

PUMMELING THROUGH THE FRAMES: A CONVERSATION WITH CAROLINE KOEBEL

For over a dozen years, Caroline Koebel has explored the poetics and politics of the body in pain and pleasure, scattering lines of flight from coast to coast in American experimental film culture. Programmer and critic, filmmaker and organizer, book publisher and digital director, Koebel's energy springs from an unwavering commitment to women in avant-garde film history and she extends her gaze into contemporary digital manifestations of creative social critique. The diversity of her pursuits frustrate any attempt at containment—bursting genres, formats, and job descriptions. Koebel has videotaped more than three-hundred participants conceiving fantasy offspring in

2009), expresses a deep and unwavering identification with the lived experiences of women survivors of the Balkan Wars in the 1990s. Koebel's films and videos constitute a particular expression of her acute awareness of the extent to which an individual aesthetic depends upon social circumstance. This conversation took place via email in April and May of 2009.

BERNIE RODDY: During your April 2009 screening at the University of Oklahoma, I was struck by the use of time and pacing in the works, which seemed to indulge the sense



“I Want to Have your Baby” (2003–05) and has co-authored *Schablone Berlin* (2005), an illustrated book about stencil and graffiti art on the streets of Berlin. She has also organized a weekly forum on torture, written catalog essays on the films of Carolee Schneemann and Barbara Hammer and drawn from the vaults at the Film-Makers’ Cooperative and Canyon Cinema to program experimental 16mm shorts by women, while managing to pursue her own distinctive style of film and video. Although “I Want to Have Your Baby,” about which she wrote a statement for the *Millennium Film Journal* (Issue 51, Spring/Summer 2009), harnesses the power of a collective imaginary both political and erotic, her essay on Jasmila Zbanic’s film *Grbavica: Land of My Dreams* (2005) in the online journal *Jump Cut* (Issue 51, Spring

of wonder that early cinema was designed to provoke. One video, *Berlin Warszawa Express* [2009], consists primarily of arriving and departing trains, and anticipated the smooth passage of digitally stratified pages that cross the screen in the more recent “Flicker On Off” series. Whether trains or grids, there is a gradual speeding up between cuts, a sense of pacing in the rattling of gangster guns, and the pummeling of boxers’ gloves in the series. You seem to take great pleasure in exploring different sound effects for these fragmented pieces of violence. For me, the extended duration of the firing and pummeling offered time to reflect on the varieties of immersion in cinema today and the implications for oppositional media

politics. In the final installment of the “Flicker On Off” series, we are reminded of that portion of video art’s history in which video was an activist tool. In this part, *All the House (Haditha Massacre)* [2008], you interject flashes of televised imagery from the aftermath of the Haditha massacre in November 2005 in which United States Marines killed twenty-four unarmed Iraqi civilians. How would you position your work with respect to this history of media critique?

CAROLINE KOEBEL: One work I would love to see *All the House (Haditha Massacre)* screen with is *Viet-Flakes*, the 1965 anti-war film by Carolee Schneemann. A couple of years ago, I wrote about it for the catalog *Carolee Schneemann: Split Decision*: “To pay attention to *Viet-Flakes* is to be overcome by sorrow. Images and sounds disappear before the mind has time to fully process what is seen and heard; continuous interruption

damning reality of U.S. military actions. After investigative journalist Seymour Hersh opened the Pandora’s Box of Abu Ghraib to the world community, I was catalyzed to curate and produce in fall 2006 a ten-week speaker series at the University at Buffalo, “Forum on Torture,” including Amy Goodman, Jennifer Harbury, and Ian Olds based on the premise that there is an urgent need for informed debate about such dire issues. In *All the House (Haditha Massacre)*, I refocus the scope of “Forum on Torture” onto my own media arts practice in more specific terms by asking how I can enlist the language and aesthetics of experimental film and video art to initiate dialogue about international affairs.

It’s true that of the three parts of “Flicker On Off,” *All the House (Haditha Massacre)* is most conversant with the history of video art—for which I had a residency in 2008 at the Experimental TV Center [ETC] in Owego, New York, to credit. I was able to take my hand-processed



and substitution compounds the hauntedness of the film’s matter.”¹ *All the House (Haditha Massacre)* comes out of my fascination with the modes of transmission by which torture and human rights abuses are conveyed, especially in the American imagination. It, like Schneemann’s film, asks for critical reflection on the role jingoism plays in blinding many to the

black-and-white 16mm material of the Atlantic City massacre scene from Francis Ford Coppola’s *Godfather III* [1990] and (referencing the Situationists) détourne it further by processing it through a variety of performative analog instruments, custom-built decades ago by David Jones, Dan Sandin, Nam June Paik, and others. It was impossible to exist in the residency space itself—the loft living quarters and the production center known as “The Matrix”—and not feel responsive to the amazing history of electronic media artists and engineers inhabiting it. It was also critical to my process that the ETC housed new digital technologies, enabling me to access the Web at will (such as seeing the Al Jazeera interview with Iman Walid, a ten-year-old survivor of the Haditha Massacre). Like others before me, I played many picture and

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Still from *ReAction: “From the Portfolio of Doggedness”* (2003) by Caroline Koebel

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Still from *Berlin Warszawa Express* (2006) by Caroline Koebel

sound games that could have emerged out of no other context than the ETC. For me, *All the House (Haditha Massacre)* very much embodies a convergence of my love of experimental film and video art.

BR: Avant-garde film has long taken both formal and political forms. The “Flicker On Off” series makes reference to this tension by offering kitchen sink hand-processing in place of a masculine vision of technical mastery and substituting oppositional television strategies for the historical investigations of more cloistered experimental film practice. To illustrate the formal side, filmmaker Phil Solomon has developed a processing technique that adds a burning quality to archival black-and-white footage. His control over the results of this process is truly remarkable, most notably in “American Falls,” a three-screen installation designed for exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington,

At the same time, I don’t take issue with “experimental” and typically describe my own practice as such. Even if “experimental” is subject to fatigue as a category of cinema practice, it nevertheless summons, in my opinion, a rich history of countercultural moviemaking, including [that of] Phil Solomon, for which I feel an affinity.

Each part of “Flicker On Off” embraces the ethos of culture jamming by re-contextualizing a big-budget movie with aim to provoke: Martin Scorsese’s *Raging Bull* [1980], Joel Coen’s *Miller’s Crossing* [1990], and *Godfather III*. I am drawn to their scenes of extreme violence for reasons such as how they act on the viewer sensorially (i.e., by inducing an adrenaline rush), their quality of existing outside time and linearity, and ethical questions that arise about the representation of violence. It is not my intent to script some rigid discourse based on these appropriated scenes, but rather to use them as notes in a composition that connects contemporary cinema arts to global affairs.

BR: It has long been a complaint within experimental film circles that the culture of avant-garde film also tends to valorize male contributions over those of women. Your program makes reference to this history in the title of “Flicker On Off” as well as in the person of Tony Conrad, who appears on all fours in *ReAction: “From the Portfolio of Doggedness”* [2003], where he re-enacts Peter Weibel’s role as a dog on a leash behind Austrian feminist expanded cinema progenitor VALIE EXPORT. This time, the crawling follows behind Viennese semiotician Bernadette Wegenstein at an intersection in Buffalo, New York. The new context for the performance seems to draw attention to the different futures of structuralist experiment in film and women’s performance. In the program notes you write, “*ReAction: ‘From the Portfolio of Doggedness’* springs from the desire for familiarity with a temporal- and site-specific artwork by VALIE EXPORT and Peter Weibel’s *Aus der Mappe der Hundigkeit*, a 1968 action ‘proclaiming the negative utopia of erect posture in our animalistic society.’”² It seems to be the documentation itself that gratifies, but documentation of a particular kind of practice. Perhaps we form a generation acutely aware of the satisfactions of reading about certain practices for which there is little record. In her book *Video Art: A Guided Tour* [2005], Catherine Elwes, a feminist critic who lived through this period doing performances and making video, takes issue with the younger Amelia Jones, who in her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject* [1998] tries to separate the intentions of the artists of that period from what can be gained from the documentary archive of it today. Elwes regrets the neglect of those intentions in scholarship. I find this whole area of artistic presence and its archive extremely interesting. Can you talk about what drew you to EXPORT and the role of this history of body and performance art in your work?

CK: The relationships you point to between performance art and

D.C., in 2008 and for which he was awarded \$40,000 from the University of Oklahoma last September. But when an experimental filmmaker receives such support, I become concerned about the capacity of such work to respond to the political conditions of our time. Upon receiving the check at an opening in Oklahoma City, Solomon said he preferred the term “poetic” to “experimental”—all experimentation having already been completed. Another way to think about this issue is to reflect on the differences between Solomon’s choice of footage to appropriate and yours. While he is attracted to the era of Eadweard Muybridge, quasi-scientific film strips dating back to the earliest period of cinema history, you draw on fight scenes from more recent blockbusters, which seems appropriate for more directly political purposes. Could you comment on the degree to which you are engaging these issues in your work?

CK: I unfortunately haven’t experienced Solomon’s “American Falls,” so I can’t comment on his use of Muybridge. I do agree that the term “poetic” can be handy and have in fact used it myself, especially when addressing individuals who might have had no prior access to “personal” cinema.



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Still from *All the House (Haditha Massacre)* (2008) by Caroline Koebel

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Still from *Grand Central/Central Terminal* (2008) by Caroline Koebel

documentation, and “presence and its archive,” are exactly what propelled me in this reenactment project. I caught myself reflecting on the iconic black-and-white photograph of *Aus der Mappe der Hundigkeit* (showing EXPORT leading the leashed Weibel across the street), that through its repetition across various volumes has come to stand in for the performance. Acknowledging the impossibility of knowing the artwork as EXPORT and Weibel had intended it, I nonetheless imagined that the proximity afforded by the image was open to scrutiny and that an alternate route to experiencing the performance, however inauthentic, was navigable. Treating the original as a script, the “new” work *ReAction: “From the Portfolio of Doggedness”*—which also foregrounds the role of the original in its inception and process—was born. Making the video didn’t bring me closer to the 1968 performance in a literal sense, but, at the risk of sounding cheesy, this spending of my own kind of time with Weibel and EXPORT’s project

both companionship and opposition to the equally wondrous *The Way Things Go* [1987] by Peter Fischli and David Weiss.) EXPORT’s performances turning Viennese Actionism on its head through their espousal of female subjectivity solidified the importance of the artist for me. In *Tapp und Tastkino (Touch Cinema)* [1968], she strapped a cardboard box to her chest and invited passersby to feel her breasts through a curtained opening. In *Genitalpanik (Genital Panic)* [1969], she wore jeans with the crotch cut out and directed a machine gun at the rows of filmgoers in a porn theater. Thrilled when first encountering these actions (or I should clarify: encountering their documentation/historicization), I remain so at this latest invocation.

BR: Answering audience queries about your collage film *hole or space* [2006] you drew attention to the eroticism of the one-shot takes from the first filmed sequences



paved the way for a more holistic comprehension. On a related note, recently, the Fetish Film Festival in Kiel, Germany, screened *ReAction* in a program with *Aus der Mappe der Hundigkeit* listed as a “short film” (the existence of which is news to me).

The artist’s films first drew me to EXPORT. In the 1980s as a Berkeley film studies student, I assisted Professor Anton Kaes in bringing her to the campus. *Syntaxma* [1983] in particular made an impression on me. I’m due for re-exposure to this experimental feminist short, but the sense I retain of what is so wondrous about it is that nothing stays in place. Everything is not where you expect it to be. Nothing is delimited. (Somehow at this moment I am imagining *Syntaxma* in

made by Thomas Edison’s company. Reflecting on your appropriation of Edison’s films of serpentine dancer Crissie Sheridan and contortionist Luis Martinetti, you drew a distinction between the erotics of early cinema and that of contemporary visual culture, which is characterized by the fragmented and idealized body parts of advertising. At the same time, however, it seems your film complicates our understanding of formal experimentation itself by reflecting on the erotics of early experimental animation. But your juxtaposition of the Edison films with sequences by Mary Ellen Bute, Oskar Fischinger, and Fernand Léger also reminded me that recent documentary theory has been

reconsidering animation's role in documentary. Could you elaborate on your use of abstraction in this work? What attracts you to early animation?

CK: Léger and Dudley Murphy's *Ballet Mécanique* [1924] is a canonical avant-garde film combining live action and animation. Watching the film again after a lapse of some years, I was struck anew by how its ingenuity sustains. It remains a cinema touchstone for me, as I imagine it does for countless others (or given the obscurity of film art, perhaps this could be limited to thousands or possibly even only hundreds of others). In the process of making *hole or space*, I performed an almost surgical removal of specific animated parts of *Ballet Mécanique*, namely those featuring dots—circles, suns, moons, pinpoints—or however you choose to deem them (“hole or space” in my case). Akin to a DJ's manipulation of vinyl in real time, in the digital editing environment I scratched and remixed the picture track, causing the film's already mesmerizing spheres to transmute into and out of one another and to gain a distinct rhythm-pulse from the original. I also reviewed *Ballet Mécanique* frame by frame and chose given moments to freeze, notably when the human touch is most visible—i.e., a fingerprint is inadvertently present (I'd love for somebody to research the smudge's origins). Fischinger's *An Optical Poem* [1938] and Bute and Ted Nemeth's *Tarantella* [1940] are likewise simply extraordinary works of film art meriting eternal life. In the case of these works, I also zero in on dots, but the process is dramatically different because of the given title's own interiority. In the example of Fischinger, my primary arc is to distance the curvilinear from the rectilinear—thereby studying, but ultimately not preserving, a key formal conflict. Perhaps it is the openings afforded by this spirit of simultaneous awe and irreverence that speak differently to erotics and desire in cinema practice.

BR: In considering artists such as EXPORT, especially her early work, your *Grand Central/Central Terminal* [2008] is hard to place. But looking at Edison's footage of Sheridan and Martinetti, it starts to come into focus. You returned to the aesthetics of Edison's studio with Katherine Crockett, a principle dancer in the Martha Graham Dance Company, who performs for you in this video at Grand Central Terminal in New York City and Central Terminal in Buffalo. I would like to see such contrasts provoke a conversation about two different avant-garde feminisms, which seem to have been united by the work of Schneemann but have been dividing ever since. By way of conclusion, let me explain.

Both Kristine Stiles and Elwes have published concerns about what they perceive to be a facile grasp among women artists of the issues addressed by pioneer feminist performance and video art. Elwes speaks to this in the last chapter of her *Video Art*, and Stiles in an essay titled “Never Enough Is Something Else: Feminist Performance Art, Avant-Gardes, and Probity,” published in *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality* [2000, edited by James M. Harding]. Stiles had been invited to contribute to a 1995 catalog for an exhibition of performance art photographs, co-organized by EXPORT called “Body as Membrane.” In her essay for the catalog, she objected to the direction she

perceived the new work was taking, questioned its position in relation to Schneemann and feminism, and objected to a conception of feminist avant-garde performance that concludes with and valorizes Orlan. I see an important discussion about what it means to be avant-garde in film or video today, one that draws attention to the historic role of personal risk in performance art as well as the extent to which a practice made manifest a lived experience and personal politics. Your work continues to offer new ways of engaging these issues.

CK: I like how you link *Grand Central/Central Terminal* to my earlier title *hole or space* by way of Edison. As with the skirt dancer and contortionist of the sampled silent films, I was very much awed by Katherine Crockett as a performing body/subject in entirety. She is riveting to behold, not as close-ups edited together inasmuch as continuous movement of which the whole resists reduction into parts. Already almost six feet tall when stationary, she seems to command endless space when in motion. More recently, I had the chance to see Crockett dance a solo choreographed specifically for her by Richard Move as a response to Martha Graham's “Lamentation.” I was struck anew by the capacity of Crockett to signify in this abstract language of movement and dance, as if she were (re)inventing it in each changing moment. You can imagine what a thrill it was for me to collaborate with Crockett on a dance and cinema and urban space reclamation project.

Let me respond to your provocative remarks about emergent generations of avant-garde artists in relation to pioneering feminist performance artists by lingering on *Grand Central/Central Terminal*. In terms of the on-location production at Grand Central Terminal in New York, Crockett and I basically had ourselves as resources. My request to film at the train station ignored by the official in question, the importance of the project as unsanctioned became all the more apparent. Our covertness made the affair more exciting. Not until I combed through the footage in post-production did I even detect plainclothes security (who knows if city or feds?) signaling one another to surveil us. Through intervening in the quotidian operations of the commuter hub, we indeed made a spectacle of ourselves. At the same time, there was no fancy apparatus of circumstances (outside of ourselves) causing any spectacular response (as there would have been in the case of a grander scale of production). Who could guide us to make complex work no matter how humble the means, better than the feminist avant-gardists we so love and admire?

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NOTES 1. Caroline Koebel in “Carolee Schneemann: Color the Shadow,” in David Liss and Photios Giannaris, eds., Carolee Schneemann: Split Decision (Buffalo and Toronto: CEPA Gallery and the Museum of Contemporary Canadian Art, 2007). 2. Program notes for artist's talk at the University of Oklahoma's School of Art and Art History, April 2, 2009.