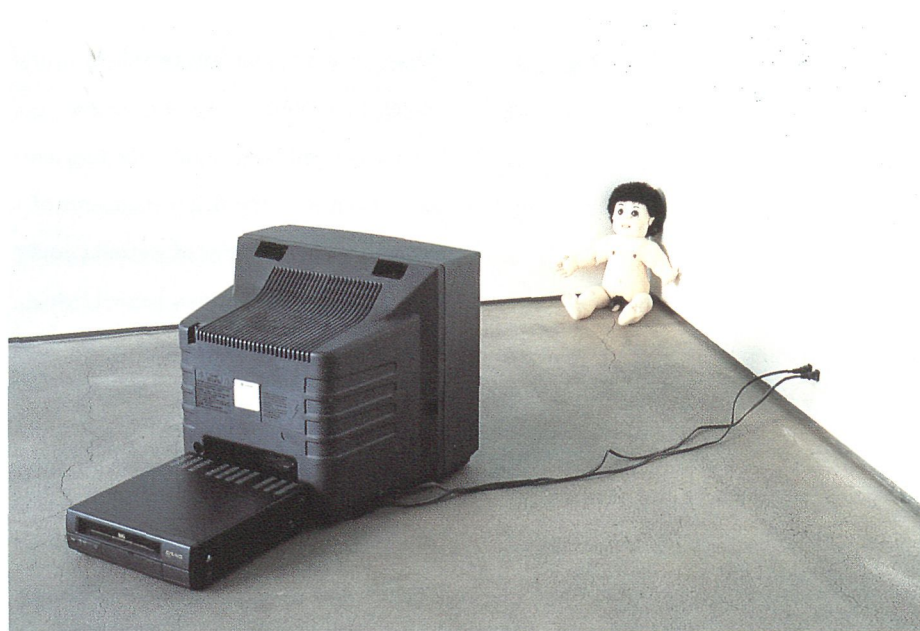
As the mysterious, enigmatic quality of the relationship in "*Jim & Silvia*" suggests, positions of gender are far from fixed in Bacher's art. Inseparable from Bacher's project of feminist critique is another trajectory involving human loss and tragedy, and the status

of personal experience in late 20th century culture. Her extraordinarily heterogeneous conceptual art production, while embedded in political analyses of gender, sexuality, and authorship, has long had a deep involvement with the sublime and the mutely poetic. While often working with sexually-and-politically-charged materials, Bacher pushes them beyond the specific and topical referent towards a more profound, more murky reading. In a sense, her work approaches each of these scavenged cultural remnants as a system, a place where signification (the creation of meaning) and subjectification (the creation of subjects) come together, endlessly done and undone.

There's something inherently perverse about finding the sublime in such tawdry, troubling, or seemingly mundane pop cultural materials. Yet such an approach seems the logical next step for any project which questions the autonomy or specificity of artistic practice. As critics of video art, for instance, have long noted, the myriad adaptations of video technology for medical, industrial, legal and surveillance purposes have often produced much more compelling documents than the consciously self-reflexive "art" uses of the media (3). In such a situation, the strategies of many video artist, a numbing embrace of ever more complicated image processing technologies, or a turn towards "video diaries" as a heavily artficed ground for

personal expression — seem precious and quaint.

Implicitly re-reading the more minimalist-inspired uses of video in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Bacher's "video sculptures" use deceptively simple structures — an upturned TV, or monitors perched uncomfortably on folding chairs — to focus attention on selectively borrowed materials and emphasize the relationship of the viewer to the image on screen. Working with

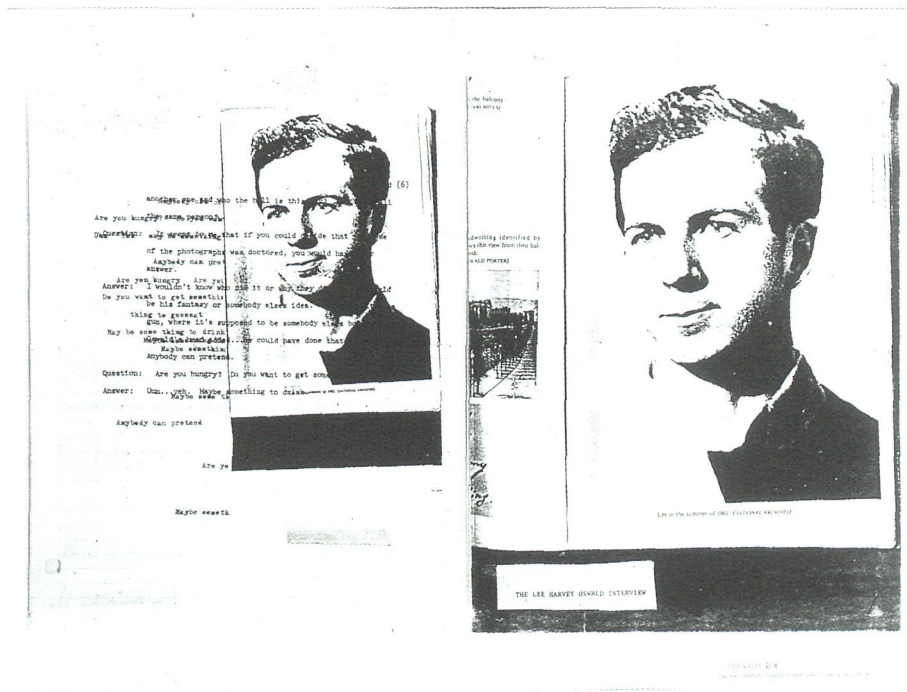


Lutz Bacher, *Who did this to you?*, 1992, installation view.

minimalist strategies of fragmentation, duration, process, and proliferation, Bacher's work often rests on an exploration of repetition and regression as structures underlying psychic life — a Freudian notion of the "compulsion to repeat" that both propels life yet insistently returns to an original inertia or inorganic matter — at its most extreme, to stasis and death.

Huge Uterus (1989) features a gruelling six-hour videotape of the artist's experimental operation for the removal of "minute and massive multiple tumors" on her uterus. The TV monitor lies on its back on the floor, with hook-up cords strung about it like the patient; the tapes come from standard medical video-taping of the procedure. Alongside, a self-help relaxation tape intended for surgery patients drones on: "... you are very relaxed and calm." Horrifying and yet mesmerizing in its

tedium, the installations subjects the female body to an extreme level of invasion and graphic display. As the tape slowly proceeds from the initial exterior shot of the body to the careful marking, incision, and then entry inside, the body itself breaks down into the organ, which itself verges on something more abstract: mom, death, the inorganic. The uterus becomes a cavity,



Lutz Bacher. *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview*. 1977. 18 x 24" stats.

from which a hand extracts a growing pile of little balls. Yet the effect veers from the clinical to the cosmic. The installation references 1970s tropes of durational performance, process, and body art, while updating them to the medicalized present — and exploring a creepy fascination with penetrating the female insides later replayed in Bacher's *Menstrual Extraction Kit* (1991), a cruelly seductive replica of a self-help abortion kit.

In the sculpture *In Memory of My Feelings* (1990), the artist shifts from the invasive procedures of surgery to those of psychology in order to track the ever-elusive realm of the personal. Bacher appropriates a pre-op personality test consisting of open-ended statements — “All my life ...,” “My mother never ...,” “One of the things I can't forgive

is ...” and silkscreens these blank phrases onto plain white T-shirts, laying them neatly in the shallow drawers of a steel cabinet. The drawers are in a sense shallow graves; the cabinet is both mausoleum and a person, a surrogate body. Unlike much recent “body art,” the minimalist-inflected markers for the human body in Bacher's work are not literal, not mimetic, but figured through substitution and scale. The T-shirts and the human-sized cabinet replace the absent body, but do not “represent” it in the conventional sense. Likewise, the texts do not so much “express” emotions as make a space for them, using the most impersonal and artificial of devices (the psychology test as an index of personality) to get at the most ineffable feelings of loss and abandonment. The chain of confessions are vaguely dysfunctional; like the “Sylvia”

documents, they imply a history of failure and disappointment.

While many of Bacher's video pieces use obsessive repetition and fragmentation to re-read existing material, sometimes the wholesale appropriation of an existing document is most powerful. In Bacher's *Who Did This to You?* (1992), an “anatomically-correct” caucasian male doll (“father”) used to test children believed to have undergone sexual abuse is pinned into a corner by a TV monitor. On it plays a one-hour videotape (“A System Out Of Balance”) produced by a law firm to inform prospective clients how best to defend themselves against child abuse charges. The video's compellingly paranoid logic poses the accused male offender as the “innocent victim” of a modern “witchburning,” who, like the rape victim of the past, now complains that “no one listens to me.” While the video is presented without explicit critical framing, the doll itself serves as a silent marker for the kind of pathetic male sensibility that would claim for white men a socially-engineered “victim” status (particularly as sited at Rosamund Felsen Gallery last year, where Mike Kelly's dolls, themselves subject to a very different kind of handling and “use,” were previously exhibited). In two related pieces, Bacher returns to the “anatomically-correct” doll as a uncanny object: *Doll Baby* (1992), a life-sized replica of the “father,” and *Sleep* (1993), a

photographic project documenting its fabrication, in which the fetus-like state of the in-process doll pushes towards a more atavistic, dream-image association with infancy, dismemberment and the corpse.

Underpinning Bacher's ruthless investigation of contemporary sexual politics is an almost psychoanalytic fascination with failure, decay and violence — a fascination in which the boundaries between masculine and feminine, or between life and death, are often mutable. *In My Penis* (1992), a continuous video-loop of a short sequence from the televised trial testimony of William Kennedy Smith, the defendant's repeated statement "Uh, I did have my penis" and subsequent grimace repeat mercilessly. The piece evokes both rape and castration, to be sure, yet also the collapse of an American political dynasty. Smith's Pillsbury Dough-boy white face itself echoes the "Jim" drawings and "Doll Baby" face: a kind of generic white male, shapeless and abstract. The tape's insistent repetition keeps shifting the viewer from the topical to the tragic, propelling a psychic slippage from condemnation to identification.

The very title, the fact that it is "my" penis, claims a position of masculine aggression, but also masculine failure, for the female artist as well as the ostensible male subject.

Yet Bacher by no means reserves such strategies of disintegrating repetition for the male subject alone. In "Survivor," the anchoring loop of the four-channel video sculpture *The Way We Were* (1990), an unnamed white woman in sunglasses utters an ambiguous refrain: "... there was a possible survivor... at a few minutes after 12:00..." before breaking down into tears and the exploding flashes of news photographers. Deprived of a context for the announcement, we can only guess at a narrative of calamitous disaster and suggested tragedy. Yet as the overwrought sequence stutters and repeats in awkward splutters of words,

the tape induces an anxious identification. Producing the effect of survival in its very repetition, the sequence brings the viewer into an unexpected contact with televised suffering and loss that, however corny and banal, is nonetheless real and irreparable. Sited alongside a clip of Sarah Vaughn singing "Send in the Clowns" and Robert Redford and Barbara Streisand reciting snippets of dialogue from the film "*The Way We Were*", the work poses endurance itself as a kind of heroism, a fierce struggle for dignity in the face of humiliation and tragic distress.

In Bacher's more recent installation *Corpus Delicti* (1992), the artist returns to the Kennedy Smith trial. In it, she presents the transcribed statements of the three women whose testimony was suppressed from the hyper-publicized



Lutz Bacher. *Mr. Hancock, Play boys*, 1991-93, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 44".

trial proceedings. Similar to the school-like siting of the “Sylvia” letters, the Corpus Delicti texts are presented on wooden desks, inviting viewers to sit and read, to spend time with the documents. Ordered by the artist from Sir Speedy Printers in West Palm Beach, Florida, the depositions sit in their boxes, surrogates for the bodies of the women (4). Paradoxically “making public” documents which are already part of the public record, the installation presents them both as absent history and as markers for a kind of “real” which remains ever on the margins of discourse or representation. Like the “Sylvia” letters, the *Huge Uterus* tapes, and the Kennedy Smith testimony, they are real, and painful — and also indeterminate,

ambiguous, and compelling. They subject the viewer to an excruciating intimacy whose violence cuts both ways.

Halting and hesitant autobiographical narratives of rape or attempted rape, the typewritten texts recount the shattering of everyday reality by an unexpected act of brutality. Pushing toward the structural issues underneath tabloid events, Bacher focuses on the face of the rupture of violence. In one fragment of testimony, reproduced on three silkscreened canvases, a former med school classmate of Smith’s describes an awkward, perhaps drunken encounter that suddenly gets out of hand. As the events go irremediably out of control, the woman’s language dissolves into

fragments of sentences, gaps, ellipses.

The act of sexual violence emerges in the narrative itself, as the moment in which her story is in effect ruptured by his. Yet the passage is strangely erotic, a broken narrative which echoes both romance novels and Joyce.

Bacher’s recent video *Are You Experienced?* (1992) brings this sense of violence full circle, returning to the concerns with death, the mother, and the female body initiated in *Huge Uterus*. It is a 17-minute process-oriented tape which the artist recorded of her arduous destruction of three electric guitars, presented in an installation with the remnants of the shattered instruments. The discordant soundtrack is made of cut-up, aggressively-repeated violin music, sampled from a Nigel Kennedy performance of Vivaldi. Shot from a low angle, a black guitar — female, phallic and solitary — rests on a stand between two large amplifiers. The artist, dressed in a man’s pinstripe suit, enters, picks it up and swings it around overhead, smashing it repeatedly on the cement floor. When the first guitar is sufficiently destroyed, it is replaced by another — a logic of the commodity, but also of psychic substitution. What is surprising is that it takes so long, that it is so much work. The glib gesture of the aggressive male rock star is replayed as a task, acted out with effort by the female artist. Yet in the sparse setting of the video, the associations multiply and



Lutz Bacher. *Jokes*, 1986.

scatter: from killing the mother to the mother killing her children, the female form of the guitar reduced to shards of almost skeletal material scattered about the floor. The process itself is pathetic, as the artist wanders around, leaves the frame and then returns, to pick up and smash bits of already damaged guitars, as if to determine how destroyed they need to be before the piece is done. From the mute “performance” of the artist’s body on display in *Huge Uterus* to the artist on attack in *Are You Experienced?*, Bacher’s project undergoes something of a rupture, a mutation.

Where that might go could be suggested by the violently scrawled “Jim” drawings, an as-yet unexecuted

restaging of a Robert Morris gun process piece, or Bacher’s latest ongoing project, the Playboys, which feature Vargas pin up drawings luxuriously translated as oil paintings. Outrageously detailed and sumptuous, the Vargas girls are the ultimate fetishes, with projectile breasts that take on a life of their own. Accompanied by hilarious May West-style one-liners — “Operator, give me a

wrong number” — the Playboys connect up with a different body of Bacher’s work, involving pornography language, in *Sex With Strangers* (1986) and *Men in Love* (1990). Taking on the historical relation of Western oil painting to the figure of the female nude, the canvases present the surface of the painting itself as skin, as a surrogate for the female, and perhaps even maternal, body.



Lutz Bacher. *Jokes*, 1986.

- (1). Lutz Bacher, “Jim & Sylvia” project description, 1990.
- (2). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) p. 180.
- (3). See, for instance, Amy Taubin, “The Whitney Biennial: Video”, *Millennium Film Journal* no. 13 (Fall/Winter 1983-84) pp. 113-115.
- (4). As with the cabinet in *In Memory Of My*

Feelings, the stacks of paper of *Corpus Delicti* stand in for the human body, working off the “theatrical presence” of the minimalist object which, in Hal Foster’s reading, stands “unitary and symmetrical... just like a person”. See Foster’s “*The Crux of Minimalism*”, in *Individuals: A Selected History of Contemporary Art, 1945-1986*, Howard Singerman, ed., (Abbeville Press, 1986) pp. 162-183. For the phenomenological account of minimalism from which Foster

draws, see Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Boston: MIT Press, 1977). For a reading of Bacher in terms of intersected tropes of minimalism and pornography, see my “Complicity: Women Artists Investigating Masculinity”, in *Dirty Looks: Women, Power, Pornography*, Roma Gibson and Pamela Church Gibson, eds. (London: British Film Institute, 1993). My thanks to Judith Rodenbeck for discussing Bacher’s work with me.