

What's Past is Prologue

A.K. Burns and MPA

May 1 – May 22, 2011

Curated by Julia Paoli

In *What's Past is Prologue* artists A.K. Burns and MPA present new projects paired with a selection of works from the Marieluise Hessel collection, a private collection permanently on loan at the Center for Curatorial Studies. The artists chose these works in order to create a unique exhibition setting that informs their new projects. A.K. presents her six-channel video installation *Touch Parade*, while MPA presents a live performance using works from the Collection as a point of departure. A.K. and MPA's projects, in conversation with their selections from the Hessel Collection, complicate commonly accepted understandings of their work and incite a discourse regarding contemporary genderqueer methodologies. Taken from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the title suggests a connection between the influences exerted by our past on our present and future. The work of both artists is commonly contextualized through a history of art informed by a feminist discourse, and while both are tethered to this history, *What's Past is Prologue* suggests that neither is bound to it.

A.K. and MPA sat down with curator Julia Paoli to discuss the framework for *What's Past is Prologue*.

JP: I want to begin with how the two of you met.

MPA: ...I guess we met at *Pilot*¹ or maybe before that, around New York.

A.K.: I'm trying to think: did *Pilot* happen after the Explosion?

MPA: 9/11?

A.K.: No, not that one, the *LTTR*² Explosion [laughter]. We definitely met after that explosion. I didn't move to NY until 2003, and I met you after my move for sure.

MPA: Right...I remember A.K. was working on a video at *Pilot* and I wrote her afterwards for a copy of *Pink Narcissus*.³

JP: Your discussion of these projects touches on the communities involved in them and I wonder how your involvement with that community of cultural producers affects your practice?

A.K.: It was huge for me to move to New York and visit Chicago and meet an intensely political and accepting group of people who were queer and feminist and artists, and who were simultaneously rethinking what those categories meant. I lived in Oakland prior to New York and I had an art community and a queer community but they didn't really mix.

MPA: I'm wondering if part of what you're asking is about shared experience, shared knowledge, shared imagery, or even ideologies.

A.K.: The conversations and collaborations that come from that can push boundaries because we don't have to explain foundational ideas or feeling to start something. Everyone has different skills and strengths that can be shared and utilized. I think meeting each other has been an extremely productive gift.

JP: You've worked together on previous projects, but I'd like to talk about your relationship for *What's Past is Prologue*. How has your relationship changed or evolved given the framework of this exhibition?

MPA: I noticed from our first meeting to look at the collection that I'm really comfortable with A.K. We have a shared herstory so we don't have to cover the basics.

A.K.: At first I was really nervous because, although I know we share similar perspectives and ideas, I assumed we would feel very differently about our attraction, needs, thoughts, and feelings about the works to include. For all that we share, we produce and process in very different ways. Once we came together to look at works from the collection, we had a surprisingly synched sensibility even about things that weren't so obvious.

MPA: We've been part of the same congregation [laughter] – seeing the same films, going to openings with similar people – so we enter into this space with a shared vocabulary. But there are also surprises, like when A.K. pulled out the Robert Kushner and I'm like what the --?

A.K.: MPA first brought up Marieluise Hessel and introduced the idea of having her in the show. I didn't need MPA to explain her presence; she is integral to the ideas that have come out of this process.

JP: Can you talk about the presence of Marieluise Hessel in the exhibition space and your shared idea to have her represented?

MPA: For me, it stems from the proposal from you [Julia] to create a new work in reaction to the collection. I was standing in this woman's cabinet of curiosities and wondering: 'Who is Marieluise Hessel?' Encountering her collection broke down two myths: that there are no women collectors, and that no one is collecting work by women artists. She has seminal feminist pieces by Valie Export, Ana Mendieta, and Carolee Schneemann. Who is Marieluise figuratively? When you say "collection," I see it as a body. Then there is a body directly connected to it [the collection], which is her body. Where is her looking, her presence in this exercise?

A.K.: I found it interesting that there are several works in the collection that are portraits of Marieluise. To me, this shows a particular intimacy with the artists she collects. It's also narcissistic, which is an important element of both art and patronage. I like that you call her collection a body—it's her investment, her interests, her eye, and her desires. A collection is autobiographical in that way.

MPA: She is visible for us so why not make her visible in the space.

A.K.: The collection is also a site of desire. Art is fetishized by owning, preserving, and presenting it. I think this is really interesting when you run into the problem of not being able to touch the artwork, something that has been a point of contention for MPA's performance, as well as the way fetish and touch is experienced through a screen in my work. This is emphasized in an institutional space where the art and viewer can't physically interact. Desire is created strictly through the act of viewing.

MPA: Site is crucial when I design a performance. This site initially was about the material in Marieluise's collection and its location at Bard, which led to the discovery

that Hannah Arendt is buried there. I turned to her readings on violence and have included them in this process, a process that makes a conscious effort to look at the women players that are important to this location.

A.K.: Marieluise's portrait also led to a conversation about which physical bodies are present in the exhibition. My work and MPA's work have our bodies in them and Marieluise completes the triangulation of efforts and representation.

JP: You both, independently from one another, chose to exhibit Louise Bourgeois' *Hanging Janus with Jacket* and Carl Andre's *Intersects*; can you discuss why you were both drawn to these works?

A.K.: Andre's presence in the show is a site of conflict for both of us – through his involvement with the minimalist movement and his association with the death of Ana Mendieta. If I approach *Intersects* from a purely visual point of view, I am drawn to it. The intersecting heavy wood blocks feel strangely intimate, or produce a desire for intimacy that is inaccessible – intimacy constructed from cumbersome unaffectionate material. I relate it to the intimacy issues present in my work, *Touch Parade*. Also minimalism has been a point of interest for me specifically because I question the things I feel conflicted by – I'm interested in minimalism as a language of the phallus. Being in conversation with that is essential to my thinking and practice. The presence of *Hanging Janus with Jacket* makes me stop in my tracks. I have a completely fetishistic and libidinal response to it; the decision to include it was deeply intuitive – it's from the heart, not the intellect.

MPA: A.K. and I share the association of the body with *Hanging Janus with Jacket*, and *Intersects* I think of as a monument. I'm interested in unpacking Andre's *Intersects* as a monument or marker for the themes of minimalist history – he and Donald Judd shared that – and the other members of that men's club. Previous to this project, I had been working on critically addressing Judd and those associations are still at play here: the angry feminist and all you might imagine her to be, as well as the aesthetic pleasure around minimalism. That critique and attraction can happen simultaneously. Andre's *Intersects* feels void of sexuality, while *Hanging Janus with Jacket* communicates sexuality in its weight, shape, the bronze material, everything about it. There's an invitation in this piece for the sexual that is not just one definition – it's not about being queer or hetero. I think it's a complicated task when you can offer the sexual without it being aligned with gender and body specifically.

Many of our choices were intuitive—about form and material. My original instinct was to put the Bourgeois and Andre in dialogue and discuss the space in between them as violent. A.K. has talked about the desire produced around the space of not-touching, the space between “the” art and “the” viewer that she's defining as desire. I'm interested in pushing things into that in-between place, and addressing that as a violent act. What is violence? That's where Hannah Arendt comes into play because she discusses these interruptions as physical, systemic, and symbolic.

JP: As self-identifying feminist and queer artists, do you feel like you're continuing a conversation or genealogy of those politics, or are you creating a new space for a new discussion?

MPA: I think it's hard to decide where we're at in time and space. The best way we've answered that is to recognize our knowledge of something that came before us. There is a shyness for me to associate my acts as historical marks, because that is a practice of patriarchy – to write collectivity as singularity – whereas feminism offers us something more horizontal and complex.

A.K.: It's a messy web.

MPA: The play, fluidity, and intersecting lines that feminism lends us – I feel – is more our location.

A.K.: We are who we are partially because of the art, love, labor, and fight fought by gay liberation and the work of our feminist sisters. I feel indebted and inspired by the life they have afforded me. That said, I do not work from a single starting point. I've made work where I'm thinking a lot about minimalism or gay male porn, and I have this whole idea about understanding 'what is masculinity?' in my practice. I'm interested in how those things become symbolically represented in society. For me that means relating and responding to a lot of 'man work.' In my work I filter the way I exist as a contemporary socio-political body. I am undefined. I can relate to the language that could describe me but I don't believe in the specificity of any of it. Many things shape that sense of self and because of that I don't relate to history in a traditional sense. History requires exclusion. So what would inclusion look like? A mess. I think that is what we come from and what we are.

JP: **Through this process we've unfixed the commonly understood roles of curator and artist. I think about authorship in reference to this exhibition and I wonder if you've thought about it in terms of either curatorial framing or the works that you've made and chosen for the show?**

A.K.: Well, you [Julia] set in motion something that put authorship in question by choosing *Touch Parade*. It is partially about a question of authorship and origin because it is a 'cover' – I look at each channel as video covers. I say that because it's important to me that I'm inserting my own fetishistic elements into each video. They are personalized in that way. Each pair of screens is two versions of the same piece. After watching the 'original' video, I redo the set of gestures from memory. The difference between the two screens is the discrepancy in my memory.

MPA: A couple things come to mind – the Bik Van der Pol piece, a work I have been thinking about from the collection, is a neon sign that says *Art is Either Plagiarism or Revolution*.⁴ Recently you [Julia] brought up the word intervention in relation to this show. I'm not entering this project with the intention to dissolve authorship but I know that our acts complicate the positions of source and authenticity. A performing body and a performance belong to an event – it's a moment in time...and there is a *huge* conversation around how to reproduce and share that moment after it happens. But even within that debate, the act of performance is temporary. It dissipates once the performing body and the audience leaves. That juggles with authenticity and authorship, but it's not my intention...or I don't enter the space with that as the goal, but am aware of the consequences inherent in the medium of performance. To perform acts with works from the Hessel Collection plays with the context in which we are viewing them. That space around artworks that is often still, I am choosing to

make active. I am interested in how we—audience and performer—look at the work. I want to draw attention to this looking, as instructional to the power and authority embedded in and around an object. In this performance, the object is both my body and the artworks from the collection.

A.K.: The Bik Van der Pol piece also makes me think about the influence of language in relation to authorship. Ultimately *Touch Parade* is an exploration of fetish and assimilation. There are a plethora of fetish videos that are not relegated to the explicit content section of YouTube. While they may elicit the same libidinal response as 'porn,' the fetish is not morally marginalized because it is coded by its inability to be recognized as such. The set of gestures – the framing, the auto-videography – all work to translate a new pair of gloves, the crushing of food underfoot, or popping a balloon into tactile expressions of a specific set of desires. The act of communicating this through the hyper-public space of YouTube means that what was historically relegated to subculture is met by those who can and can't read this language.

In picking pieces for the show I was looking for work that I had a fetishistic response to, that implied the impulse to touch, and were about desire and/or imposed ideas of restraint, inaccessibility, and questions of intimacy. I believe the viewer is an imperative part of the construction of the show. How each viewer receives and reads these relationships is what *Touch Parade* and the whole show is about, for me.

JP: I'd like to finish our interview by asking what your thoughts are about the title of the show: *What's Past is Prologue*?

A.K.: I love the title.

MPA: Same.

A.K.: I've been thinking a lot about the idea of the future and how it is always inclusive of the past and present.

MPA: Your choice for title doesn't make these acts final. It situates us and the exhibition in the beginning, but it addresses that we are carriages of the past.

A.K.: I think both MPA and I make work with references. I often respond to images and objects that already exist. I'm not interested in the idea of something being new or original. Nothing I do is original. I think the title alludes to that, but I like that it offers a beginning. When you think of 'the past as prologue,' we admit that there's a before, so our beginning is not a fixed beginning.

MPA: Also, this interview isn't the answer. The meaning happens between the viewer, the object, and, in my case, the performance.

¹*PILOT TV: Experimental Media for Feminist Trespass* was a four-day autonomous television studio in Chicago from October 8 – 11, 2004.

²*LTR* is a feminist genderqueer artist collective that produced an annual art journal. The group was founded in 2001 by Ginger Brooks Takahashi, K8 Hardy, and Emily Roysdon. Ulrike Müller joined *LTR* in 2005 and Lanka Tattersal was an editor for issue four.

³James Bidgood, *Pink Narcissus*, 1971 64 mins.

⁴Bik Van der Pol, *Art is Either Plagiarism or Revolution*, 2008. Currently installed in CLAP, Hessel Museum, March 27 – May 22, 2011.