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In Jean Genet's 1956 play, *The Balcony*, The Chief of Police despairingly asks two women in an exclusive brothel, Carmen and Irma, whether or not any of the customers have desired to play his role. "I ask you, do I exist?" inquires the Chief of Police. "You do not," answers Irma. "What! Not yet?" he exclaims frantically: "Are there no simulations?" "Simulations?" repeats Carmen. Idiot! Yes! Simulations of the Chief of the Police?" To which Irma responds: "No. The time is not yet right, my dear. Your function has not yet been sufficiently recognized as worthy of becoming an image/fantasy to console dreamers."

Written half a century ago, Genet's drama concerns the complex relationship between fantasy, mimesis, role-playing and masquerade. The playwright addresses how performance serves both to found and legitimate subject positions in society. Or to put it slightly differently—it's only when someone or something is represented or becomes a sign of itself, that it achieves recognition and significance. By desiring that others simulate his role as "Chief of Police," the actual Chief of Police seeks to affirm, buttress and aggrandize his identity.

Genet's play is set at the turn of the century. Since then of course, questions about the legitimacy of the role of policemen have taken many turns. However, fantasies continue to be played out, even if the particular roles have changed. My presentation today will explore the recent proliferation of video works in which artists validate their particular practice by publicly identifying with an earlier artist and constructing a genealogy for their own work. For the purposes of brevity, I'll limit myself to discussing three specific video projects,

though I want to emphasize that there are many others in which similar issues prevail. The video projects upon which I'll focus are Renée Green's *Partially Buried* of 1996; Christian Philip Müller's *Im Geschmack der Zeit* of 2003, and Andrea Fraser's *Kunst Muss Hängen* of 2001. Questions that I want to grapple with include: What are the broader implications of these art historical and genealogical maneuvers? Are the lines between art and documentary "reality" entirely blurred or merely reconfigured in these projects? And what does the filial and genealogical association desired and indeed established by the younger artist do for both?

Let me briefly describe these works for those who are not familiar with them. *Partially Buried* is a multi-layered project that summons several overlapping spheres of influence: the United States in the 1960s-1970s, the reception of Robert Smithson, African American culture, and contemporary critical theory. Initially, the video constituted just one part of a much larger environment, which included photographs, magazines, records, recordings and other supporting texts. But with the dismantling of the installation, the videotape component has come to be exhibited on its own, as a work in its own right. Green's voice guides the narration as she documents her journey from New York City to Kent State University in Ohio, the site of Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* of 1970. The artist's childhood memories—her mother was a student at Kent State University in 1970—add a personal layer to the journey. *Partially Buried* opens with video footage taken from the front seat on the passenger side of a car



whose driver, caught in profile, is Green herself. She drives through Shaker Heights, an upper middle class suburb of Cleveland, Ohio. A running text foregrounds the artist's presence in the third person: "this return," the text informs the reader, "induced the artist to examine her relationship to the genealogy of American artists as well as to attempt to imagine the currents that affected her before she was consciously aware of their capacity to shape." Much of the videotape concerns the politics of the late 1960s and early 70s, but also the history and practice of artists such as Smithson, Robert Morris, Yvonne Rainer, Hans Haacke and others. The tape also includes visits to archives and memorials, as well interviews between Green and native informers. Green thus inserts herself into this project in a double fictional role—one of an American artist, Renée Green, "but also one of an interviewer, researcher, and scholar seeking to put together a history—in other words a historian. Similar to filmmaker Alexander Kluge's fictional *Gabi Teichert*—a history teacher who sets forth, spade in hand, to dig up German history—Green embarks on an archaeological search for knowledge. She's clearly aware what she unearths will necessarily be incomplete, but trusts that it will still provide some sort of counter history or counter memory. In other words she seeks to construct an alternative history and to give voice to what has been silenced—to uncover and patch together pieces of a history whose immediate access is not easily accessible in the present. Furthermore, she's aware of how her contemporary condition affects her production of history. As she explains in a 1997 interview, "My idea of history is as an activity reflecting lived lives which relates to something that is very present. It's not something different." The past is always determined by our present condition, which undermines the "truth-bearing" role of the investigator or historian, since it's ever warped by one's own subjectivity that threatens to overshadow and color any objective search.

In Müller's *Im Geschmack der Zeit*, the videotape again is part of a more complex ensemble. It's played on a monitor in one corner of the installation. On it we see the artist clad in a black tee-shirt and gesturing in front of the Klingenbergstalsperre reservoir in Sachsen designed by the architect Hans Poelzig. Clutching a microphone in one hand and carrying a large, overstuffed briefcase in the other, this same figure will preside over a twenty-minute-long architectural tour of Poelzig's structures in Poland and Germany. In relative terms, the figure of the announcer remains small throughout this intriguing excursion, especially when contrasted to the featured buildings that threaten at times to overshadow his diminutive form. Occasionally, he stops to read passages about Poelzig and the architect's creative accomplishments from several books. Müller was commissioned by an association led by Berlin's Poelzig Babylon-Ensemble around the Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in 2002 to produce a work that explicitly focuses on the Berlin born architect. However *Im Geschmack der Zeit* goes considerably beyond the character of Poelzig, putting the architect's persona into the service of a history of the plaza and, more generally, of Germany and Europe in the twentieth century. The videotape depicts Müller in his initial phase of research for this project seeking to uncover as much about Poelzig's life as possible. He travels to architectural sites and archives, and interviews family members as he investigates the life of the mercurial



architect. What emerges is more than just a biography of Poelzig, for in adopting the role of historian, Müller says as much about himself as artist as about historical texts.

In each of these videotapes Müller and Green not only present certain histories—US protest during the Vietnam War era, and Weimar urban development—but also dialogically insert their own experiences and artistic practice into the historical fabric and construct a genealogy. The established historical and genealogical narratives are thereby at once challenged, unsettled, and unraveled by the artist, who recasts them in the present from a personal perspective. This will to history or this historicizing impulse is of course not new and is part of a more widespread phenomenon. However, what intrigues me about these particular projects is the role that *performance* plays within the historical imaginary. For unlike say Johann Grimonprez's *dial H-I-S-T-O-R-Y* of 1997, a trip through the media footage of airplane highjacking, or Dan Graham's *Rock my Religion* of 1984, a genealogy of rock and roll from the Shakers to Patti Smith, where, in both of these projects, a distance remains between the subject of the work and its producer, in the videotapes of Green and Müller, the body and voice of the artist are inserted visually and aurally into the historical text. What, we might ask, are the implications of "playing" or to use Genet's language, producing the "simulation of" an historian?

But before we proceed it should also be emphasized that it's not just the role of historian that's being represented—more specifically, it's that of an art or architecture historian that Müller and Green assume. By projecting themselves in double roles as both artists and art historians, they inscribe themselves not only into their own art work, but also into a certain genealogy of artistic practice. To return to Genet it's the events of a revolution in the streets at the end of the play that transform the Chief of Police from his present condition into a historical subject worthy of representation. Both Green and Müller mimic or perform the role of art historian in order to produce a reading of history that's marked by *difference* and allows the spectator to see differently. The difference in *Partially Buried* is based in race and gender—the relationship of a contemporary African American female artist to a historical narrative that's been primarily constructed as white and male. In the case of Poelzig, Müller, through his videotape and presence, "camps" the architect (makes him "campy"), thus drawing attention to the heterosexual myth of the masculine disposition of the field of architecture. By re-presenting through their own bodies the representation of a history, an excess is produced that creates a perception of incongruity. This incongruity in the form of their performative roles affirms and represents subjectivities whose specific differences from the unmarked/tacitly universal (white, heterosexual male) have been censored out. Theirs becomes a politics of highlighting the socially and historically compromised nature of knowledge, and of making the invisible visible (again). By performing the part of the historian, both artists emphasize the important role of the latter in constructing the canon, and in determining who's included and who is not. Their appropriations and masquerades underscore the ideological underpinnings of any historical project or genealogy. History, from this point of view, is understood as a constructed narrative, rather than one in that's



inscribed in the order of things. The cultural context of the present in which the artist works: is just as important to understand as the cultural and historical context in which the precursor artists that they're in dialogue with operated in. For it is the context of their own perspective in the present that determines their interpretations of the past.

Now, if the methodology of the two projects that I just discussed is similar, Andrea Fraser's videotape, *Kunst Muss Hängen*, pushes the strategy of role-playing, mimicry and masquerade to another level. The videotape features Fraser re-performing a speech by the late German artist Martin Kippenberger. As Fraser explains in a recent statement, appropriately entitled "Performance Anxiety", Kippenberger was an important figure for her for a number of reasons. First, he has actually purchased several of her artworks, which didn't go without notice by German and indeed other European collectors. Secondly, and more importantly for our purposes here, was that Kippenberger had perfected the role of the self-loathing artist who hurls insults and vitriol at those in the institution of art who support his pathetic being and subject position. Many of his public speeches were excessive, and in Fraser's view, were "extraordinary acts of self-objectification that were at one comic, violent, pathetic and grotesque." Kippenberger "performed his position as an artist and embodied it at the very same time." So what happens when Fraser, an artist, performs a performance by another artist who is in turn performing the role of a pathetic "artist"? And where is the reality of this exchange located? Prior to attempting to untangle this slippery chain of representation, let me briefly describe Fraser's performance.

For *Kunst Muss Hängen*, Fraser costumed herself so as to mimetically resemble Kippenberger. The latter's speech, which was similar to many other public speeches that Kippenberger made in the 1980s-90s, was delivered to a public of art collectors, dealers, curators, critics and others in the contemporary art world on the occasion of a formal dinner following a gallery opening in Austria, in 1995. Fraser carefully studied a videotape documenting Kippenberger's intoxicated and highly obnoxious address and memorized and reproduced his words, gestures, inflections, intonations and movements perfectly. This strategy of impersonation in which Kippenberger's drunken mannerisms and vulgar disrespect of his art world audience and himself are meticulously represented implies—at least in the context of an art work—at once both affirmation and critique, suggesting that there's something going on here that is *more* than just an impersonation. By choosing to imitate Kippenberger at his best (or worst depending on one's perspective), in other words, by imitating Kippenberger while he performs the role of the "misogynous, homophobic, and xenophobic" artist, expressing his disdain of dealers, collectors and other art world patrons, Fraser signals her reverence for the legacy of the now-dead artist. But at the same time, her appropriation of Kippenberger's persona raises the question of her particular relationship to this past model; is her performance a stylistic confrontation, a contemporary recoding that establishes difference at the heart of similarity, or an imitation that adds an exclamation point to the relevance of Kippenberger's speech today? Indeed, Fraser's mimicry of Kippenberger inevitably recalls strategies of appropriation



developed by artists in a previous period, namely the late 1970s and early 1980s, typified by the re-photography of figures such as Sherrie Levine and Louise Lawler. Indeed, just as Levine's work "consisted of directly re-photographing from existing reproductions a series of photographs by several masters of photographic modernism and presenting them to the world as her own", Fraser directly re-performs Kippenberger's speech performed before an art public, before yet *another* art public. From this perspective, Fraser's re-performance upsets, just as much as Levine's pictures do, ideologies of authorship, originality, and subjective expression on which the integrity of artworks and artists alike are presumed to rest. And just as Levine's selection of stolen images was anything but arbitrary—always, as many have by now noticed, the work of canonized male photographers—the particular performance Fraser chooses to re-perform is ideologically dense (the misogynist, homophobic and xenophobic white male artist, abjectly addressing his public)). Thus both Levine and Fraser subject what they appropriate to a demystifying scrutiny enabled and mobilized by the very act of (re)placing them with quotation marks.

And yet, there's something very different about taking a picture of another artist's work and assuming the persona and performing the subjectivity of another artist. More than a prank, an ironic gambit, and one that's mechanically produced, at that, to perform somebody else's public identity is also to performatively constitute oneself by an act. And the sustained nature of the videotape—namely, the fact that unlike taking a photograph or photographs, to perform someone's identity within the context of a videotape is not a singular event, but a kind of sustained production—has a real effect on agency, especially since agency itself arises not from some chosen subject existing before the performance of identity, but rather from the "self" constituted by performance. Just as Kippenberger's identity is constructed through his public performance, so is Fraser's. Indeed, Fraser's painstaking restaging of Kippenberger's performance sutures her own personality so thoroughly with that of the performed subject that "artist and role appear to merge into a seamless whole"; Fraser's act of mimicry is so intense that it becomes difficult to distinguish the dancer from the dance. Unlike with Müller or Green's performances, Fraser so fully incorporates Kippenberger, her mimicry or simulation comes so close to its referent, that it produces an extreme anxiety—for it's no longer clear if there's a difference between imposture or role and the "real thing".

In other words, is Fraser representing a past performance that is gender, cultural and time specific, or is she articulating a present subject position of a, more general, condition in the new millennium: one that transcends gender and, shall we say expands the notion of cultural and historical specificity? And perhaps this is what produces discomfort in the viewer: the inability to know for sure whether the condition that Kippenberger's speech articulates and with which it engages was culturally and historically specific and now has passed, or whether it is more general and we are actually still experiencing it? That, is to say, whether the scathing indictments against the art world and the realm of culture at large articulated by Kippenberger are still as resonant today as they were when they were made in Austria in the early 1990s?



To sum up then, in the work of Green and Müller there's a distance between their present-day subject positions as artists and the role of historian that they play. Although their view of history is dialogical—with an evident awareness of how historical narratives are invested with the values of the present—there still exist a separation between past and present as underscored by the separations between their presence as artists and their performance as historians. In the case of Fraser's *Kunst Muss Hängen*, the distinction between past and present has been collapsed, parallel to the complete blurring between her identity and that of Kippenberger. Returning in conclusion to Genet's play, then, it would seem that Kippenberger's self-hating diatribe directed at what he deems to be an utterly perverse art world is becoming a stance, or a role, that today is more resonant than ever. Like the Chief of the Police in *The balcony* who had to wait for an increase of social unrest for the pertinence of his role to become apparent, by perfectly impersonating and fusing her identity with that of Kippenberger, Fraser makes the point that the relevance and the significance of Kippenberger's abhorrent artistic persona has only increased as the years have gone by.