

The illegal we do immediately; the unconstitutional takes a little longer.



*Kissinger (illegal/
constitutional)*, 1987,
distressed black-
and-white
photograph mounted
on aluminium,
129.5 × 96.5cm,
from the *Jokes* series

My Secret Life: Lutz Bacher
– Lia Gangitano

Although Lutz Bacher, since the mid-1970s, has engaged in practices that resist stylistic categorisation, imply assumed identities and reject the necessity for epic art statements, it seems that her work, either because or in spite of these efforts, is both monumental and highly personal in its intensity. Reviewing Bacher's projects sequentially, variations (from still to moving, spatial to flat, silent to loud) indicate that the image, although persistent in its mirroring and shaping of experience, is also consistently engaged in a process of imminent breakdown. A deliberate subversion of apparent 'signature' style is perhaps related to the unstable status of the image that Bacher seeks to insinuate throughout her practice.

While her early work in still photography and its various methods of reproduction, such as *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview* (1976) or *Sex With Strangers* (1986), delineated a constellation of concerns involving 'authorship, gender, sexuality, violence and power', they also served to confound easy allocations of labels – feminist, for example – due to their cool aggression and vague authority.¹ Hiring others to execute her paintings and drawings for *Playboys* (1991–94), or appropriating mass-produced imagery and text for works such as *Jokes* (1987–88) drew a certain general branding of Bacher as a 'mysterious California conceptualist', but this postmodern label was resisted by her deliberate migration from strict methodologies (of appropriation, for example) to other ways of working.²

However, Bacher's alignment with the presumed depthlessness of the appropriated image (as infinite copy) is thrown into further question when her body of work is considered to succumb to the corrupting effects of 'real-time'. It seems that Bacher considered this question all along. Beginning with her subtle mediation of images and texts taken from such popular sources such as pulp fiction, self-help manuals, pornographic magazines, celebrity interviews and gossip columns, she has put the sources of her work through some form of physical or psychic 'damage'. While she has, during the same period, worked in image- and text-based 'flat' work such as *Jackie and Me* (1989), *Playboys* and *Jokes*, as well as time-based video pieces – *Huge Uterus* (1989), *Olympiad* (1997), *Closed Circuit* (1997–2000) and *Crimson & Clover (Over & Over)* (2003) – she has addressed in both the same set of concerns. The processes of illumination and obliteration (of image, of subject, of author) are consistent, perhaps cumulative across media and time-frames.

From the beginning my work in video has used long, unedited recordings. This reflects a bias towards 'real time' task-type processes, which incorporate 'chance' occurrences while embracing the continuous and the sustained. At the same time I have made strategic use of repeated fragments or other circumstantial disruptions or breaks in the flow. I understand both of these tendencies as the

1 Maura Reilly, 'Lutz Bacher at American Fine Arts and Participant Inc', *Art in America*, April 2005.
2 Walter Robinson, 'Weekend Update', *Artnet Magazine*, 5 February 2003: 'Playboy too in the back room at American Fine Arts on West 22nd Street, where mysterious California conceptualist Lutz Bacher has one of her 1993 blowups of a Vargas girl done by sign painters for hire. Who doesn't remember the fuss that greeted this particular act of feminist appropriation? [...] In the front is a videotape, *Manhatta*, a digitally fractured aerial tour of Manhattan island. Lutz's *Closed Circuit*, a video year-in-the-life of the late art dealer Pat Hearn, was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum, of all places.' See <http://www.artnet.com/Magazine/reviews/Wrobinson/robinson2-5-03.asp> (last accessed on 25 November 2007).

*inherent content and structure of video technology — the capacity to transmit or record ‘anything’ indefinitely and the inevitability of technical intervention, disruption, or breakdown.*³

The opportunity to exhibit *Huge Uterus* for the exhibition ‘Spectacular Optical’ at Thread Waxing Space, New York, in 1998 was the occasion of my first meeting with Lutz, instigated by Simon Watson, who had shown the work in 1990.⁴ Our discussions involved ‘the weird conjunction of the conceptual and the visceral that we all juggle...’, as she put it to me later.⁵ The show explored the work of the filmmaker David Cronenberg, and Bacher’s spare installation, made almost ten years earlier, was configured as ‘body/monitor/hook-up’ (with exposed cassette and videotape players, speakers and monitor). It included a six-hour unedited video recording of an operation on Lutz’s own uterus, paired with a self-help soundtrack provided to help patients relax before surgery. Although in observable dialogue with historical precedents that made visible bodily limits through performative, real-time endurance works, *Huge Uterus* also complicates its visceral subject matter through medicalised distancing, mild language programming and stark presentation. By placing the viewer in a position of experiencing, at once, the interior of a body (the artist’s), an eviscerated body (of equipment) and a disembodied voice, the work creates an undulating, yet unrelenting, sense of intangible unease.



Huge Uterus, 1989,
VHS, 6h, loop,
installation view

Around this time, just prior to the exhibition of *Olympiad* in New York in 1998, I learned that Bacher’s father worked in baseball, suggesting that she spent time in sports arenas while growing up.⁶ This lent personal significance to her particular approach to stadiums, such as the one depicted in *Olympiad*. The installation of the silent, black-and-white video at Rupert Goldsworthy Gallery used a portable Sony lamp projector, producing an image that was dim and unassuming in scale. Yet this modesty, combined with relatively hidden biographical details, did not detract from *Olympiad*’s overwhelmingly large and menacing presence. Bacher noted:

In the late 1990s I made a number of pieces that focus on urban space and monumental architecture with echoes of events cultural and political, and phenomena both technical and natural. Olympiad [is] a video record of a walk through the Olympic Stadium in Berlin [that] displays the sporadic signal glitches,

3 Lutz Bacher, unpublished artist statement, 2002.

4 ‘Spectacular Optical’, Thread Waxing Space, New York, 28 May—18 July 2008.

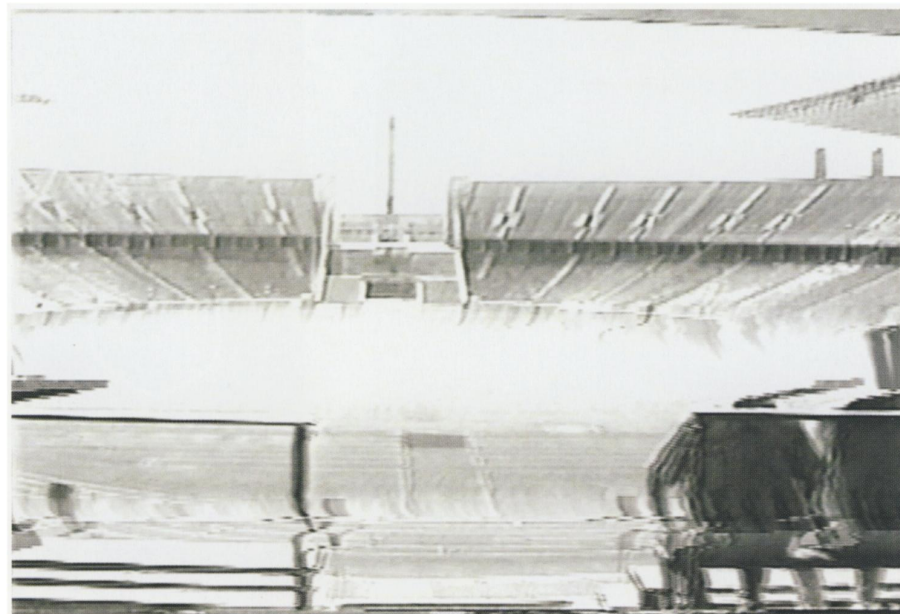
5 Lutz Bacher, correspondence with the author, 3 March 2005.

6 ‘Olympiad’, Rupert Goldsworthy Gallery, New York, 18 April—16 May 1998.

*stoppages, tracking problems, burnouts and other artefacts of a corrupted or damaged videotape. Paradoxically, this graphic degradation intensifies at the same time as it disturbs the classical aspirations of this haunted site.*⁷

It was perhaps this accidental, ‘found’ damage that led Bacher to notice similar effects in video post-production, specifically her use or exploitation of compression, or variable frame rates to ‘interrupt image flow, modifying a “naturalistic” sense of things and movement as well as at the same time unhinging image from synch sound’.⁸ Bacher further noted that the enhancement of the degraded image, with its ‘implication of decay, dissolution, etc., goes all the way back to *Men at War* (1975) and *The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview*’.⁹

Bacher’s restrained, yet comprehensive, interventions into these unassuming exhibition frameworks (the group exhibition ‘Spectacular Optical’ and the relatively small 17th Street gallery of Rupert Goldsworthy) spark an understanding of her particular pairing of work and context; but, more importantly, they elucidate Bacher’s exacting practice of adapting specific works to their exhibitor. To call this a ‘collaboration’ with curators or dealers seems almost too impersonal, and in the late 1990s Bacher took this process to an entirely deeper, more symbiotic level with the works that would follow.



Olympiad, 1997, Hi8
Colour remastered to
Betacam SP black-and-
white and silent,
36min, still

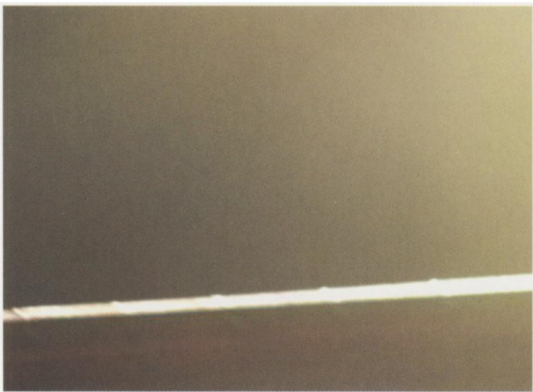
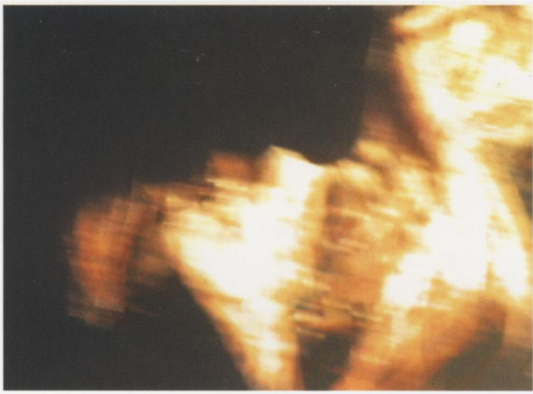
Bacher’s long-term affiliation with Pat Hearn Gallery (with solo exhibitions including ‘Playboys’ in 1993, ‘Do You Love Me?’ in 1995, and ‘Men at War’ in 2000) comprised the vast ‘content’ of *Closed Circuit*, one of her most enduring projects to date. Having worked closely with Hearn in the mid-1990s, my numerous visits to the gallery in subsequent years would be presided over by a static video camera positioned above the desk in Hearn’s private office, feeding real-time surveillance video to a monitor in the passageway of the public exhibition space (from October 1997 through July 1998). The general historical precedents for this time-based installation (in durational performance, site-responsive installation and closed-circuit and surveillance video works) were apparent. But this project unfolded in its afterlife into a demonstration of the intimate differentiation between making work with, or with the permission of, someone else, and making work that could only be made for that person – in this case, Pat Hearn.

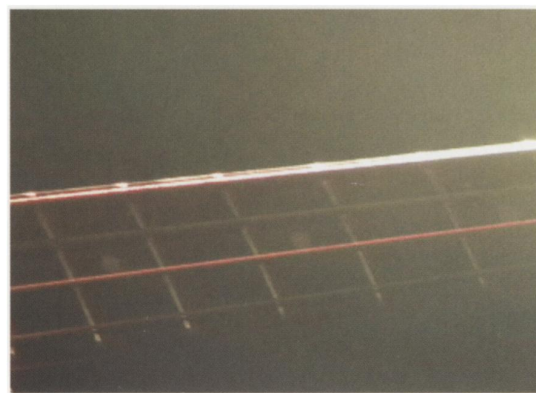
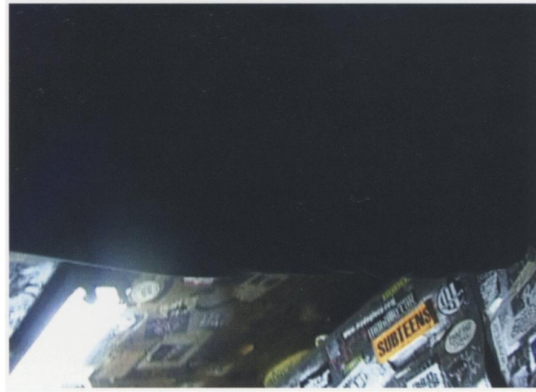
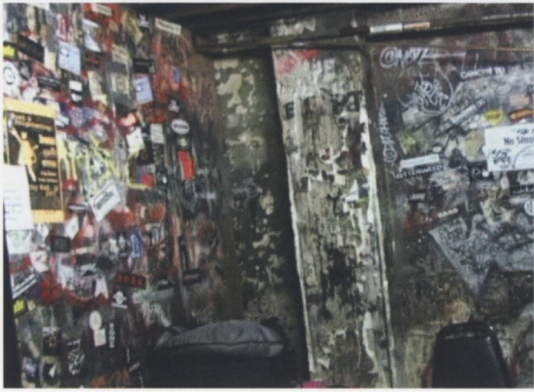
overleaf
*Crimson & Clover (Over
& Over)*, 2003, unedited
camera roll authored
to DVD, 30min, stills

⁷ Lutz Bacher, unpublished artist statement, 1998/2002.

⁸ Lutz Bacher, ‘Hover Clutch’, compilation of artist’s notes, n.d.: ‘This scan converter derived post “effect” I named the “hover clutch” because of the suspended movement produced ... on [a] computer monitor while entering digital video — at first my video editor maintained that it isn’t possible to record [it] as it is not an effect, merely a playback anomaly, but he eventually figured out how to record the anomaly and later purchased a scan converter to perform the process...’

⁹ *Ibid.*





Closed Circuit is the 40-minute digital animation of video stills taken from a year of time-lapse video recordings, which show a fixed camera perspective of the office of my NY art dealer, Pat Hearn. In the autumn of the year the animation unfolds in narrative — like sequences around the working interactions of the woman at the centre of the universe of her small office. Into the winter and spring this orderly and legible context is transformed by a changeable light source and disrupted by the rapidly accelerating montage. Finally, in the heat of the summer our main protagonist and the space in which she now fleetingly appears have transmuted to a suspension of glowing translucent images which are no longer animated by nor anchored to the former reality — where we began — 40 minutes ago — a year ago.¹⁰

The first presentation of the completed *Closed Circuit* installation occurred at the Whitney Museum of American Art for the exhibition 'BitStreams' in 2001, seven months after Hearn's death.¹¹ The video, silent, with time-code dates and images of the closely-framed confines of Hearn's office space, was shown on a 20-inch LCD monitor suspended in a small rectangular room. During my first viewing of the piece, I was joined in this room only by Hearn's husband, the equally legendary art dealer, Colin de Land. Bacher's intensive, frame-by-frame distillation of still images from this particular year of time-lapse motion video created an altogether different sense of space and time; this, and the image of the woman on screen rendered us motionless



for the 40-minute duration of the piece. Later, Bacher would write: 'At the Oscars the man from *The Incredibles* [Brad Bird, director, 2004] said, "Animation is about creating the illusion of life", and of course I thought of you and *Closed Circuit* and the scene of the room (inside the room) with Colin.'¹²

Bacher's notes from the period in which *Closed Circuit* was made mainly cite Adorno's aesthetic theory, particularly ideas about organic/inorganic imagery, technical imperfection and issues of transparency. In relation to the second half of *Closed Circuit*, she highlighted the following passage, which was an epigraph from Louis Aragon: 'The whole useless body was invaded by transparency. Little by little the body turned to light. [...] And the person was no longer anything but a sign among

¹⁰ L. Bacher, artist statement, 2002, *op. cit.*

¹¹ 'BitStreams', Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 22 March—10 June 2001.

¹² Lutz Bacher, correspondence with the author, 1 March 2005.

the constellations.’¹³ From the first to the second half of *Closed Circuit*, the transition from the visceral to the conceptual is once again dramatised – in this case, a shift to some other type of inorganic image emerges due to the repositioning of a desk lamp. This light, together with the faster montage, causes a slippage from the naturalistic image and narrative cohesion, to the point at which the person at the centre of the story, Hearn, and her personal history recedes, literally, into a large field of light. As this moment unfolds, the sense that someone is leaving the room becomes palpable – the piece, once built on a lived symbiosis, has now been transformed into a crystalline work. No longer an organic process structured around a ‘we’, the work ultimately reaches an inorganic form.

Bacher’s long history of affiliation with Pat Hearn and Colin de Land – she exhibited at de Land’s American Fine Arts in 2003 and 2004 – also provides the elegiac context for the single-channel video installation *Crimson & Clover (Over & Over)* (2003). The video recreates one of the performances in a memorial concert for de Land by the band Angelblood. An epic rendition of the classic rock song, Bacher’s video begins amidst the chaos of an interminable sound check on stage at CBGB, New York’s legendary punk club.¹⁴ Gradually, over the course of thirty unedited minutes, this gritty tangle of performers, equipment and screaming feedback mutates into an ecstatically focused collaboration among a searching camera, piercing guitars, whispering vocalists and shimmering stage lights. In the process, this messy territory and repetitious refrain transform into something unexpectedly eloquent and sublime. Fulfilling the age-old



Closed Circuit, 1997–
2000, digital video
animation of video
stills, 40min, stills

desire for synaesthesia – *Crimson & Clover (Over & Over)* functions as an extended family portrait, recombining personal and formal elements that span Bacher’s career.

As the video moves from recognisable figures towards increasing detail, a glowing white ‘horizon’ line and dust particles suspended in a strangely coloured atmosphere punctuate this epic terrain. Sound undergoes a parallel evolution, from crackling feedback and partial melodies, to conclude with the plaintive refrain of voices and guitar: ‘you just have to love her, over and over, over and over, crimson and clover’. Video and soundtrack are deployed as an accumulation of fleeting moments in an unending process, whereby increasing abstraction, not unlike the transparency that haunts *Closed Circuit*, comes to signify an un-representable immanence.

13 Quoted in Shierry Weber NicholSEN, ‘Subjective Aesthetic Experience and its Historical Trajectory’, *Exact Imagination, Late Work, On Adorno’s Aesthetics*, Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1997, p.38.

14 ‘Crimson & Clover’ was released by Tommy James & the Shondells in 1968.