

LUTZ BACHER: IN



PIECES AND ALL AT ONCE

BY ANDREW BERARDINI



View of Lutz Bacher's exhibition "ODO,"
2008, showing a continuous line of
original and appropriated photographs.
Courtesy Ratio 3, San Francisco.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW

A solo show by Lutz Bacher, at Alex
Zachary Peter Currie, New York, Mar. 3-31. She is
also in the Whitney Biennial, through May 27.



*No adventure is directly created for us
from part of the mass of legends drawn
of the whole special class of history*



... do that illuminate moments



*Their divergent emotions neutralize each other and reinforce their solid environ-
ment of boredom. [p. 32]*



**Every night fifty million women
get into bed to masturbate, think-
ing of sex with Marlon Brando.**



*Regardless of its subject matter, the cinema presents heroes and exemplary conduct
modeled on the same old pattern as the rulers. [p. 34]*



*Nothing of importance has ever be-
not even one like that of the age of
the apostles and the first century of
sons of a thousand. [p. 133]*



... military units, they must



I don't have to kiss his ass.



*I have sometimes been reproached — wrongly, I believe — for making difficult
film. Now I am actually going to make one. [p. 149]*



*Here was the abode of the ancient king of Wu. Grass now grows peacefully on its
ruins. There, the vast palace of the Yin, once so splendid and so beautiful. All this is
gone forever — as the people scurrying conceals slips away. [p. 153]*

Bay Area artist Lutz Bacher is receiving wider art-world attention after decades of cult accolades, but her work stubbornly resists characterization.

HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED to view the work of Lutz Bacher? This pseudonymous artist who so weirdly plays with so many kinds of images, changing her exhibitions midstream and always slinking into more ambiguity, more noise, more dis-comforting slippages? Her work, though frequently driven by tactical humor, has an unexpectedly heartbreaking resonance. How are we writers supposed to assemble all the fragmentary information into a narrative, an artist, summarizing it in a short few words so that the astute reader can remark to others, "I now understand the work of Lutz Bacher?"

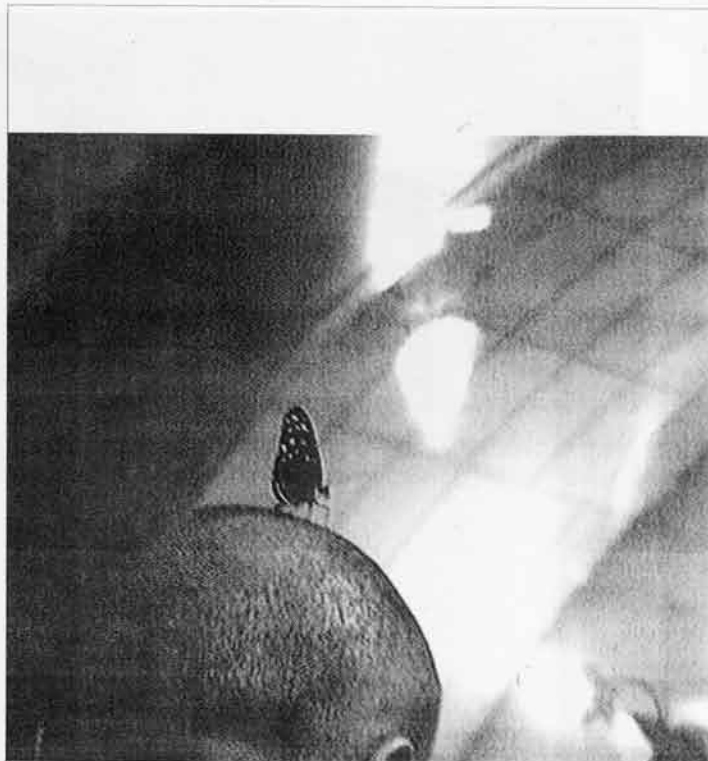
I might be reluctant to explain the work to you, but Bacher doesn't seem to want to, either. The press release for her 2008 exhibition at Ratio 3 in San Francisco consisted of a recipe for butterscotch pudding, and the artist is evasive in many other ways as well. It's easier to be told how to see than to actually see, and Bacher, it seems, wants us to see for ourselves.

Ever since her career began in the 1970s, this Bay Area artist has drawn upon fragmentary information from popular culture and her own life to produce works that play with the fungibility of identity and the all-around trickiness of images. In artist's books, installations, sculptures, videos, photographs, paintings and screenprints, Bacher uses images and objects in a physical, visceral manner. Her closed-circuit anarchy always calls authority—especially her own—into question. Desire and entropy happily shape her work.

Meaning is situational and, unstuck, it can evolve, change, deteriorate. I love Bacher's distressed pictures of politicians and celebrities wisecracking and shit-talking: a concerned looking Jane Fonda saying "I'm really weird. I'm really all fucked up," or a smirking Henry Kissinger stating in a cartoon speech bubble, "The illegal we do immediately; the unconstitutional takes longer." (Both are from Bacher's series "Jokes," 1987-88.) We can't always be sure if Bacher is making up their remarks, if they're real quotes or just sharp witticisms. I love how fugitive Bacher's prints are, how she crumpled or buried each of them before they were framed. Later in her career she sent her pictures through the rough repro-graphics of the photocopier, and each of her videos crackles with (in the artist's own words) "sporadic signal glitches, stoppages, tracking problems, burnouts and other artefacts of a corrupted or damaged videotape."

But images aren't the only fugitives. There are also the numerous interviews that Bacher has conducted over the years, which, as published, have become a genre in themselves. In them, all the nonsense of speech that our ear filters out is included, as well as accidents of transcription—another kind of noise. Either way, the interviews lurch and trip, pause and stutter, as the speakers look for the right phrase, or change conceptual streams. Perhaps they stumble out of shyness, perhaps mendacity, each word measured and then recalled and remeasured: they know they're being recorded.

The interviews ostensibly address the loaded question, "Do You Love Me?" That phrase has been recycled as a title



THE FOLLOWING INTERVIEWS HAVE
BEEN & EDITED FOR SPACE + CLARITY

Above, page from Bacher's artist's book *Do You Love Me*, 2012. Courtesy Primary Information.

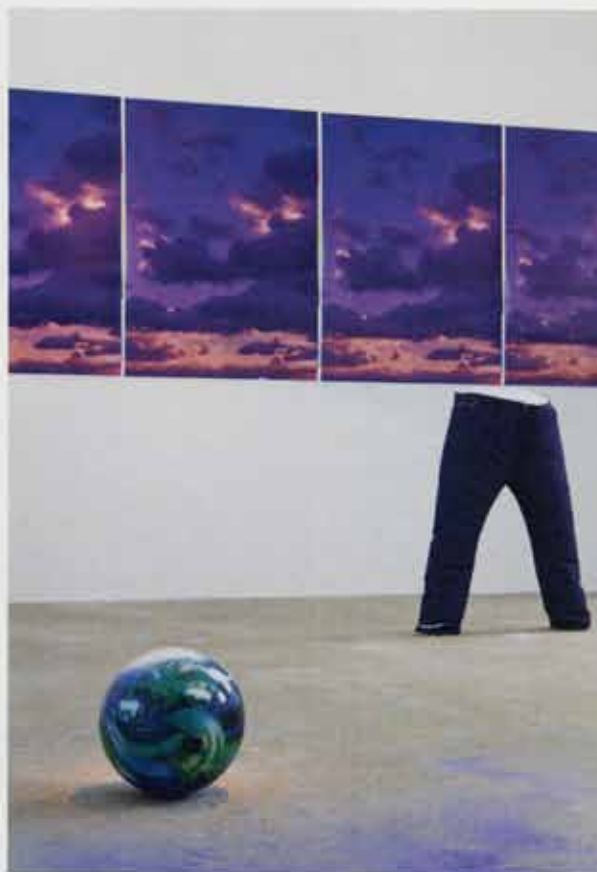
Opposite, view of the exhibition "Spill," 2008, showing *Marlon Brando* and *Jimmy Carter* from the "Jokes" series (1987-88), at the Contemporary Art Museum, St. Louis. Courtesy Alex Zachary Peter Currie, New York.

more than a few times in the artist's work, and names her most recent artist's book, published by Primary Information in New York, which collects transcripts of interviews (interspersed with seemingly random imagery) in which Bacher asks a variety of people to talk about her and her work. The "Me" of "Do You Love Me?" is, of course, the artist, though in the many interviews she never actually asks that specific question. Her queries run more along the lines of: "How did we meet? What do you think I'm like? Am I a diva?" Most of the time, the questions aren't canned, but fresh, always drawing her subject out: "What do you mean by . . . ?"

...the creation of a world that ...
...the ...
...the ...



BACHER'S WORK PLAYS WITH
THE FUNGIBILITY OF IDENTITY AND THE
ALL-AROUND TRICKINESS OF IMAGES.



This spread, two views of the exhibition "Do You Love Me?," 2009, at the Kunstverein Munich. Courtesy Alex Zachary Peter Currie.

Bacher just lets her subjects talk, allowing them to reveal more of themselves, really, than any clear truth about the artist or her work. The interviews are almost frustratingly unreadable, or just readable enough, and then the conversants pause and stutter, and the noise creeps in.

I think that the hyper-fidelity to the interviewees' stumbles and pauses and change-ups, and the mistakes of transcription, and all the noise of the images being translated through one machine or another, seem natural. Yes, natural. Naturalism is a kind of put-on, realism another kind of fiction.

AS A HOST OF HER FRIENDS and colleagues has found out in sundry interviews, describing Bacher's work is difficult. In each exhibition, she carefully arranges seemingly disparate objects and images, each time making them interact in new ways. Composed of cultural and personal detritus, the assemblies might be confusing, except that there is something distinctly funny and strange about them. Their language is too familiar to be alienating and too unfamiliar to dismiss.

In the shifting terrain of Bacher's endeavors, exhibitions of the same work can be quite different, so let's take a single one as a point of reference. Her show at the Kunstverein Munich in 2009—another project titled "Do You Love Me?"—had 22 works in it. A plastic army tank crawled on the wall where the show's title, in vinyl, appeared; scraps of a huge car advertisement covered another wall, in front of which were posted two incredibly detailed and, well, disturbingly ripped naked male mannequins; not far off stood a huge pair of disembodied jeans stuffed with tiny foam balls;

BACHER'S MIXTURE OF BODIES AND IDEAS, POP AND PERSONAL, FEELS ENTIRELY RELEVANT TO PROBLEMS IN ART AND LIFE NOW.



This spread, two views of the exhibition "Lutz Bacher," 2011. Courtesy Cabinet, London.

Above, *Baseballs*, 2009, 50 used baseballs.

Opposite, *The Road* (on wall), 2009, pigment prints mounted on dibond; *Redwood* (center), 2010-11, bark, plywood, foam and hardware; and *Woodland* (center right), 2010, painted wood mannequin with nylon clothing and burlap.

and behind that, mounted on the wall, a series of identical photographs of lavender sunsets. Cardboard cutouts of the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz* stood in a gallery with the Tin Man's finger seemingly pointing out a giant naked male pincushion doll displayed on a table with uneven legs. The doll is an oversize version of the ones used by children to show authorities how they might have been sexually abused. Thus the doll, for all its benign boyish looks, is, unsettlingly, anatomically correct.

There's a special challenge in making connections among these disparate objects. There is the creepy sexuality, the kitschiness, the double-dip pop references. The tank and anatomical doll are outsize toys that hint at violence, and the car ad feels too big for the gallery, though it is the ad's actual size. Filled with foam balls, the pants stand seemingly ready to collapse, leak or fall to pieces at any minute. All the sizes feel slightly off; everything looks like it's hanging a bit precariously. There's always something a little satisfying in putting together a puzzle or handily solving a whodunit—and there are mysteries that seem to be waiting for solution in each of Bacher's installations. All the things in her shows seem intimate and uncanny but are always infused with humor and sexiness, so that unraveling their intricacies never feels like a dry exercise in smart-set theoretical twaddle. With their confluence of sex, violence and commerce simmering beneath the surface, they conjure childhood with its own confluence of sex, violence and commerce always prowling beneath the surface. These are just stabs: in this whodunit we can never be sure who actually did it.

Though Bacher has had a three-decade career, it's only in the last few years that she's migrated from cult status to something more mainstream. Some of her most recent exhibitions—her show in 2011, for example, at London's Cabinet gallery, in which one room presented a scatter piece of used baseballs and another a tableau that included photos of a rural highway, a shaggy tree trunk and a mannequin in woodland camouflage—have been particularly beautiful. There has been a wave of female artists from the '60s and '70s recently receiving late-career revivals for a host of reasons, including Dorothy Iannone, Simone Forti and Barbara T. Smith, to name only a few. Their work, like Bacher's, speaks to our particular moment better than that of their peers who hit it big at the time. Bacher's mixture of bodies and ideas, pop and personal, while always remaining somehow elusive, feels entirely relevant to problems in art and life now. I can imagine a hard-headed '70s art world filled with Minimalists and later on Pictures Generation wunderkinder who might have dismissed her oeuvre as not serious enough, or too messy, and dinner-party Neo-Expressionists in the '80s writing it off as too smart. But now, it seems, we like things both messy and smart. With the meaning of art regularly dictated to us by press releases and often art critics, it can be a relief to just get a recipe for butterscotch pudding. □

¹ Unpublished statement from 1998/2000, quoted in Lia Gangitano, "My Secret Life," *Afterall* 17, Spring 2008, at afterall.org. Gangitano was the curator of Lutz Bacher's 2009 exhibition "My Secret Life," at MoMA PS1, New York.

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