

Read This Last

– Anthony Huberman

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. For over thirty years, she has consistently engaged in a process of imminent breakdown, successfully interrupting our image flow and combining a sense of cool aggression and vague authority. Cordoned between ascetic materialism and appropriationist cacophony, her works have been inspired by the idea of challenging the 'quest for innovation'. Instead, the processes of illumination and obliteration operate alongside those of technical imperfection and transparency, transforming what seems like a messy territory into something unexpectedly eloquent and sublime. Her intent on trumping all in terms of pure disorderly mass constitutes a refusal to provide points of orientation or the possibility of survey. With Bacher, language is reduced to an accumulation of noises, a rubble of disjointed parts. Technology breaks, materials are used up and images grow exhausted in their semiotic play. In short, the material parameters rupture the tidy system of appropriationist decontextualisation. We are not so much confronted by a direct message *per se*, as we are asked to decode a visual grammar of dissent, filled with inevitable absences, tinkering on the edge of visibility. Adding further milkiness to this haze is the work's implied demonstration of the impossibility of realising any creative endeavour, which might include philosophical ideas and political discussions as well as the aesthetic proposals of art objects. She is more a nomad than a refugee, both of whom are ghosts in society, but with an important difference – one has control over his visibility, the other does not.

Men at War, 1986,
black-and-white
photograph, 1 of 20,
35.5 × 28cm each



This appropriated photograph shows a group of almost-nude male soldiers, one of whom has a faint trace of a swastika drawn on his bare chest. What we get in this work are not representations, more or less truthful, more or less 'total' in their scope, of some definite social reality, but the suggestive surging forth of new social surfaces or new lines of conflict, partly communicated through oblique visual and tactile material and partly through more or less coherent iconography. But too much about the image is 'wrong' and seems coerced: everyone seems stuck in a permanent state of happiness, as if it were obligatory, a part of the American Dream, and we realise the image leaves us with no coherent and well-defined representation of a soldier, a Nazi or a homosexual.



Playboys (Wrong Number), 1993, graphite and silkscreen on paper, 111.8 × 91.5cm

To make these paintings, Lutz Bacher asked a painter to copy Vargas's *Playboy* illustrations from the 1960s. These works approach the imaginary, within the debate on realism, with the goal of revealing the construction of reality and defying the notion of posing. This is not a painting about painting, but a painting wrought free from the deadlock of eternal self-reflexivity, a painting that contains social relations in the making. One gets a sense of how many decisions, inventions, slippages and re-imaginings must have taken place between the actual encounter of the illustrator, its transcribed format in the magazine and Bacher's commissioned copy, thereby making the actual encounter with the woman depicted nearly unimaginable. At the same time, though, there is nothing in the least bit either unwholesome or immoral about the 'dames', who simply share with Benjamin Franklin the belief that honesty is the best policy.



GAP 1, 2003,
offset lithograph,
50.8 × 122cm

This series of appropriated advertisements for Gap, featuring Ed Ruscha and his son, make up a sort of counterintuitive project of abstraction, an abstraction against all odds and hard to grasp given the insistent use of real objects, readable images and well-known social and cultural phenomena. And yet, the work could be seen to perform a continual muting or obstruction of reference to social reality. Here, art had obviously and irreversibly lost the 'battle' (if it ever could be called that) with modern-day capitalism to capture the hearts and minds of the global media audience. Nevertheless, Bacher is interested in mobilising contemporary and historical 'facts' or global information as multiple paths poised at the limit between art and life in order to undermine it, to abolish it, whilst acknowledging the sheer futility of such a project. The image seems to challenge us to consider what happens *after* art has lost its specific meaning and become generic.

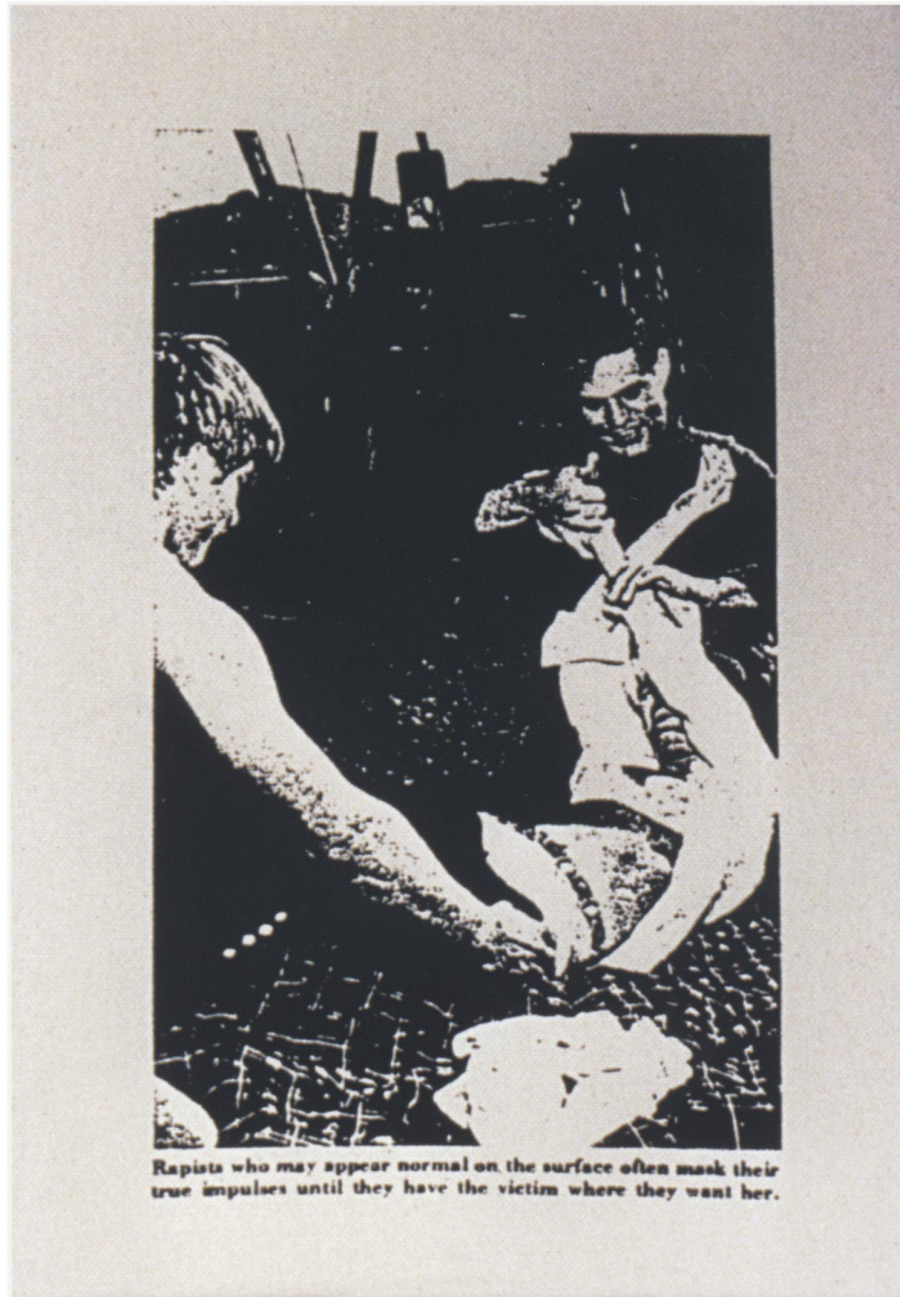


Little People, 2005,
Polaroid photograph ,
1 of 18, 79.4 × 60.3cm

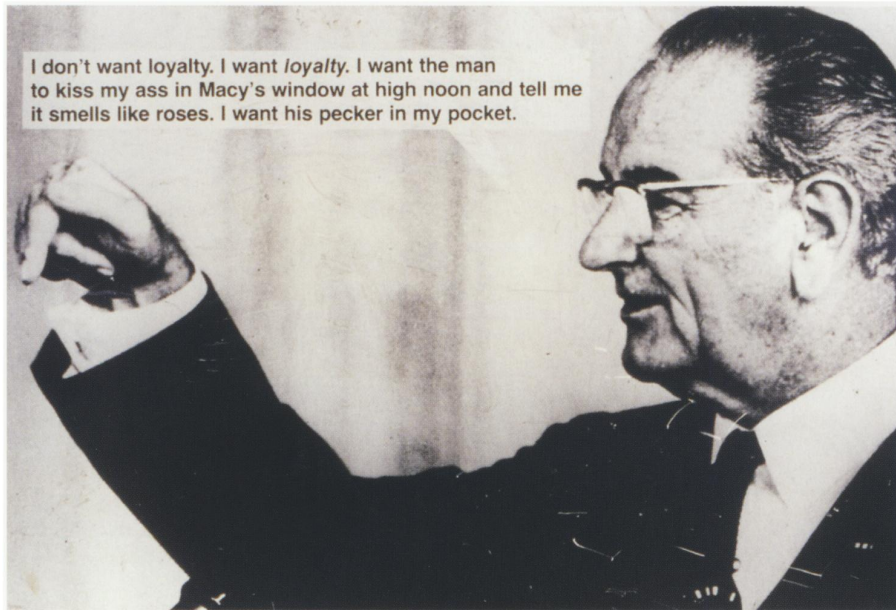
Lutz Bacher took these oversized Polaroid photographs of plastic trolls in 2005.

At the centre of the work is a future reality that is already past but has not been realised, an impossible time which can never happen, a time that refers the spectator to a moment when the future was still supposed to come, a time before post-history and post-utopia. Black metal right-wing church burners? Gay death cult snuff Internet toys? These figures casually ramble through a variety of identities and issues, from sickness and fairy-tales to space travel and the possibility of alien life. These characters don't talk to us and converse, they talk to themselves. One appears, and then another character seems to chime in, but they talk to no one, just the human wall. Communication becomes animal. Characters hear each other's sounds and maybe react, maybe not. They're all in their own universe.

Sex with Strangers,
1986, silkscreen ink on
raw stretched canvas,
1 of 6, 15.2 × 10cm each



These series of enlarged photocopies are graphically sexual, but come accompanied by a text-caption that is clearly scientific in nature, as if taken from an academic textbook. Although it is possible to read this work in terms of the discourse of transgression and abjection, a starkly anti-formalist and 'anti-aesthetic' undermining of the values of white heterosexist culture and its privileged symbolic and aesthetic forms, it also contains images so explicit, honest and so unaffectedly frank as to be non-pornographic. Almost anatomical, they seem to be illustrations of experiments to measure and demonstrate the physical reality of sexual energy.



LBJ (Loyalty), 1987,
distressed black-and-
white photograph
mounted on
aluminium,
96.5 × 142cm

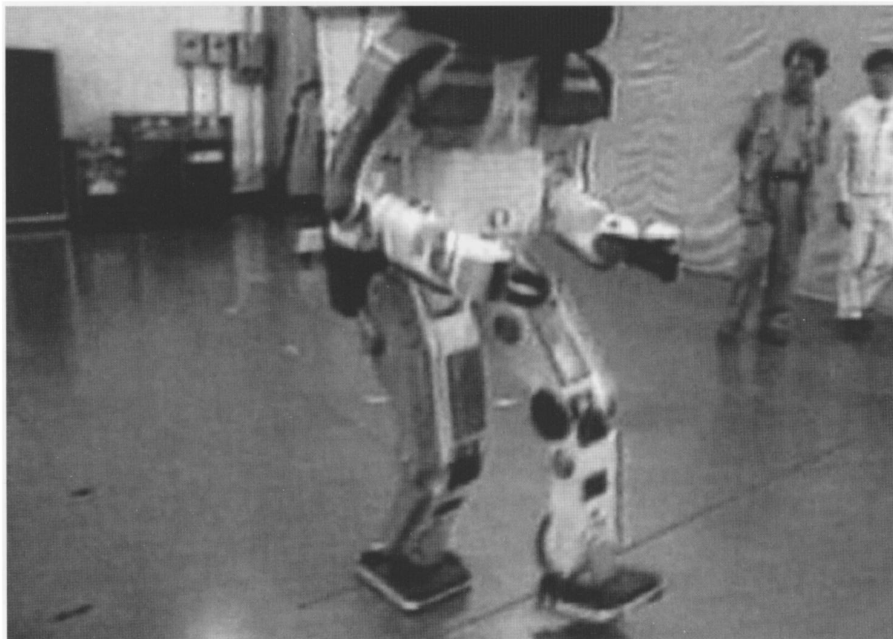
Jane Fonda, 1988,
distressed black-and-
white photograph
mounted on
aluminium,
78 × 95.8cm, both from
the *Jokes* series

It is a particular treasure to find a trace of conversation, a fragment of cultural discourse, within a dusty pile of magazines in a library basement – in pages that would otherwise remain lost in recent history. In this series of replays, the found images are allowed to confront new possibilities without abandoning its initial premises – if anything, the original problems are only exacerbated. These are allegorical constructions, sites meant to be read as a metatext in parallel to another site, in tandem with a set of conditions to which they are wholly indebted, yet completely removed from. Bacher transforms an essentially ethnographic project into one that is chaotic and unwieldy in its use of texts and imagery, so given to self-contradiction and obliqueness. What do these jokes suggest about America?



Jackie and Me, 1989,
black-and-white
photographs, 6 of 7,
61 × 45.7 cm each

This series of seven found photographs, taken from a paparazzo's book, offers a glimpse at what seems to be Jackie Onassis. The images are of victims and perpetrators alike, the pursued and the pursuer, although both remain partly out of view, their identities left loose. We watch an object of desire become anonymous again, as if a meditation on the frailty of human life as being capable of both wondrous beauty and a decidedly unheroic status. Celebrities spend most of their time out of sight, yet have the remarkable ability to evolve out of their own moment of emergence and engage with history as a real-time process, that is, as a continually unfolding medium.



BOTS, 2005, 9 Mpeg
videos shot on digital
still camera and
authored on DVD,
loop, still

Shot using the video function of a still digital camera, these short videos are shown as a group, in site-specific installations. Bacher films the robots, one by one, as if they were doing warm-ups offstage, placing the viewer in a place where he or she might be assisting a rehearsal, an audition or maybe a theatrical screen-test. The 'actors' (as in other works by Bacher) seem to forget their lines, stammer or simply stop; the viewer moves around them, alternatively focusing and unfocusing on single monitors. Using robots as a stand-in, a decoy, the work's actual implications are realised in the institutionalised visual parameters of video, and the maintenance of its capacity to remain as cogent and viable as the phenomena it purported to discuss. Although the protagonists – robots and video itself – are both artificial creations, their awkward malfunctions celebrate their life rather than glorify their death.

Inspired by Lutz Bacher's work, I wrote this text by taking sentences and sentence fragments from many of the other articles published in this issue of *Afterall*. For my introduction, I am indebted to Lia Gangitano, David Bussel, Bettina Funcke, Stephan Pascher, Ina Blom and Walead Beshty. For *Men at War*, I am indebted to Ina Blom and David Bussel. For *Playboys*, I am indebted to Marta Kuzma, Ina Blom and Bettina Funcke. For *GAP*, I am indebted to David Bussel, Dieter Roelstraete, Ina Blom and Ruth Horak. For *Little People*, I am indebted to Maria Muhle, Ina Blom, Bettina Funcke and Walead Beshty. For *Sex with Strangers*, I am indebted to Ina Blom and Marta Kuzma. For *Jokes*, I am indebted to Bettina Funcke, David Bussel, Ina Blom and Walead Beshty. For *Jackie and Me*, I am indebted to Dieter Roelstraete and Stephan Pascher. For *BOTS*, I am indebted to Maria Muhle, Walead Beshty and Dieter Roelstraete. This is not a new idea.