

A RIDE OF CIRCULAR NOTIONS

CRUDE METAPHORS

Artist: Kim Schoen

Interviewer: Jesse Aron Green

Curator: Edgar Martins

JAG: Okay it’s recording.

KBS: Good. But how do we get from what we say to what’s on the page? I was hoping there was a shortcut but of course there isn’t.

JAG: No you just listen to it over and over, and write it down.

KBS: Well, I’m glad we’re doing this as a spoken interview. But maybe when we go back to listen and transcribe, we’ll think: *Well, what I just said there is simply a lie!* Or more to an ontological point: I can’t believe I said that. Duchamp once insisted in an interview: “Every word I am telling you is stupid and wrong.”

JAG: Right. How shall we start then? Perhaps you could begin by reminding me of the mechanics of the project?

KBS: Why don’t we start a bit out of order? That’s what I liked about the Elif Batuman text you sent me on Orhan Pamuk’s novel *The Museum of Innocence*.

JAG: OK. Pamuk’s book is the story of a narrator who tracks a woman, the object of his unreconciled affections, via the detritus she leaves behind. In most cases, Pamuk based the objects in the book on those he found himself. Recently, he opened a museum, which he bought the real estate for even before writing the book, containing the objects that appear in it’s pages.

KBS: I love the rearrangements of time that involves. There’s a confusion between what precedes and what follows.

JAG: Let’s start by thinking about Pamuk’s process and how it may be similar to your process in the *No Non Nonsense* body of work. It seems like you’re trying to get outside of a logic of intention by taking improvised language and using it to inspire the choice of objects and their

arrangement. This is an unusual way to construct the means for a still life. And despite this fissure from “sense”, you seem to want to allow the image to be legible or readable for a viewer; that is, to allow it to create a possible, if unpredictable meaning.

KBS: I think what interests me about constructing these still lives is that they’re permanent photographic records of something that was very fleeting and erratic — speech. The instruction I give to the actors while making the videos is to try to work against sense, to try to *speak without meaning*, which is a very difficult exercise. Hardly anyone can do it — which is why the casting process takes so long. In the process of working against sense and their speech meandering about, they come up with very inventive, imagistic language. I then go back and prop the fleeting, tossed-off scenarios in their speech, and make them into photographs.

JAG: Can you talk about the language you just chose? You said you “prop the speech” — which is a beautiful turn of phrase.

KBS: The process starts for me with the locations. I think of them as found sets — I see a place that is visually confusing, which is generally a consumer space, and then invite actors to come and experiment with language there, not knowing what is going to happen next. I mean, there’s no real direction that I give them — other than to kind of body-block them when they start veering into too much sense. So because the locations are like stages or film sets, the idea of propping seems appropriate. I find the props. It’s very loose and interpretive. The objects need not appear the way they do in the still lives. It is my own concrete interpretation of their speech.

JAG: Right. Which is also another meaning of “propped”— that you’re taking their speech, which might not have a clear meaning, and you’re “propping it up”— you’re supporting it to make it have a clearer sense than it does.

KBS: Well, it’s comic to me because the photograph always appears as if it *intends* to mean. But the speech that they are being propped from is language that tries to say without meaning. Layered on top of that is my translation from word to image. The title of each photograph is an acronym of the phrase it’s propped from. These titles can only be spoken with considerable difficulty — they’re long and unwieldy and not words, but acronyms, which have a relation to the language of corporations,

which I like. You can’t quite return to speech again from image.

JAG: The process of making these sounds labyrinthian. Borges comes to mind. To recapitulate, you do this huge casting call to find the one person who might be able to improvise in such a way as to avoid sense within rhetorical conventions. You record it, then reinterpret it by making it concrete in the physical world with both a set and props therein; and then you photograph it as an image to be seen, with all of the art-historical and conceptual conventions that come with the tradition of the still life and photography in general. It’s a lot of labour — many stages of labour — an exteriorization of an internal experience. To make what appears to be a rather straight forward artwork you’ve had to create...

KBS: An obstacle course made of tires! Yes, the construction is labyrinthine, not linear.

JAG: I can’t help but try to make meaning out of these images. At the same time I know that I don’t have full access to whatever it is that they’re “about”. I know that I will not be satisfied because I know the method of production is outside the frame, so to speak. Regardless, at a certain point I do become satisfied, because I allow myself to make some sense out of them.

KBS: Well, the drive for meaning and coherency is a stubborn one. And nonsense isn’t completely nonsense; it works only within systems and structures of language — sometimes there’s excess syntactically, lack semantically. There is always this tension between sense and nonsense, excess and lack. But you will never be in a state where you’re totally confused looking at an image, because there’s always a vestige of structure or familiarity somewhere. I think what you’re left with is trying to negotiate constructions of meaning.

JAG: I am reminded now of Guy de Cointet’s work, which seems similar to yours in its playfulness, in its engagement with deconstructing language. Do you feel an affinity there?

KBS: It’s been said of his work that there is a sense that something is always hidden, “as if there might be some revelation of the irrational in the quotidian.” I very much relate to that.

JAG: Do you think that’s why you work in a kind of hybrid conceptual — documentary fashion? Because you want

to preserve the things we are surrounded by and that influence us?

KBS: Yes, I use the forms of display I encounter in my life as my raw materials, and then introduce a kind of structure for events to unfold within.

JAG: I’m reminded of something you said during another conversation we had once: that you’ve had the visceral experience of being overwhelmed by the endless possibilities of meaning; that being fully within nonsense has a physical manifestation. I got the sense that this was an ambivalent location for you: that you want to invite it, and its productivity, as much as you find it confusing and disorienting.

KBS: Lying in bed one can get a sense of vertigo thinking of all the things there are to contemplate. Not necessarily even the things one needs to think about but just the sheer number of things that exist or have existed — and the mind can reach an exhaustion trying to, as Deleuze says, “contemplate what it contracts”. The mind is always pulling things together, asking *what difference is there? What difference does this make?* And the point where one cannot seriously contemplate things anymore is a moment where nonsense enters in. For example the delirium that can be induced by thinking, in almost a single moment, about how toothpicks exists, and exhaust pipes and Mata Hari and what your brother said to you four weeks ago, and mercury and bulldozers and —“and and and” —

My interest in making the nonsense videos is a kind of structural pursuit—to delimit the infinity of what is possible to say through trying to say anything. What fascinates me is the existential negotiation of human limits this brings up— what your mind can actually call up in the moment, the strength of your own storehouses of memory, etc. And spontaneity — while courting it might seem paradoxical — touches on the edges of what infinity is as an idea. But spontaneity also remains within our own limitations, the limitations of grammar, speech patterns, our own histories. I am also pre-occupied with what remains of spontaneity after its occurrence; I like the absurdity of the record-keeping of spontaneity. So in a sense the documentation is most important to me, which is why they are videos and photographs, not live performances.

JAG: Tell me about the choice to work with still life.

KBS: Still lives are constructions of order. They try to preserve meaning through formal arrangement of that symbolic order. But the combinations of objects in my photographs are completely untethered from signs and symbols of “agreed significance” that might have resonance with a general public. The arrangement of objects has no intended meaning; they simply might mean. There’s an arrangement that suggests a purposiveness — but doesn’t exactly follow through on its promise.

JAG: In one of your images, HTCYTU, there’s a camisole and glass of water on the mantel, and the camisole is still hanging on the hanger it’s sold on. In others, car tires and bricks. Can you tell me more about the objects in these photographs?

KBS: Well, like the objects in Pamuk’s novel and museum, they are mass- produced, and easily bought. Batuman writes that Pamuk’s novel “restores a specialness to objects of mass production, transmuting quantity into quality. A middle-class fake is more magical than a priceless painting, precisely because it’s everywhere at once.” I like this admission of the fact that a mass produced object might have affective potency.

JAG: I’m reminded now of your empty book series, which are also still lives of a kind, akin to product photography. They are photographs of objects that appear to be large heavy books, taken simply against a flat grey background. But they aren’t books. They are props, used to “stage” furniture.

KBS: I’m fascinated by things that are presented to us visually, from an unknown presenter, to convince us of something. I shuttled those books around with me for a long time, from London back to L.A. before actually shooting them. What attracted me to them initially was not only that they were empty and made of cardboard — but the comedy of their titles. Who was it who chose them? I thought about that for some time. Somebody intended to mean something that in the end doesn’t mean anything. But that absence of intention and meaning creates another kind of space where I think the imagination can enter in.

JAG: This double-life of the object, to both make and evade meaning, has a relationship to Beckett. Is he an influence? Similarly, is Duchamp’s playful use of language — his puns and word games — an influence?

Beckett’s “Proust” was a text I read and reread with great pleasure as I was making *A Work Made From Bed* — a video shot in the reconstruction of Proust’s bedroom in the Musee Carnavalet in Paris. His dark and comic take on how we deal with “habit” was very influential to me. Lying in Proust’s bed, watching them vacuum around me was my take on the comedy I often find in the rituals of display. Proust’s room is constructed and displayed so we can imagine ourselves — and him— in it, attaching ourselves to a sort of literary pathos. I think there was both longing and slapstick in physically placing myself there, substituting my body for his. I’m pre-occupied with missing bodies.

As far as Duchamp goes, I am enamoured of him in a way that supersedes the ubiquitous discussions of his influence. His tongue was always in his cheek — one of my favourite sculptures. I recently discovered his work *Rendezvous of Sunday, February 6, 1916* — four postcards taped together, words that take the form of regular sentences, but ones which constantly interrupt the production of meaning, “so that the rendezvous of language and meaning never takes place” and I nearly lost my mind reading it. He’s constantly present, Duchamp. His experiments and jokes still jab.

JAG: Sometimes talking about influences feels like driving through a desert, studded with hot-springs and outposts and gas-stations to keep you going. A very California metaphor. I bet you love Ruscha.

KBS: Ed Ruscha is like an old boyfriend you can’t quite get over. He’s still cool and charming and he’s burned his way into your mind. Like him, I find inspiration in commercial display. I get a lot of ideas while driving; for me it’s Wilshire Blvd. I suppose I do feel a part of an L.A. conceptual legacy, even though in my heart I’m not a joiner.

Kim Schoen received her M.F.A. in photography from CalArts in 2005 and her Masters in Philosophy from the photography department at The Royal College of Art in London in 2008. Recent exhibitions of her work include *A Voyage Around My Room* (Norma Mangione Gallery, Turin), *A Man Asleep* (LM Projects, Los Angeles), *Trust Fall* (The Whitechapel Gallery, London). Her work has been written about in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Art in America*, and her essay “The Serial Attitude Redux” was published in *X-TRA, Quarterly for Contemporary Art* (Winter 2010). Schoen is the co-founder and editor of *MATERIAL*, a journal of texts by visual artists.

And it becomes a question of how tightly can you tie yourself up? It's like the corset. But the problem with the corset was that the tighter you brought everything in at the center, the more things exploded on the other end. You can't squeeze out an entire population of people!

(Excerpt from *The Horseshoe Effect*, single-channel video, 2012)

HTCYTYU, 2010



CPOLTASHAH, 2010

So when one is looking for different kinds of devices, different ways to stack building blocks of prosperity one on top of the other, circular paths of logic that are stacked higher and higher, one has to then begin to question, is what's happening underneath the water really all that vital? And yet, we start to understand when it comes to the issue of transnational marriage that people really are wondering if they can be taken through a ride of circular notions.

(Excerpt from *The Horseshoe Effect*, single-channel video, 2012)





N600: Hawaii



N600: Berrocal



And it's not a matter of putting out insecticide and hoping that if you replace the trap something different is going to happen, because I don't know what the latest *Vogue* fashion is, that's not something that I pay attention to, and I'm not sure that if it's coming from the other side that it's going to make a difference and that there is some way that you can march to a certain tune or...if you're in the army, maybe it's going to be different for you, but I'm not in the army, and so, you can say that you're a poet, or you can say that you care about what happens politically, but as soon as you cross that boundary (and you don't necessarily feel when you're crossing that boundary), that's what's going to be the deciding factor. In so many different ways: are there bricks in your backpack? Did you pack lunch?

(Excerpt from *Is It The Opera or Is It Something Political?*, single-channel video, 2009)

HIIYRTTSDICTH, 2010

Not everybody is willing to swim against the current, and you know, stake their claim, as it were, on the minds, or the way that the midwest has been divided up against the grain and the roots cut up from the inside, and—going back to Jefferson and his imported plants, and whether or not he had a vision that was realized—or if we just see it that way now from the past, because of course all of the vegetation is new and the lists have changed.

(Excerpt from *Is It The Opera or Is It Something Political?*, single-channel video, 2009)

GBTJAHIP, 2010

