

K / L / M / N / O / P – a conversation with Lucy McKenzie and Paulina Olowska in New York,  
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Ken Okiishi and Nick Mauss

Ken Okiishi (KO): In what context was *Hold the Color*, or *Oblique Composition III*, 2003 (ill. pp. 14, 66–69) first performed and videotaped?

Lucy McKenzie (LMcK): We were invited to do a live performance at the Cabinet Gallery in London to coincide with Paulina's first exhibition there in 2003. Even though it was filmed, this was not a priority at the time.

The primary reason that the film came about is that I wished to find a way to create a musical soundtrack for an exhibition at Tate Britain.<sup>i</sup> We had met the young composer Martin Dutka in Warsaw at *Nova Popularna*, 2003, (ill. pp. 94, 95), and we used a piece by him and a voiceover by Mark Kent, which was recorded for the original performance.<sup>ii</sup>

Paulina Olowska (PO): And because there was a live audience during the performance, the film is more like a theater play than a video. When I watch the film I am reminded of the Polish theater plays that were on TV every Monday during the 1990s. I loved watching them, with their simple camera techniques, the full view of a stage and the overdramatic acting...

KO: What about *Oblique Composition I*, 2002 and *Oblique Composition II*, 2002?

LMcK: *Oblique Compositions I* and *II* were both live performances in which I played the clarinet while Paulina struck alphabet letter poses spelling out phrases. The first performance also included portrait drawing, while the second included a silhouetted costume change – like a striptease. They both took place in 2002, in the Ujazdowski Zamek in Warsaw, and during the *Flourish Nights* exhibition in the Flourish Studios in Glasgow.

Our first performance together took place on the opening night of the *Dreams of a Provincial Girl* exhibition in Sopot which we organized in January 2000. The performance was a recreation of an image from one of Paulina's *Ty I Ja* fashion magazine shoots. While Paulina's younger brother DJed house music, we stood in belted raincoats with very large aggressive dogs and shone torches into the faces of the audience in what was a very crowded room. There is no recording of this performance.

All of these performances were pretty rough and ready. We were aware of the potential of performance art to veer from seriousness into comedic and pretentious territory – an aspect I find interesting. Certainly in the performances in Sopot and Glasgow, I was attracted to its function as 'bohemian dressings' for events where, 'normally', the more serious undertaking is boozing and dancing.

KO: When the performance was edited into the video *Oblique Composition III* for the exhibition *Art Now – Lucy McKenzie* at Tate Britain, what did the context ‘Art Now’ mean to you?

LMcK: The major part of the exhibition was both conceptually and visually sparse, and melancholy. This was underlined by the accompanying sound, which was like hearing someone’s TV through the wall.

The context of Tate Britain was problematic, and I deliberately made work which was visually unsatisfying. I used the high-profile opportunity to involve a Polish charity for trafficked women and looked at the way the Tate itself is a charity.

KO: While a shadow of the real antagonism between the marketing of art and the elation of producing and interacting with it is cast on almost all current ‘art world’ discussions, I think it can be productive to discuss this problem from a point of view more embedded in the processes we actually love. I think Jacques Rancière’s formation of art as producing a “recomposition of the landscape of the visible, a recomposition of the relationship between doing, making, being, seeing and saying,”<sup>iii</sup> generates a way of shifting value to the work that is done by art and artists beyond the production of luxury commodities (and the critique of that commodification) or manifestation of political commitment. “The cult of art presupposes a revalorization of the abilities attached to the very idea of work. [...] Whatever might be the specific type of economic circuits they lie within, artistic practices are not ‘exceptions’ to other practices. They represent

and reconfigure the distribution of these activities.”<sup>iv</sup> With *Nova Popularna*, you created something unthinkable – at least in my experience of the beginning of the 21st century – an actually amazing place to hang out! Can you talk about the experience of running the bar on a day-to-day level? Were there surprises in terms of who frequented the bar and what the social interactions were like? And, in terms of reverberations, what has happened to the ‘spirit’ of the project, both locally in Warsaw but also as objects, images, conversations and ideas from and about *Nova Popularna* have disseminated?

LMcK: We spoke about many of these issues in the catalogue that was produced after *Nova Popularna*. But as the event recedes I can say something about what has surfaced. At the time there was the question of how to proceed in publicizing the bar. Instinct could not be relied upon because it was not about promoting either me, or Paulina and me as a unit, but the bar itself and those that performed there. Is all advertising good? How far could we mediate between our own intentions and those of the artists we were hosting?

What was interesting for me was giving up a familiar relationship with the media. Instead of being careful with the truth and averse to hype, it was necessary to adopt some of the tendencies of club and music promoters. This is what we were in the project, no matter how against the grain that may be to an artist. I continue this experiment with the record label I run now, Decemberism, as this also requires a repositioning of attitude to things like style magazines.

PO: I was not really concerned about whether the bar would be a successful place or a failure. The plan was to keep the bar running for a month. *Nova Popularna* was an experiment in revitalizing and investigating the idea of an art salon, but also a three-dimensional painting where we could express our love and interest in arts and crafts and the aesthetics of movements such as Polish folk design and Art Nouveau. Our bar/salon was located in the old National Artist Club gallery, which permitted us to hide the fact we were running an illegal bar with hard liquor and loud concerts. As little as it was advertised in the media, it started to attract an audience by word of mouth. Since we had a range of music styles and concerts from classical piano to electronic music, there were sometimes clashes between music-lovers with different tastes. At any one time there might be groups of Warsaw DJs listening to chanteuse Bianca Glazebrook singing jazz or traditional musicians drinking and listening to heavy metal tunes. I guess in the end it was quite an ambiguous place to hang out: Was it an artist-run space? A bar? An exhibition of some kind? After closing it down many people very quickly became nostalgic about it and wanted to start it up again. It became a bit of a legend. The *Nova Popularna* catalogue and record now function as fragments of a history, alluding to what the bar was like.

Nick Mauss (NM): Lucy, I appreciate your choice of dated material that once had a very specific intention, audience, context, but which is put to different uses as the world around it falls away. There are multiple senses of past and present. I'm left with the feeling that what it means now

and what it once meant couldn't be further apart. Could you tell me about the tensions brought up in your invocation of Kollwitz?

LMcK: I made reprints of Käthe Kollwitz works which were originally used as illustrations in a German satirical magazine called *Simplicissimus*. In this magazine her drawings, typical of her oeuvre depicting various horrors of war, had had amusing captions added to them, in line with the black humor for which the magazine is famous.

They were shown as part of the exhibition at Galerie Daniel Buchholz, entitled *Kulaks*, which was concerned with public art, and for which I had researched the way in which the status of Kollwitz's monument in the Neue Wache on Unter den Linden in Berlin had changed under different administrations. She is on the one hand symbolic of a recognizable type of public art and political monument. But on the other hand she is highly resistant to recontextualization, as the *Simplicissimus* captions proved; they don't work, her pathos is too fully formed to serve in its new flippant circumstance.

Some might consider her an archetype of the female artist whose work provokes a strong reaction.

KO: The shifting stylistic modes in your paintings and drawings have often been discussed in terms of 'Glasgow' and 'provincialism.' The most recent stylistic shift has coincided with a decision to move to Brussels. I'm interested in how you see the connection between place and

style. The Tintin drawings of Simon make me think about the ways in which we see things – and people – in different ‘styles’ depending on where we are. How do you find the ‘styles’ in which you produce work being affected by living in Brussels?

LMcK: In moving to Brussels I have had to reposition my relationship to the cultural material I’ve been looking at for the last few years, much of which does come from this city. As someone who thrives on reactivity, it’s a revelation to be in an environment where your work – because of its affinity and clear precedent – could be interpreted as continuing a historical tendency or tradition.

NM: One of your first collaborative exhibitions with Paulina, *Heavy Duty*<sup>v</sup>, was a mix of painting, installation, mural – modes which have become a stable part of your repertoire. But you also furnished a room with the artworks you grew up with, artworks made by or given to members of your family. Favoring inclusion, and complicating your own work by pointing around it, seems characteristic of your individual approaches, but especially vibrant in your collaboration. I keep trying to imagine these collections of warm objects set in the bare climate of the gallery, overfull of meaning and defying incorporation.<sup>vi</sup>

PO: The room with the family collection in the show *Heavy Duty* presented a straightforward reference to objects that had left a mark on our aesthetic and artistic development? – I guess we

did not even realize it then. I chose three images from my family collection: my grandma's nude painting from her art school years that was painted with a palette knife using the moody colors of Luc Tuymans; a very classic realist painting of a landscape by my aunt; and a pop painting of a fake plastic deer by my uncle. All of the three characters creep into my work. Lucy's pieces were from her father's collection of works by the art students he had taught in Glasgow: modernistic metal wall pieces, for example, but also a ceramic muscular baby's body. The baby really disturbed me; I just could not look at it. It was a brown ceramic life-sized baby with an earring. I remember suggesting to Lucy that perhaps it should not be exhibited because it was so disturbing, and she replied that she wanted it to stay where it was because it is one of the artworks that she had had to grow up with.

When we first started to work together I was fascinated with Lucy's interests in Eastern aesthetics and how our relationship and understanding of each other grew while relating and analyzing the imagery that we used. Throughout our collaborations, we have always tried to maneuver and deal with issues of taste: what an art object is expected or supposed to look like; and the idea of what is good taste, what is bad taste, and what is the difference between the two. I especially enjoyed exploring the idea of 'forgotten taste.'

The three figures I mentioned above represent for me the idea of the 'minor,' or the 'local,' and over the years became an important source of inspiration for me. I go back and forth between working with images from the past and using icons from the present day. I often reinvestigate these ideas of the artist, of someone who works outside of the art system, or art world.



KO: I think these two ideas – ‘the minor’ and ‘the local’ – spin out in complex directions in your work. For example, Paulina, in *Metaloplastyka X*, 2005 (ill. pp. 19, 38, 39, 90), there is a simultaneous deterritorialization of Alexander Calder and a presentation of vernacular, or ‘local’ references left untranslated. While the visitor (in the case of its first exhibition at Galerie Daniel Buchholz, in Cologne) can, of course, learn about certain elements – such as what the Polish text means or the tradition of metaloplastyka – the work more immediately shatters the dominant figure of Calder. The ‘local’ can act as a resistance to corporatist globalization but can also become insular, stymieing or even neonationalist; the minor can become majorly revolutionary (as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari suggested in the late 1970s)<sup>vii</sup>, but it can also become absorbed into an unaltered dominant culture as ‘exotic,’ ‘strange,’ ‘eccentric’ or just ‘interesting.’ What is your relationship to the figure of Alexander Calder? Why do you present ‘local’ (Polish) elements in ‘foreign’ or ‘international’ contexts without resolving the local/foreign interpretation?

LMcK: Soft nationalism has been a powerful component in our work. It’s one I feel has to be seriously questioned now. I come from Glasgow and, since the early 1990s, this has often been cited as an example of how artists no longer need to leave their regional community or pander to London to achieve international recognition and financial security away from state support. This has culminated in the current situation: a flourishing commercial gallery and collector climate

supported by the state. One result of the development has been to render many initiatives run by artists either pointless (artists in Glasgow have dealers anyway now) or unfundable (art funding is refocusing on the new commercial scene and establishing an organized, sanitized ‘arts quarter’). I witnessed and even participated in the Polish art scene – emanating primarily from Warsaw – as curators and artists entered the international system of art fairs and established New Polish Painting abroad. There began to be German funding for projects. I guess because of a historical relationship between the two countries: real estate and land speculation spread into cultural affairs. The two cities [Glasgow and Warsaw] are exporters, not importers of culture. And these changes all seemed to happen while I was engrossed in the reverie of my own imaginative love of Glasgow, or projections of Poland.

PO: Calder is a monumental abstract sculptor whose work fits perfectly into public spaces like airports, parks and business lobbies, and is accepted and enjoyed by the general public. I wanted to appropriate his kinetic and painted metal technique but leave my rust on. Instead of trying to achieve an equilibrium, *Metaloplastyka* was unstable and decentered with symbols that do not relate to balance: a question mark, crossword puzzle, a glove pointing to a new tax law. All of it was to present a clash between the Polish ‘minor’ monumentality of public sculptures by little-known artists and the internationally-established Calder. This not only makes for some fantastically strange imagery but also describes the old mechanisms of Western male genius versus the exposed processes of the ‘female’ artist. I should point out to you that I work very

intuitively and suggestively, rather than explanatorily. I like to treat my subjects with a certain sense of frivolity, of nonsense. But, at the same time, I deliberately choose ways in (entry points) for the viewer such as using obvious language references – words that are self-explanatory, ‘rewolucja,’ ‘sense,’ or ‘metaloplastyka.’ *Metaloplastyka*, which was not just a sculpture but a series of works about the creation of the sculpture, focused on a process which moved from ideas to accidents to sketches then to the monumental. I wanted to show how one might come to a monumental finished piece through a rather unmonumental series of steps.

*Metaloplastyka* translates as metal craftsmanship and was the term for a tradition of artisanal work from Poland which was very popular in the 1950s and 1960s. In this era, dominated by the mass production of the communist command economy, *metaloplastyka* was the only form of handmade furniture and household objects available.

I translated the international modernist sculptural brand – the Calder Mobile – into a handcrafted autobiographical statement.

KO: When I attempt to understand aspects that are oblique and even obfuscated, I find that I need to invent a translation – a translation that is more a series of mistranslations that fail to cohere into a single meaning. I can understand something from ‘rewolucja’ which may be ‘revolution’, but the specific connotations of the word are left open. From the perspective of Polish ‘local knowledge’ and/or your ‘self knowledge’, the connotations are highly charged with specific meanings, but I am left spinning. This spinning may be infuriating to some people, but I

think that this part of the strength of your work. It jams up against ideologies of ‘oneness’ and ‘closeness’ in the ‘global community’ while at the same time opening up a new aesthetic of undecidability and multiplicity. Whereas the ‘minor literature’ of Kafka found “linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape”<sup>viii</sup> to “send the major language racing,”<sup>ix</sup> your work emerges out of and intervenes in a ‘globe’ in which inside/outside relationships are supposedly being made obsolete – or at least seriously brought into question. Could you talk about the complex of languages, histories, political shifts – the ‘experience’ in which your aesthetic is formed?

PO: When I was 16, the way history was taught in schools in Poland changed radically. Because of failed communism, our school professors told us to throw away the world history we had learned up until that point, and we were forced to realize that history had been taught from the ‘wrong’ point of view. And then we got brand new history books, we started learning English and German, and they fired the Russian teacher.

Perhaps another cultural shift was when I was in grade school and then in high school, moving back and forth between Poland and America. I learned about different cultural and regional-specific approaches to teaching. This made me realize how context defines how and what you learn. I was drawn to the idea of invented history, of pulling things from the past to create my own language, through mixing experiences of both the East and West. It’s a way of fantasizing

about the past. This is why I started to make use of images from certain magazines from the 1960s and 1970s – for example, *Ameryka*, an official American state-sponsored publication that glamorized the US to an Eastern readership, and the Polish women's magazine *Ty I Ja*. I could use them to present visions of an idealized history in a subjective rather than analytical way.

LMcK: Paulina and I started working together when we organized the show together in Sopot.<sup>x</sup> The act of organizing and arranging the works slipped into working together, literally just painting together in the same spot on the wall, deciding who should do what. From the start it was not collaboration for its own sake but a kind of pragmatic problem-solving / labor-saving so we could express a bit more clearly what we wanted to say, and were perhaps unable to say on our own.

From what I understand, it appears that formally your work is dissimilar, although I'm presuming there is common ground since you studied together and have shared many of the same experiences. It's actually surprising how as a unit in contrast to each other you seem to prove the genetic providence of certain types of production: Nick, you as the German making gestural paintings; Ken, the American, treating subjects with a theoretical rigor. I only say this because I want to mention what a pleasure it can be to talk with you both together, since you have such different approaches and perspectives, anything but a 'united front,' which seems productive in collaboration.

NM: It was long after our first meeting that Ken and I started to work collaboratively. The intricacy and depth of feeling in Ken's conceptual/autobiographical approach struck me from the very beginning, as much as the lack of comfort his work produces. Then, as now, he works with video and photography, while I work with drawing and installation in a more intuitive way, so I think it was the 'incompatibility' of media and sensibilities that stalled us from working together. I 'acted' in some of his videos, cast for my awkward delivery, and I remember conversations from that time spinning around 'muse' and 'audience,' and more consistently around our different interests in gay and feminist lineages. Ken probably realized much earlier that these persistent conversations were another kind of artwork.

With regard to art I find the idea of 'united front' limiting, conservative. At the same time, there are some things that can only be said together. What I value in collaboration, the quality that gives it a real-time dynamic is that it discontinues ossification, containment, the smoothing out of differences and complications. Generally, I react to our collaborative pieces with surprise and even discomfort because they are so foreign and still somehow implicated in my own work. I know from people who've seen our projects that they can't assimilate them into our individual practices, which continues to be interesting to me, this coming together that opens up a new zone. I think we're both interested in transmitting the experience of an encounter without agreement, as a self-elaborating, changing process. So, to answer your question, our projects begin with and take as their subject a conversation, or several overlaid conversations that recur.

KO: I just recently saw that classic movie, *The Way We Were* (1973), with Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford. Have you seen it? Here's a quick summary of the dynamics of their relationship (from my very warped Barbra Streisand fan viewpoint). Streisand is a middle-class Jewish communist activist college student who falls in love with the most perfectly upper-class WASP male student in her college, Redford. He doesn't care about her, but eventually (after being a soldier in WW II, etc.) falls in love with her because she is so weird and so dedicated to him. The differences between them produce a desire that hinges on the inevitable failure of their relationship. Theirs is a love which tries and tries, but eventually cannot mesh with his professional life. So after much juicy angst-ridden drama, political, social and economic forces realign desire along genetically 'pure' and 'logical' strains: they split up to pursue lives more fitting to their predestinies. At the end of the film, there is a moment of pure conformist propaganda: They meet by chance near Central Park. Streisand is, once again, handing out left-wing political pamphlets and Redford is on his way to some upper-class 'society' function across the street. He asks his date (or new wife?) to meet him inside while he talks to Barbra for a second. There is a tease that they will get back together again – it's quickly suffocated. They both accept that 'difference' is the way things are, that they should move on, forever separate, clinging only to the bittersweet memory of 'the way we were.' They have fit into and are happy to fulfill the original trajectory of their societal roles, successfully sublimating their attempted diversion into a faint tingling memory. And then there is, of course, the baby they produced together... It's so terrible! But I discuss it because I hadn't previously really understood the 'problem' of

coming from different backgrounds! I find it difficult to understand ‘difference’ and ‘similarity’ in a logical way; the divisions just don’t make sense to me. (Even though I can, intellectually, tell what these divisions are ‘supposed to be,’ the whole system feels counter-intuitive).

For me the question is not how or why people with such ‘different’ perspectives or visual backgrounds chose to be together or do things together, but why anyone would want to be around a bunch of self-replications. Isn’t that just totally boring? I see issues of ‘united front’ as strategically important when dealing with conservative forces and institutions (the market, corporate administrative bodies, the law, etc.) that only take something seriously when a ‘united front’ is presented. And my lack of discipline really makes shutting up and letting these strategic maneuvers happen virtually impossible for me... I don’t see collaboration as about individuals submitting to a group body; I think the way people throw around the word ‘collective’ these days is outrageous. (Only Bernadette Corporation<sup>xi</sup> seems to get the connection between ‘collective’ production and corporate identity.) For me, collaborative art practices generate and collect multiple gestures, ideas, failures, psychologies, intentions, dialogues, attempts, histories, bitter fights, etc., over time; but more than that, the act of collaboration hatches multiplicities that seem to appear ‘out of thin air.’ There’s something magical about it: perhaps because the act of collaboration can subvert an individual artist’s ability to control meaning? I enjoy losing control over meaning, but can also understand how this could cause a lot of anxiety...



NM: Even though you work in the same media, it's clear to me that your collaboration is not about commonality but about emphasizing differences and playing with the curiosity you inspire in each other.

PO: Often the work was created in a parallel sense by simply asking each other to pull certain images or things that we like. We gathered ideas from different places, and each idea led to another idea, and inspired the next one. This process amplifies and celebrates differences rather than similarities. When one walked into the *Nova Popularna* bar or saw the wall paintings in the Gdansk shipyard, one saw motifs typical of each of our styles.

LMcK: I often forget that despite the visibility of contrast in our collaboration, it is built upon strong commonality and it's because of this that it works.

We encouraged in each other the interest in championing what we considered idiosyncratic to our condition and experience of culture; our backgrounds may be different but the method of locating meaning and exploiting it is shared.

Despite being from, and identifying with marginal cities, we have both traveled widely and dealt with a variety of working situations from a young age. We were both precocious, and part of our art education was through alternative scenes and the creation of identity, which continues to be a form of shorthand in how we form ideas together.

Difference in collaboration facilitates something that we feel must be legitimized. In my case the interest in underground networks under ‘Actual Existing Socialism’ became more than mere tourism if I was collaborating with someone from Gdansk who had experienced this directly.

Do you feel this applies to you too?

KO: The question of ‘difference’ is a hard one for me. I am wary of the ways in which the concept has been used, especially when it unconsciously increases the rigidity or essential nature of borders and, in effect, prohibits movement, or continually reinscribes hierarchies while attempting to redefine them. But at least in terms of our discussion here, I think we are attempting to break open the related artistic models of the individual artist; the group of people (‘collective’) who act like an individual artist (often under a single name); or the ‘movement’ that shares a coherent set of ideologies, beliefs, aesthetic principles – all of these ‘bodies’ that act like the bodies we already know (from individual to governmental). Perhaps it is possible when moving back and forth between individual and collaborative practices to corrupt (in a positive sense) the smooth functioning of these monotonous artistic models. For example, I find that I bring ‘source’ material to the surface of my ‘individual’ working process – I treat it collaboratively rather than as something ‘I’ am subsuming into ‘my’ work. This is a key difference from the ‘appropriation artists’ who, while working with questions of ‘authorship,’ were interested in repetition rather than collaboration.

NM: What does collaboration allow you do to?

PO: Collaboration made me realize the possibility of layering images and meanings, so the directness of source material fades away. The result is multiple interpretations, not simply one definition of the work. My earlier paintings had been created by falling in love with a picture and by altering it into a painting which gives the image a second life. When we started the first wall paintings, specifically the one in the Gdansk shipyards, Lucy and I basically layered favorite ready-made typical mural images from both of our backgrounds. For example, we used iconic graffiti lettering, Fachwerk, or Polish fashion advertising symbols from the 1960s. From then on, I started to approach art-making like a collage, pulling images from different places. I started collaborations with other artists quite spontaneously, to see where the work would lead. There's a double collage – not only the familiar construction of the work through the arrangement of different elements but also, quite literally, a collage of artists. With Lucy, the most structured example of collaboration was the *Nova Popularna* bar, which was not even about making a 'work of art,' but about creating a salon-in-process. The collaboration became about practicality or the division of roles in order to successfully make an operating project. I wanted to mention that in our first meeting, I discovered we shared a common approach to painting: a conceptual attitude towards figuration. Coming from a classical education as a painter, it was very unusual to be working in this medium with the freedom of references that Lucy and I shared. Both of us were interested in referencing fashion, applied arts, sign painting and murals.

Another quality our work took on was that of ‘mutual mutation’: the transformation of each other’s work into a joint piece. The *Oblique Composition* was first a small painting of a woman walking in her bathing suit next to an oblique large shape. The three performance manifestations of *Oblique Composition* took on different shapes but had things in common such as a female protagonist, the act of mimicry, and a celebration of abstraction. The final video of *Oblique Composition III* had a loose moody feeling like one of the Chantal Akerman films. One can watch it in a loop. For me it was a celebration of female friendship and of contemplating work together.

NM: Sometimes we treat ourselves very self-consciously as protagonists in our work, for example in the photo series where we’re walking around Sanssoucci and the edutainment ‘Biosphäre’ in Potsdam. I notice with you and Paulina a kind of role-play with invented archetypes and different ways of casting yourselves and each other in the situations you establish. This aspect of dramaturgy seems to run consistently through your work, could you talk about that?

LMcK: The female best friend double act is depicted and documented with varying degrees of sympathy to real women – whether that’s the exploitative and banal Tatu, or Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas with their avant-garde pedigree. In-between you have things like Eric Rohmer’s questionable but completely successful rendering of female friendship in women like Renette

and Mirabelle – and everyone else, for instance Strawberry Switchblade<sup>xii</sup>, Cobra Killer<sup>xiii</sup>, *Céline et Julie vont en bateau*<sup>xiv</sup>, *Maries I and II in Daisies*<sup>xv</sup> and *J'ai faim, j'ai froid* by Chantal Akerman<sup>xvi</sup>.

Strategically we have relied on the double act; it's been useful in a practical sense to get things done (good cop, bad cop) but our affinity with it lies conceptually in its visual and anecdotal history. What value is placed on female solidarity in the art world outside of theory and academia?

[to NM and KO] What is your own relation to this, the fictions that arise out of real friendship?

NM: The only useful model I can think of in the conundrum of giving outlines to our friendship, or how we enact it, has been *Bouvard and Pécuchet*<sup>xvii</sup>; loosely, the episodic misadventure.

Around the time of our first project together we visited a series of two-person exhibitions at the Neuen Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst in Berlin called *Partnerschaften* focusing on pairs of gay men, artists who had shared part of a life together. If I remember correctly, it was the first time their works were shown together, installed as fully realized independent bodies, so what came through wasn't really about direct influence, but about something not necessarily palpable in the individual works. It was very revealing in that context to sense the relationship – to see the work framed against it.

PO: Have you ever considered redoing or reconstructing one of your past collaborations? And what new forms would it take?

KO: For me, the ‘artwork’ of the collaboration is located in conversation; the conversation is the ‘pure’ form. But conversations are formations within specific conjunctures that become flattened out when all that remains are the words, the photographs, the recorded sound – but there are also the memories, individual and collective, that continue to ‘live’ with you, and with performance-based practice personal memories have often been considered the ‘real’ documentation... The question becomes how do you present, or represent, or reconstruct ‘this’? How do you move from love to aesthetics?

I think it becomes generative to think in terms of translation rather than representation or reconstruction; there is often an overinvestment in a particular understanding of the context of redoing that causes certain aspects to overwhelm and simplify the complexity of the first articulation. One of the most brilliant recreations I’ve ever seen is in the collaborative video *Rainer Variations*, 2002 by Yvonne Rainer, Richard Move, Charles Atlas and Kathleen Chalfant. In part of it, Rainer attempts to teach her choreography *Trio A* to a drag-queen incarnation of Martha Graham. While this can be seen flatly as a campy reconstruction of a ‘classic,’ I think it is more significantly viewed as the process of attempting to translate from Judson Church via Rainer’s lesbian aesthetics to Drag-Queen Martha Graham – which is, of course, an impossible translation.

In my own video work, my starting point is often personal – and eventually collective– reverberations from significant encounters with cultural products. For clarity’s sake, I’ll highlight in the title of the video a main text as the ‘central’ text – but this is just a convenient fiction, something that gives the viewer an entry point. When I ‘remade’ Larry Clark’s film *Kids* – as some people described the video – what was happening was much less limited and hopefully more interesting than ‘remaking.’ I was translating a set of reactions, experiences and discourses related to the film through my own experience of hipster New York; and then retranslating that through the bodies and voices of two of my friends who were also wrestling with images of themselves and the hyped-up city.

PO: Nick, how do you use reference in your work?

NM: I work to put the formation of my sensibility and a trail of influences in the foreground. When Americans tell me my work is ‘so European’ I don’t know if I can respond; for one, it’s kind of an aromatic valuation, and I’ve never felt overwhelmingly German or American, though I grew up in both places – I don’t want to give relevance to that kind of rigidity. But I do have a sort of forked process, references appear mediated, I work them over generation after generation until I have managed to translate them somehow. Often when I’m drawing it really feels like I’m trying to write something down, or trying to find ways to unbalance ideas I cherish, which has a lot to do with distance, frames of reference, and sentiments out of reach being brought into

relation with one another. When Ken and I work together the use of reference is again highly subjective, but tends to dissolve in the process. Our recording of Virgil Thomson's musical *Portrait of Florine Stettheimer* (1943) started with the surprise of 'discovering' the sheet music printed amid the flow of found and staged pictures, texts, and collages that make up the 'Americana Fantastica' issue of *View* magazine. The whole network of artists the magazine discloses gave a sudden view with a gasp into this world of people working together and alongside each other across disciplines in the New York of the 1940s. Beyond a curiosity for both Stettheimer and Thompson, I was struck by the inherent sweetness of the gesture, the musical portrait, and it seemed to both of us that the only way to open it up, or to see through it, would be to play the piece. So we made a vinyl recording of each of us playing *Portrait of Florine Stettheimer* on the piano for the first time; Ken's version holds up musically, whereas side B testifies to my miserable sight-reading: it's a rendition full of silences, invented chords, erratic tempos. With this piece and with others, the interpretation simultaneously breaks down and opens up. There's an inability to play the material, which represents the warping that comes with historical distance, but over that are moments of sincere and accidental invention, which the distance makes room for.

KO: And beyond the recording of the piece, even up to the moment of first exhibiting the LP, there was constant disagreement between us about which side was a better translation of the experience of the encounter. Remember, Nick, how at the opening you kept on trying to make



sure my side was always playing and I tried to make sure yours was? We each believed the other to be more interesting.

Do you, Lucy and Paulina, have this ‘thing’ happen when you are collaborating? I feel it as a sense of shifting onto the other – no, that is probably too overstated. It’s a significant phenomenon, but it’s intimate, slight, subtle.

PO: By the time that we have finished a collaborative work our respective contributions have become intertwined. It is difficult to compare them independently. When we are not working together, we keep an eye on each other’s work, comment on it and I guess inspire each other.

LMcK: If it’s offered, it’s hard to resist passing the responsibility onto someone else!

KO: Yes, well, but seriously, I think something happens in this shifting of responsibility on an intimate scale that is important. It’s something that is often masked when a ‘consensus’ is reached in the ‘final’ presentation. There are ways in which we simultaneously shift responsibility onto each other – and I think it is inaccurate to describe this as ‘sharing’ responsibility because it produces a mutual responsibility that is not based on agreement.

NM: While in your collaborative projects you may be painting simultaneously, or delegating tasks to get the job done, on your own you’ll often rip each other off. I’m interested in what

happens when you knock each other's styles, while paying tribute to the mutual influence that grows out of your friendship and collaboration. How do your individual works continue in their own ways the interior dialogue of the collaboration? How do you feel about giving up control?

PO: Those two questions answer each other. Giving up control means permitting the possibility of being stimulated by each other. Sometimes we work so closely together that the concept of sole ownership evaporates. By giving up control you stop being precious and restrained. You permit yourself to learn from one another. The idea of the rip-off is interesting in itself now, when there is so much interest in copyrights, appropriation and intellectual property. In both of our work there is so much of a 'ready-made' aspect. We are free to use each other's images and ideas as ready-mades, as much as the ideas and images of others.

LMcK: The collaboration works and continues because there is a free exchange of influence and an honesty about it. It creates a haven from the paranoia which surrounds intellectual property, and makes possible events like Paulina's show in Braunschweig, which had an audioguide – a short piece of fiction I had written for her – as its 'soundtrack'.

I have no idea how much is visible in our work to anyone other than us. For instance the use of Vogue cigarette packaging has great personal significance for us, but I've no idea how this is picked up by our audience.

KO: At any moment of an exhibition, it seems – particularly with the fluid ways in which you work – an artwork is being recreated by context. How do you see *Oblique Composition III* translating into the Goetz Collection?

LMcK: The showing of *Oblique Composition III* in this setting is not as natural as previous settings, but as usual, exhibiting is about dealing with a certain set of boundaries and considerations, in this case managing a disparate group of works. We are fortunate that objects associated with the film will also be present, and we will have the opportunity to spend time in the building reconfiguring them to suit this situation. As I have mentioned before, the film came about as a solution to another problem; I consider it a component. That means it's not shackled to itself.

Ken Okiishi (born 1978, Ames, Iowa) lives and works in New York.

Nick Mauss (born 1980, New York, New York) lives and works in New York.

Ken and Nick met while studying fine art at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York, and started collaborating while living together in Berlin from 2001-2002.

<sup>i</sup> *Art Now: Lucy McKenzie*, Tate Britain, London, 20.09.–09.11.2003.

<sup>ii</sup> *Nova Populrana* was a project between Paulina Olowska and Lucy McKenzie, organized with the help of Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw, Poland in 2003.

<sup>iii</sup> Jacques Rancière: *The Distribution of the Sensible: Politics and Aesthetics*, in: Jacques Rancière: *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill, New York 2006, p. 45.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> *Heavy Duty*, Inverleith House, Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh, 14.04.–27.05.2001.

- <sup>vi</sup> For the exhibition *Dream of Provincial Girl* Lucy McKenzie and Paulina Olowska worked together with Caishlan Herd for example.
- <sup>vii</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis 1987, p.105.
- <sup>viii</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan, in *Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 30, Minneapolis 1986, p. 27.
- <sup>ix</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis 1987, p.105.
- <sup>x</sup> *Dream of Provincial Girl*, Apartment space, Sopot, 22.02.–15.03.2000.
- <sup>xi</sup> The Bernadette Corporation is a collective of artists founded in 1994. See: <http://www.bernadettecorporation.com>
- <sup>xii</sup> Strawberry Switchblade was a Scottish indie pop rock female duo formed in Glasgow in 1981. See: <http://www.strawberryswitchblade.net>
- <sup>xiii</sup> The band Cobra Killer is a duo from Berlin associated with the Digital hardcore movement. See: <http://www.cobra-killer.org>
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Céline and Julie Go Boating: Phantom Ladies over Paris (Céline et Julie vont en bateau)* is a film by French film director Jacques Rivette (\*1928) from 1974.
- <sup>xv</sup> *Daisies (Sedmikrasky)* is a film by Czech director Věra Chytilová (\*1929) from 1966.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *J'ai faim, j'ai froid (I am hungry, I am cold)* is a short film by Belgian filmmaker and director Chantal Akerman (\*1950) from 1984.
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Bouvard et Pécuchet* are characters of an unfinished satirical work by Gustave Flaubert, published after his death in 1881.