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Contemporary Art & Criticism Summer 2016

Chantal Akerman—Ken Jacobs—Mike Kelley—Sylvia Plath
Robert Ashley—MONOMYTHS—Annie MacDonell—Cara Benedetto
Walter Scott—Francisco-Fernando Granados—Brian Jungen
Hito Steyerl—Ron Tran—Shane Krepakevich—Rodrigo Hernández

Performance

these installations are stills from films such as *In the Mood for Love*, *The Hustler* and *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant*. All show interior spaces. Krepakevich introduces a remove from these images by photographing them off a computer screen in his studio, allowing the reflections of overhead lights to obscure parts of the images. This functions as a means of reinforcing the surface of the image, but also introduces one interior over another: the artist's studio over that of the filmic representation.

The distinctions between art and design seem to be fluid in Krepakevich's exhibition. This is not, however, an art exhibition about design. Instead, we see permeability between the two disciplines, but what one is saying to the other isn't clear. What does it mean for brass and black cord to be used in a lamp, and for those same materials to be used in a (non-functional) art object, made by the same individual? Is what we are seeing a conflation of art and design of the order endorsed in the 1920s? As an art historical reference point, we visually understand the types of abstract geometries of this period. What is perhaps less legible is the political and social milieu from which these geometries arose – a time of war, turmoil and revolution. But of course today we have our own wars, and our own turmoil. How do these echoes from the 1920s reflect our present circumstances? If these echoes are part of a modernity that T.J. Clark describes as “a social order which has turned from the worship of ancestors and past authorities to the pursuit of a projected future,” perhaps they are a means of bypassing present circumstances altogether. If the art of the past looked to the future, it would seem that the art of the present is increasingly concerned with looking to the past. For Krepakevich this seems to be a matter of engaging with historical formal experiments. Gravity, weight, line, surface, angles. His works are not effusive statements, but delicate constructions that demand close scrutiny.

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Carol Sawyer: *The Natalie Bretttschneider Archive*
Carleton University
Art Gallery, Ottawa
Jan. 18 – April 19, 2016
by Jaclyn Meloche

The exhibition *Carol Sawyer: The Natalie Bretttschneider Archive*, curated by Heather Anderson at Carleton University Art Gallery both exemplifies a feminist intervention into a permanent art collection as well as an intervention into the ways in which women artists are represented – or rather, not represented – in Western art history. But beyond complicating the structure of the male-dominated canon, Canadian artist Carol Sawyer's practice challenges the relationship between documentation, representation and reality by blurring the boundaries between portraiture, self-portraiture and performance.

Rooted in semiotic discourse, the concept of representation continues to beg the question of reality – particularly within photography and photographic art criticism. Although mimetic resemblances of a time, place or person, photographs function as a frame constructed and presented by the individual behind the camera. Notorious for his writings about the ontology of the photographic image, French theorist and critic Roland Barthes negotiates the photograph through a post structural and semiotic lens in order to ask what is a photographic image, and does it signify reality? In his own words, “I wasn't sure that Photography existed, that it had a ‘genius’ of its own.”¹

Embedded within Barthes' writing are three key notions that, in relation to Sawyer's work, help to explain how the artist's photographic and moving images contemplate reality: *representation*, *reproduction* and *repetition*. Moreover, with reference to the word “archive,” these three terms propose to challenge the very nature of fact vis-à-vis fiction within lens culture.

In the spirit of a feminist recovery project and research initiative, Sawyer's work recalls the life and work of Natalie Bretttschneider – a fictional artist whose contributions to feminist art history have re-

mained overlooked. Throughout the exhibition, viewers are presented with archival documents, texts and various images that recall a life, a time and a place belonging to the late Brettschneider. In keeping with the traditions of a retrospective, Sawyer's curatorial intervention questions both the omission of a woman artist from Canadian art history as well as the notion of biography. More specifically, does one's life become intelligible, or rather real, through photography?

At the heart of his text *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Barthes argues that photography is not real, but rather the impetus for what he terms *the punctum* – the moment or revelation of affect embodied within an image – through his *reflections* on a photograph of his late mother found following her passing. Although the image is not her per se, it does recall her being, therefore bringing her back to life. Drawing from a Proustian analogy, Barthes explains that “I had no hope of ‘finding’ her, I expected nothing from these photographs of a being before which one recalls less of that being than by merely thinking of him or her.”² Although a mechanical reproduction of his mother's body, the photograph instills in him an overwhelming nostalgia that brings her back to life. Through their ability to reproduce an emotion and a time, Barthes suggests that photographs resurrect their subjects in print, forcing the viewer to reconsider what is real, and what is not real, in an image. In this example, the photograph of his mother translates into a recognizable representation of her through the ways in which it speaks to him, both metaphorically and emotionally.

The entangled relationship between photography, representation and reality, which Sawyer explores through the make-believe portraits of Brettschneider, exemplifies how a photograph, or moving image, can challenge notions of fact and fiction. For example, in *Natalie Brettschneider performs 'Profile Mask' (c. 1952)* and *Natalie Brettschneider: Rapunzel and Medusa sit down to chat about war' (c. 1947)*, the artist complicates the nature of self-portraiture and documentation through her use of the word *perform* – a term that performance studies scholar Richard Schechner suggests means *to be*; that meaning is born from an ensemble of experiences that when brought together create consciousness.³

With reference to the traditions of women's self-portraiture in the works of Claude Cahun and Cindy Sherman, Sawyer too is drawing from methods of the latter to suggest an identity; that when captured within a frame, the likeness of a body perpetuates the notion that said body is real; that said body embodies a life; and that said body holds a place in history. Moreover, in keeping with her predecessors, Sawyer is appropriating her own body as an instrument for representation. The image presented to the viewer, while biologically hers, is not hers in a Butlerian sense. Her body instead becomes the result of performativity, adding another layer to the ways in which an identity is understood in material culture.

Arguably the strongest example of a self-portrait in the exhibition is *The Rebearal (1948)*, a credited collaboration between Natalie Brettschneider and Maja von Derenstahl. In the projected black and white film, Sawyer performs Brettschneider, the lead character in the film. However, through her operatic voice, Sawyer loudly reveals herself as an imposter – both in the film and in the entirety of the exhibition. Likened to a performative confession, the film offers gallery viewers both a haunting soundscape of past representations of women in film and provides insight into the ways in which images produce, and reproduce moments of being in contemporary art.

This exhibition begs us to consider the question: does the use of the lens perpetuate the illusion that an identity is fixed? Moreover, does the lens inform the ways in which biography becomes the result of narrative – whether real or fictitious? In the form of an archival retrospective of Natalie Brettschneider's life and contributions to Canadian art history, Carol Sawyer provokes the viewer to constantly question what is real in the exhibition, and what is not. Coupled with objects and textual documents that suggest historical proof of a life lived, the selection of photographs and video call into question the nature of reality by insinuating that reality is neither tangible, nor fixed in its singularity – just like Brettschneider's life, which is not tangible, nor real.

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1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980; New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 3.

2 Ibid., 63.

3 Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

Carol Sawyer, *Natalie Brettschneider performs "Profile Mask"*, c.1950, 2015. Digital ink jet print on archival paper. 31.75 x 34.29 cm. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND CARLETON UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY, OTTAWA

