

**Not to be circulated without permission of the authors.**

**Interview**

**Silvia Kolbowski by Hal Foster**

**From the monograph *inadequate...Like...power***

**Secession, 2004, Vienna**

**Distributed by Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König**

Hal Foster: I'm going to take you all the way back.

Silvia Kolbowski: All the way back? Are you going to hypnotize me? [laughter]

HF: Why were you born in Buenos Aires?

SK: I didn't have much choice. My family went from Poland and Russia to Buenos Aires - in the 1920s from Poland, and from Russia in the early 1900s. They ended up there because I think the immigration quotas made it difficult to come to the U.S. at the time.

HF: Why did they move?

SK: Economic reasons, religious reasons - because they were Jewish - one great-grandfather was drafted into the Russian army at 12, and was hustled out of the country a few years later to avoid a second draft. Buenos Aires was an easy place for Jews to immigrate to because there were no restrictions, and there was already a Jewish community there... In 1959, when I was six, my parents moved to New York for economic reasons.

HF: Were you happy in your choice of parents?

SK: [laughs] Hal! You know my parents are going to want to read this book! One thing I will tell you is that I was off by two generations, in my childhood, from my friends. Most of the friends I had, growing up in New York and in college- of the ones who came from fairly recent immigrant backgrounds, they were all second-generation Americans.

HF: What do you mean "off"? Your friends were older?

SK: They were my age, but their grandparents had immigrated to the U.S., so two generations later they weren't thinking like immigrants...

HF: What was your mother tongue?

SK: Spanish, although when we came to the U.S., in an effort to have us assimilate immediately, my father wouldn't allow us to speak Spanish at all. It was a fairly brutal entry into the English language, but I did manage to retain my Spanish fluency. And even though obviously I'm completely fluent in English, I have a strange feeling of not being at home in the language.

HF: In an early work you quote from *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and there is a passage somewhere in the novel in which the Irish protagonist Stephen Dedalus feels that he doesn't really inhabit English, it's alien to him, and that in the voice of his teacher it *occupies* him.

SK: It's funny that I don't remember that aspect of the book. I was reading Joyce at the time that I was putting together the project "what was the right answer" (1), which was about the fluctuations of Oedipal positions, and I included the lines in which Stephen describes his confused feelings about his mother's kiss. In general, I think my obsession with language is connected to my immigration.

HF: What was your initiation into contemporary art?

SK: It was pretty rough. In 1971, I went to the tiny, hippie Franconia College in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, which was called “the sin on the hill” by the locals. It was a great progressive school, but with only three or four art teachers. And with no curricular restrictions, I really made a mess of my first three years in that I took only English literature and studio classes. At a certain point, I felt isolated there in terms of making art, and I remember feeling that I had to get back to an urban context where there would be more going on. So I returned to New York, and finished my degree at Hunter College, where I took a lot of art history courses. Throughout college I did mostly painting, of the color field variety, and I dabbled in other mediums. I remember often wanting to make materials or mediums do things they weren’t supposed to do, which would either infuriate or intrigue teachers.

I had been very politicized in my teens by the Vietnam War protests, the SDS movement, and the legacies of the civil rights movement, and also through becoming friends with several red-diaper babies. After a few years of retreating from politics at Franconia, when I came back to New York in 1974, it was very strange because my politics were up-to-date, but my art allegiances and alliances were not. And there came a point when I thought, they have to become more coherent in some way.

HF: Did you have any sense of artists that were politically active around this time? The Art Workers Coalition, for instance?

SK: No, but around 1977, I went to a meeting of Artists Meeting for Cultural Change, which I think was an outgrowth of the Art Workers Coalition. I believe my first meeting was their last meeting, when the group was disbanding into small reading groups, because it was no longer being held together by collective activity. I ended up joining a reading group on feminism and psychoanalysis, where I met Jane Weinstock, who was starting to write film and art theory at the time. Anne Friedberg was also in the group, and I can’t remember whom else, except that they were all film theory people. In a sense, what compelled me to move in a direction that made my artwork more coherent with my politics was the overlap of feminism and psychoanalysis, but through the lens of film, and *Screen* and *Camera Obscura*, and *m/f* magazines.

HF: For many of us that convergence was important. At the time, film theory was far more advanced than art criticism, it drew on different traditions or had different concerns that were far more compelling. Tell me about the reading group.

SK: My memory is that we started with the Juliet Mitchell book, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, and read some Lacan, and Levi-Strauss on the incest taboo and the exchange of women. We read the French feminists, like Cixous and Irigaray –

HF: Why were you attracted to a feminism steeped in psychoanalytic critique as opposed to the kind of feminism that celebrated a natural womanhood--surely that was more available at Hunter and in the art world at large? Was it a self-conscious matter of a generational shift within feminism at the time?

SK: I think I fell into that reading group out of a desire for some different academic and political context. But until then, I’d have to admit that I took feminism for granted, in the sense that coming of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s I gauged people’s progressive affinities based on their general anti-war and counter-cultural, or civil rights attitudes. I think I was too young to be aware of the tensions that existed along gender lines in the anti-war movement. It wasn’t until I was in my early 20s, in the mid-seventies, that I began to be self-consciously interested in feminism.

HF: Was this group aware of internal differences within the feminist movement?

SK: Well, it was certainly in the Mitchell book, which historicized feminism. And there was already an identification at that time of strains of feminism that were more oriented to divisions along gender lines, as opposed to ones that theorized the unconscious and cultural and psychical sexual difference. Also, certain feminisms were more aligned with Marxist critiques. I remember that Eunice Lipton, with whom I’d studied art history at Hunter, got very annoyed with me because I was reading the French feminists in the late 70s. When I asked her why it was a problem, she said “Because there is no feminism in France right now!” I was dumbfounded.

HF: It’s out of this group that the Dora film was made, right? (2) I think I first saw you in that film.

SK: That's unfortunate, because the camera did not love me! I found acting, even stylized acting, a real challenge, and it made me admire profoundly Annette Michelson's role in Yvonne Rainer's *Journeys from Berlin*, a film I really liked. The Dora film didn't come directly out of that reading group. It was directed by Jane, who was in the reading group, together with three British theorists and artists. They asked me to audition for the part.

HF: Did you have any relation to the case history of Dora?

SK: [laughs] This is the point where I'm supposed to explain how I'm a hysteric, right?

HF: Please do. Why was the case selected as the basis of the film?

SK: I think it was because they wanted to make tie-ins between the way the body of the hysteric articulates the repressed, and the way that the body was used in television advertisements – the obsession with hygiene and the fixations on the oral. Also, the film was an attempt to raise questions about why Freud wrote Dora's mother out of the case history, so it was connected to contemporary feminist critiques of Freud, but from a pro-psychoanalytic point of view.

HF: Dora was an important topos for criticism at the time for those reasons--especially the question of hysteria in relation to sexual difference. Were you aware of feminist art at that point?

SK: It's very hard for me to remember what I found out about when. Like, when did I find out about "The Dinner Party"? I know that it was through the *Riddles of the Sphinx* movie by Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, which I saw in London in 1979, that I found out about Mary Kelly's "Post Partum Document." And I took a course with Craig Owens in contemporary art, at Hunter, around 1980. We must have studied some feminist art. But I only remember that I wrote a paper for that class on Daniel Buren's project, the one that had striped flags strung out the window of a gallery on West Broadway-

HF: "Change of Scenery." (3) So you had an idea of institutional critique.

SK: I don't think I thought of it as institutional critique then.

HF: What did you think of it as?

SK: I guess I was naïve, but I don't remember being aware of the term then. I think that my whole orientation, based on when I came of age, was around the notion of "the political." I grouped feminist art into that, as well as work like Buren's. At the time, I wasn't even thinking about his work in relation to conceptualism.

HF: What were the political dimension of the Buren piece for you, if not an investigation of its situation?

SK: I vaguely remember that the paper was about how the extension of the flags out across the street brought the noisy and hectic space of the city into the pure, quiet white gallery, and about how the flags were imperceptible in the street, overwhelmed by urban commercial imagery. And I knew the stripes took the place of art. It wasn't that I was unaware of the project's aims, but I wasn't situating it within an art historical category. Also, I was very aware of the general political situation in the U.S. at the time. Didn't Reagan get elected that year?

HF: Yes. Was that election a shock to you?

SK: Not a shock, but a dreaded occurrence. And it served to politicize me even more.

HF: Did the Dora film lead to your early work with advertisements, such as "Model Pleasure" (4) Had you thought about questions of representation all along or did that film help to prompt your thinking?

SK: I was already working with advertisements in 1979, in work that combined photos of advertising and set up scenarios of women. And I was very aware of the work of Godard, which influenced me a great deal – the intermingling of the economic and the personal.

HF: How did you turn to photography or, rather, to the use of photographic images?

SK: I did a project for an artist-organized exhibition in a rented space in Soho, in 1978, that included small Polaroids of the space, and its architectural elements, which were then hung in the actual space. Somehow photography felt more historically relevant.

HF: Were you aware of other photo-text work?

SK: It's embarrassing to keep articulating my ignorance. I was aware of the late 1970s work of Victor Burgin, because people in the film theory world knew that work, and I saw it published. I remember that I also saw published in England the work of other British text-image artists. But I don't think I was seeing photo-text work in New York galleries in the late 1970s. I met Victor around 1979, when he was invited to give a talk at a place where I was working, The Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies. In fact, I think I suggested his name to the organizers of the lecture series. And I got to show him my work at the time, which consisted of enlarged contact sheets. I was shooting within the roll in the camera, so that when the contact sheet was made, there was a narrative already contained in it; it was almost like shooting a film.

HF: The narrative was that strong?

SK: It wasn't Hollywood narrative, no. I showed this work to Victor and he took one look at it, said "This is pure formalism," and basically walked away! That was mean, but it was the first piece of important criticism I got, and it was useful, since I already had my own doubts about how formalist the work was. Of course, later I realized that knowledge of formalism was crucial in shaping projects. By the late 1970s I was affected by the people around me who were working with appropriationist techniques.

HF: Who in particular?

SK: I often exhibited together with artists like Laurie Simmons, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Sherry Levine, Dara Birnbaum, Cindy Sherman, Richard Prince, Vicky Alexander and others. But I think in my work of the early 1980s you can see the influence of both appropriationism and also of the British photo-text work, because remember that my orientation was political - quasi- Marxist, or at least critical of capitalism, and the British work was more overtly political than the work coming out of New York at that time. I think that influence, and my interest in avant-garde film led to my combining set-up shots and found images, and also combining text that I wrote with text that I found, like a script. In that sense, I think that my work was somewhat different from the work of the other artists in that loosely knit group.

HF: Because the photos and the text interrupted each other in your work, and there wasn't the same disruption in theirs?

SK: Because it wasn't the exclusive and direct appropriation of existing imagery - still or moving. And it wasn't the exclusive use of the theatrical set-up. The mediation in the work by those artists was largely carried out through selection - of image or footage or set-up. I was using grids in a narrative way, and mixing found and created images, as well as language that was found and written. No one was making any distinction between my work and the work of the other appropriationists at the time, but there were differences that became apparent to me.

HF: Do you think the projected spectatorship was different? That was a great concern at the time--differences in spectatorship, how different viewers were positioned by the work. There was a charge, or implied charge in relation to appropriation work à la Richard Prince, that whatever critique there might be, there was also a fascination, that Richard in particular was expert at the very seduction that he seemed to expose. Did you ever feel implicated by such a critique?

SK: I think Richard Prince is the type of artist who will always work with what fascinates him or what he's fixated on, and about which he doesn't particularly want to create a critique.

HF: He displays his fascination in ways that can be taken as reflexive.

SK: I think so. There was always an overt desire in my work to both display the fascination, and somehow to raise questions about fascination with media imagery, and about the kind of spectator that got produced. I suppose you could say that the projected spectator of my work was perhaps more skeptical about the allure of media imagery than the projected spectator of the work of someone like Prince. But at some point, I became very dissatisfied by the passivity of the placement of "Model Pleasure" on the wall. There was only a mental and conceptual connection on the part of the spectator -

HF: But you weren't out to assault a male gaze or open up a space for feminine spectatorship, as Barbara Kruger was at the time. Barbara was adamant on those scores.

SK: I thought that Barbara's work of that period created more of a vacillation of positionality on the part of the spectator. You could identify with the subject pronoun, or you could be addressed by the subject pronoun, but the use of language set up both, or multiple possibilities.

HF: Yes, you were always addressed (or not) by the work, but often too somehow cleaved by this address. For me your work seemed to exist somewhere between that of Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince, or somewhere outside of theirs: you didn't attack a male gaze, but you also didn't perform your own fascination--though some critique of the former and some element of the latter were in play.

SK: You mean I missed my opportunity to assault the male gaze?! [laughs] Well, in terms of an assumed male gaze, I was as affected as many others were by Laura Mulvey's article, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," [1975] and I did see the dominant gaze as being a masculine one, hence the hysterical identification required of women in relation to Hollywood cinema and much art. Psychoanalysis helped me to understand the cultural and psychical stakes of looking, the relationships between power and gaze. By the way, even though my work wasn't structured like conventional imagery, there were those who felt that any use of traditional imagery of women, such as mine appropriated from fashion photography, couldn't be feminist. I once stood my ground with a curator over that issue, and I was removed from an exhibition. And then my back went out, and I was in bed for a week...because I'm a hysteric. [laughter]

HF: See, everything's connected. I wanted to ask you about the exhibition "Here and There." (5) You said before that you became somewhat discontent with the spatial placement of your work in exhibition space. Did working at the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies have anything to do with that discontent? How did you get involved in the Institute and what did it mean to you?

SK: When I was still a student at Hunter, in 1977, I got a part-time job, through a friend, answering phones at the Institute, which was near the main Public Library, on 40<sup>th</sup> Street. I had no idea what the place was. Within six months, the director, Peter Eisenman, offered me a job in the Exhibitions Program, and later asked me to run a new Catalogues Program. I learned everything on the job – editorial and design skills - and I worked there for about seven years, editing and designing an interesting series of architecture catalogues. I was also exposed to an amazing series of public lectures on architectural theory, urban theory, art, film -

HF: It was an important space for many of us.

SK: And at some point Craig Owens became the editor of a critical tabloid the Institute was publishing, called *Skyline*.

HF: I first met Craig there. If you were to sum up what that experience meant for your work, what would you say?

SK: Well, as an artist I was an outsider there, so on some level it was quite difficult to deal with the insularity of the architectural profession – architecture is a very specific language and its practitioners are quite single-minded about the field. But I got to witness the development of post-modern architectural discourses parallel to post-modern art discourses and practices at the same time, and it was illuminating to me to see how differently they were being formed. There were some crossovers, but not many. And over the years, that reinforced my sense of the specific historical differences between practices, even ones that seem related. I've been teaching in architecture departments

for years, and I emphasize this difference for students who often connect the two fields on a purely visual level. You know, they base building plans on paintings...

HF: Your work is also very concerned with design and display. Did your experience at the IAUS bear on these concerns?

SK: After a few years it led to collaborations with architects – on texts, buildings, installations, and exhibitions. In particular, with Peter Eisenman I worked at the level of the *parti*, the generating idea of a project.

HF: And did this affect your dissatisfaction with work that just hung on the wall?

SK: It definitely made me more aware of how the body inhabited space, and aware of the historical development of ideas of space. But most of the impact came from a different direction. When the “Difference” show was at the New Museum in 1984/85 (6), I remember that there was a critique voiced about the work in the show not being sensitive to the institutional framework. I think it was either Mary Kelly or Victor Burgin’s response at the time to say that institutions were not just galleries or museums, they were also cultural discourses like sexuality and politics. And even though I agreed with that, and even felt at the time that Institutional Critique was weak in not embracing that view, I have to say that the criticism still bothered me.

HF: For you the position that an institution can also be a discourse was to move too quickly away from the physical setting? You felt that such a focus might not take its actual frame into account sufficiently?

SK: Right. I thought that it was a good response, but I felt there was validity to the critique, in terms of an inattention in the work to museological setting. I also felt there was a related inattention to questions of space and spectatorship, which the critique had not directly addressed. I had been starting to think about these things before that show, so the criticism resonated for me. It was clear to me that the criticism came in part because there was a reluctance to look at the feminist aspects of a lot of the work in the exhibition – a reluctance to look at feminism and spectatorship and its repercussions – but it still bothered me.

HF: After all, the primary concern of the work in the “Difference” show was representation, not the art institution, and maybe that’s an important difference between this aspect of feminist art and that set of conceptualist concerns.

SK: True, but it seemed to me that a feminist approach could incorporate both problematics.

HF: You became more interested in how your work functioned in the space, but then--in “Here and There”– you move to another kind of space, a space that is not physically present. In that work you evoke a “there” that is distant from “here” but, on account of new global connections in media and capital, somehow immanent to “here” as well. Those were the early days of post-colonial discourse too. How did that project come about? I remember it vividly.

SK: It came about for a very dumb reason. As soon as I dwelt on questions of space, spectatorship, and institution with regard to “Model Pleasure,” I immediately came up against the problem of form. “Here and There” still drew images from the media, texts from media, and used original texts, but it used the idea of the timeline, as a given form, a way to occupy the gallery walls. It was a play on the timeline, though, since everything in that room existed in the same temporal dimension because all the images and texts were found in the months leading up to the show. Since it was like art-by-the-yard – it could have been extended indefinitely - the show designed itself, made its own form, and that relieved me of what felt like a pressure to conceive of a relevant form. And at the time I thought, great! I will never have to think about form again, I will always be able to use this line. And I never used the line again. So much for formulas.

HF: So it seemed a way to address the art-as-commodity problem directly? Like those Situationist industrial paintings sold by the foot?

SK: Exactly. It seemed a way not to have to make any decisions about scale or presentation, because everything was used at 100% scale, and hung in relation to the line. The work was sold that way, and it was also exhibited as excerpts a couple of times. But you’re right, “Here and There” didn’t deal well with the question of space and

spectatorship. It moved spectators around the room, but in a very simple way. The emphasis was still on concept and discourse.

HF: “Here and There” was shown at Nature Morte Gallery in the East Village, right? That was a moment when the art world was capitalized dramatically, even in the East Village, but there were also pockets where interesting things could occur nonetheless.

SK: It’s been an irony of my exhibition history that the commercial galleries I’ve been with always provided unquestioning support of my work. (7)

HF: There was a shift in emphasis away from questions of sexual difference to those of ethnic and racial difference. The debate about multiculturalism was on the horizon. And there was a prescient sense in “Here and There” that markers of such difference had become available for commercial exploitation too.

SK: A lot of the images in the show, drawn from the print media, showed the intersections of the female body with colonial markers. It happened to be a year where the fashion theme was colonialism –

HF: It was just a year or two after the “Primitivism” show at MoMA.

SK: That’s true, but do you think that fashion designers were aware of the Primitivism show? Maybe. But remember that Yves Saint Laurent designed the safari suit in the 1960s. It might have been a replay of that moment, which has replayed several times since the sixties – oh, also wasn’t that the year that the Meryl Streep film “Out of Africa” came out? That must have been it, because there was an unabashed overlay that year –

HF: Of colonialist nostalgia.

SK: Right. And some of the images in “Here and There” were not of the female body, because I had started at the end of the “Model Pleasure” work to see feminism as a broad issue, as an analytical model. I wanted to try to locate feminism in the structure of space and spectatorship, and in relation to economic critiques and post-colonial discourses.

HF: There was an attempt in the mid-1980s to think postmodernism not only in terms of representation and difference, but as a cultural logic of a new moment of international economies, in which the image figured as a form of capital. “Here and There” was a kind of provisional mapping of this sort as well.

SK: It was a moment of awareness of changes in the economic structure, awareness of multi-national capital - as much as we knew it was a problem then, I don’t think we began to imagine the magnitude of the problem.

HF: We knew we were in transition, but not necessarily to this present.

SK: I guess I should say that when I was reading about feminism and psychoanalysis in the late 1970s, I was also reading Althusser and Williams, and others.

HF: That conjunction was also available in *Screen*. The theorist I had in mind just now, a figure of some disdain to feminists to this day, is Fredric Jameson: he was concerned to open up postmodernism to questions of capital at large, to a cognitive mapping of this new stage. “Here and There” also evokes Godard’s “Ici et Allieurs.” Was that important to you?

SK: I have to confess that I wasn’t very interested in Jameson, but the Godard reference was self-conscious. What I liked about Godard was that there was often a focus in his work on the dynamics of capitalism as it affected women, as it affected family structures, relationships, the lives of children. He also focused on the implication of the filmmaker in the work. Godard wasn’t presenting an Olympian view. Many of us were starting to be concerned then with questions about our own positions in these economies that we were looking at. And in a period in which there was a degree of territoriality about what one could address, a period in which maybe I was no longer seen as a white feminist woman, but rather as a white person wanting to talk about race, how would I find the voice with which to do that? A voice that wasn’t Olympian or presumptuous.

HF: You began to feel implicated in these processes—is that why you began to focus on exhibition display and museum practice?

SK: Museum practice because the museum was already looking at the “there,” so I could say, let’s look at how the museum looks at the “there.” Also, the “Enlarged from the Catalogue” series began to move the spectator around the work and the gallery in more complex ways. (8)

HF: Which kind of “there”? How did you decide to reframe the shows that you did?

SK: I think it was as simple as being at the Metropolitan Museum and being intrigued by certain displays or catalogues. For example, I was intrigued by the way they attempted to encapsulate American culture in one wing and one catalogue. The first three projects were based on a Met catalogue of a private pre-Columbian collection. That catalogue allowed me to look at the question of the collector – as in the science of authentication or the way that abject qualities of old ritual objects generate both disgust and value –and at the way the museum framed the material.

HF: When you chose these objects – the pre-Columbian show, the American wing – it was still the late 1980s, during the Reagan-Bush era, when there was a transparent set of connections between government positions, corporate interests, and fashion styles. We were witness to an enormous capitalization of culture and culturalization of capital at that time. Your work seemed to respond to it, maybe not as directly, say, as Hans Haacke in his “MetroMobiltan” piece [1985], but the concern was there in your work too. You seemed to be more interested in how this economy was played out in terms of representation, exhibition, publication, design...

SK: I was interested in both the ways that American culture was exported and the ways other cultures were imported, the flows and exchanges of cultures. Questions of fetishization in relation to post-colonial cultures were interesting to me. I was less interested in the specifics of the instrumentalization of power than I was in the ways that the unfamiliar was being made familiar to us. At least in part, that process took place in museums.

HF: In this work, and in your magazine projects then and later, there is a convergence of design skills – you play with enlargements, displacements, reframings –and conceptualist devices—for example, you like to withhold the image sometimes and substitute other kinds of information, direct our attention elsewhere. I always felt you were a little ambivalent about your own immaculate sense of design—again a mix of fascination and critique.

SK: Maybe I wasn’t ambivalent enough about design. At the time, many of us felt that you had to use the language of advertising to critique it, and I remember being praised for this by a mainstream critic at the time. But cultural absorption is relentless, so critical alignments can be fleeting. I was surprised in the 90s when artists in their 20s and 30s were influenced by grunge, and so-called good design looked somewhat proper...

HF: One of the “Enlarged” pieces has to do with Michael Asher .(9) Why the explicit citation of his work?

SK: Because by 1990, I was sick of the group show format. Private galleries, and even alternative spaces always organized them at the last minute in those days, and I didn’t have work sitting in my studio. I didn’t have a studio! By the late 1980s, my work had become a specific response to a show or a recent event, so I found the typical format very difficult because it favored studio practices of conventional sorts, and projects done in series, which supported the explosion of the art market and the growth of galleries. Out of frustration, when I was asked to be in this particular show, I made a work about group shows, because I had a memory that Michael Asher had done a piece about group shows in the late 1960s. My intention was to bring history into the space of the private gallery where, in those days, history didn’t exist.

HF: But why Asher at that particular point?

SK: Because I didn’t know anyone else who had made a piece about group shows, Hal!

HF: Were you aware of the exhibition on Conceptualism that took place in Paris in 1989, “L’Art Conceptuel”? (10)



SK: I don't think I saw that catalogue for a while, but I had begun to read about Conceptual Art in the late 80s, and I became familiar with the monograph on Asher's work, which I found fascinating.

HF: What motivated you to read about Conceptualism?

SK: The question of spectatorship and site...you know, Asher's great line, "why put something on the floor, why put something on the wall?" But all my work in the 1980s, and even in the early 90s, was done in relation to Neo-expressionist work of that time. So taking a textual/analytical stance, using non-precious mechanical reproduction, allowing the aesthetic form to generate itself – all this was in part framed by the enormous market and general cultural celebration of a retrograde Neo-expressionism. Somehow that's gotten lost a little in thinking back to the 1980s...

HF: I say the same thing to my students today--that your kind of work was oppositional, pitched in a battle with Neo-expressionism. Neo-expressionism raised the spectre of Neos-at-large, and we were subject very quickly, by the 1990s, to the recycling of recent movements. That clearly concerned you, with your interest in Conceptual Art. Did you see your work in opposition to this kind of opportunistic recycling?

SK: We were in a very oppositional stance in relation to Neo-expressionism, but in relation to Neo-conceptualism, I don't think my stance was oppositional. I was cynical about the stylistic focus of the return of conceptualism, with a small "c", but I wasn't cynical in my own response. If there was going to be a resurgent interest, and then the door was going to shut quickly again - I wanted to keep the door prized open for a little while, so there could be reflection.

HF: With regard to the Harry Winston project, and to "These Goods are Available at \_\_\_\_\_," as well as "Already" (11), which, in evoking "Etant donnés", commented on the Duchamp industry of the time -- what did it mean for you to develop these conceptualist devices in a different historical frame from that of Conceptual Art itself? I mean an art world in a boom-and-bust mode, with all kinds of media hype, big auction sales, real estate speculation – here and in London—all of which is addressed by "These Goods." How do conceptualist devices change when applied to these different socio-economic conditions?

SK: What do you mean by "devices"?

HF: Methods of framing and reframing, withholding the art, so to speak, in the interest of other kinds of questioning...

SK: The Harry Winston project framed art work of a few years leading up to 1990, the work of Jeff Koons, in particular, but also of lots of other artists of that period -

HF: The art work as luxury object.

SK: Exactly. I had my gallery send out an invite, and put an ad in *Art Forum*, drawing people to the pre-existing store site of the self-declared "Most Exclusive Jeweler in the World." I timed the invitation so that visitors were able to look at the jewels for a while, then witness their daily removal and replacement, by guards, with back-lit photos. I was able to create an artwork as luxury goods, so to speak, and by virtue of its being, at the same time, completely dematerialized, make one of the least expensive artworks in the world, with the least amount of institutional negotiation or sponsorship possible. That was my aim. I thought I could harness aspects of public culture that already existed in cities, the everyday interaction with streets and buildings and goods.

HF: But one of the dangers of dematerialization is literal invisibility. Some Conceptual art is so precise in its adjustments—its additions and its subtractions – as to be overlooked. How have you negotiated that problem? We often feel that conventions and institutions are so strong, so intact, that even the slightest disruption will be registered; but often it is not, and the artist has to archive his or her little *détournements* in relative obscurity until they ripen into a dissertation subject...

SK: If we're lucky... I didn't have any illusions that the audience for the Harry Winston project would be big. I knew there would be the usual invited audience related to the mailing list that the gallery used. I knew the audience

would be smaller than that of the average gallery show, because people don't like to travel out of their way to see art. I heard from friends who went there that some people got annoyed, because they expected to find "Art," or got into trouble because they tried to get into the store in search of the "Art". Their entry was frustrated because you have to have an appointment to view jewels at Harry Winston. But I believe that the paratextual dimension of artwork is also important, the dimension we're involved in right now, and discussions generated by lectures, and teaching, catalogues and articles. It's too restrictive to think of audience in terms of verifiable scale and impact. We don't all want to be a Matthew Barney! Compare a small, focused audience to a large disengaged or restless audience.

In "These Goods" the storefront scenarios were meant to be readable to any passerby. For example, if you saw real estate listings in one store window, taken from a low-income neighborhood, and compared it to the listings in the store windows on either side of a very high-income neighborhood, the discrepancy in value for similar houses was patently apparent. In fact, the discrepancy was such that the real estate agent/landlord of the hat shop, in which I placed the listings from another neighborhood, threatened to evict the owner of the shop. It's funny, but I could never do that project now in any major city, nor could I do Harry Winston again, or "Closed Circuit," because those projects were done on the cusp of an explosive proliferation of shopping venues, on the cusp of changes in display styles that incorporate aesthetic techniques, making disjunctions unreadable. The changes in density are so strong, and the marketing of goods is so aggressive, that you could not read any of those projects in a city today. I was invited to do another version of "These Goods" in a German city a few years ago, and I wouldn't do it. There was no way it would have been readable.

HF: That was also what my last question was about: not only about visibility versus invisibility, but also about legibility versus illegibility, vis-à-vis conventions not only of display and marketing but also of art and exhibition. I think that conventions and institutions of art are in a state of great fragility, not to say febrility, today, and this differs from the moment of Conceptual art. There was a more limited but also more focused sense of audience, and one could assume a knowledge of conventions, as well as a consensus about significant challenges to these conventions, in a way that one cannot any longer.

SK: I agree that there's febrility, but that's something that needs to be mediated by curators and critics. It's harder for artists, who are in the mix. I suppose that might be one reason why I began to work, starting in 1998 with "an inadequate history of conceptual art," with a self-generated, research-like project that presents the spectator with a circumscribed arena for reflection, that arena being a period of history. In "Like Looking Away," the arena is the phenomenon of shopping as entertainment. I started to crave a more detached work process that could make me less subject to endless cultural permutations, while still letting me remain alert to cultural and political events. It's a difficult balance. With "inadequate history," the exhibition site became virtually unimportant, and in some ways the institution did too, except with regard to history.

HF: I'm curious as to why you've used the interview as a device in your last three projects. Also, should we be especially interested in the particular people you interview?

SK: I find the people I interview by looking for a certain type of person. I put the word out, stay open to tangential encounters, and the interviewees find me. In the last two projects, my methodology has changed pretty dramatically. I no longer start with a pre-determined concept that generates a project. I sketch out an idea, like an architectural *parti*, but then elements need to be changed as other elements develop unexpectedly.

In a sense, even though I look for difference, each interviewee turns out to be both a type and a unique figure. But I don't look for a cross section, because they're elusive, and mainly because I'm not trying to present the last word on a topic. In fact, there's no reason you should be particularly interested in the people I choose. They won't enlighten you more or less than others might.

HF: So why do you need interviews at all? Couldn't you just write a script?

SK: Well, I'm often surprised by what people reveal to me, and by the limits of my knowledge about the everyday. Frankly, I don't know why they reveal so much. Is it the demand I make through the questions or the demand posed by the projected display in an institution? I'm not sure. When I was beginning work on "inadequate history" I felt insecure about the project, so I kept putting off setting up interview dates. Then one of the people who'd agreed to participate called me to set up a date! I didn't even know him, so I was kind of shocked, although grateful because it finally set the project in motion. I got the sense that people wanted to contribute to the formation of a historical account about a period that meant a lot to them. In the last two projects, the interviews end up being reductions, like

the way you reduce a sauce in cooking. The original ingredients of the interviews are there, but the flavor changes somewhat. So we're in the work, but we're also not.

HF: I mentioned earlier that you sometimes withhold the image, and substitute other kinds of information, or direct our attention elsewhere. Can you say something about this?

SK: It's amazing how little has changed for the passive spectator of most mass media and art, given the aesthetic experiments of the last century. We have to assume that there's a comfort in passivity, but nevertheless I'm still interested in having the spectator make sometimes awkward connections between language and image and space, to produce their own interpretations. It's important to me that the reception of the projects involve mental and physical movement – you can't take in everything at once – the body must turn here to see this, go there to hear that...back to see something else...a movement amongst the ear and the eye and the body...something is always missing. As a spectator I find the overemphasis in art and media on personal experience somewhat manipulative, so I don't like to bring story and body together. I try to mediate through limits like anonymity, the editing out of specific references, the use of actors and partial images, a humor that comes out of condensation. My projects are also formed by those who won't be interviewed! And, of course, all questions themselves are limits.

HF: With regard to “an inadequate history of conceptual art,,” why the term “inadequacy”?

SK: I wanted a non-scholarly means of addressing the return of conceptualism. I wanted to respond to a contemporary phenomenon through an aesthetic practice, so I thought of inaccuracy and unsubstantiated recollection. I remember that the theoretician Parveen Adams asked me at the time what I was working on, and when I told her “an inadequate history of conceptual art” she said, with her usual wit, “That shouldn't be difficult.” I thought that was the perfect response, because of course from the scholarly point of view, that was the thing that one did with most ease – not get the facts right.

The project literally came about because I was editing, for *October*, a text of Pam Lee's on Gordon Matta-Clark, in which she wrote that spectators reacted to Matta-Clark's projects, like the one on the New York pier, by feeling physically threatened, and she quoted someone as saying that. As an editor, I wrote back and said, I don't think you can make a general claim about this unless you have other quotations from the period. So she found another quotation, and I thought, wow, it would be very interesting to think about what people would say *now*, across 25 or 30 years, about what they'd witnessed in the past. So as an editor, I was looking for adequacy, but as an artist I felt inadequacy was a better strategy.

HF: One thinks of other important uses of the term, such as Martha Rosler's “The Bowery in two inadequate descriptive systems” [1974/75] Personally I am reminded too of a moment in the well-known conversation between Gerhard Richter and Benjamin Buchloh, in which Benjamin insists to Richter that his project is to prove the bankruptcy of various modes of painting. And Richter replies, “Not bankruptcy, but always inadequacy.” So there “inadequacy” has a positive inflection. This leads me to a question: what is the other of “inadequacy” now? What myths of adequate representation do we as artists and critics still believe in? I think the integrity, the totality, of many representations, conventions, and institutions—against which so much deconstructive practice was arrayed—can no longer be presumed. We know we have nothing *but* inadequate systems.

SK: But who is this “we” that knows this? Because if you watch or listen to the media, and if you listen to Bush's speeches, and Rumsfeld's speeches, and Ashcroft's speeches, (12) all you hear is the plenitude of a paternalistic discourse of protection, and the effects are dire. And then the Democrats respond with requisite certitude.

HF: But there's a jump from worries about “inadequate histories” in art and the totalizing rhetoric of Rumsfeld et al. All I mean to suggest is that certain conventions and institutions of art might not have the solidity that our critiques once projected. There isn't that sort of seamless history there that needs to be exposed—it's been shown to be in tatters. Again, what is the other of “inadequate” vis-à-vis a history of conceptual art?

SK: We see different kinds of tatters. The history of Conceptual Art has been in the process of being formed for over 35 years, without a great deal of questioning. In part, it's the lack of questioning that creates a phantasmatic adequacy. Actually, my project was formulated to address an adequacy in-the-making, to look at how history is being formed. But also, I don't recognize the kinds of firewalls between discourses that you're implying exist.

HF: They're not firewalls, they're differences.

SK: But I think there is permeability. I don't see my work as instrumental, and I'm not saying that the discourse that my project generates will affect the federal government -

HF: But you're the last person who would be critical in a political demonstration, let's say, in the same way you would be critical in an art project.

SK: Yes, but it's interesting, for example, that the political Right in this country complains about the fact that the academy has been too permeable to critical discourses of the left. And it's true that some critical discourses of the 1980s have had a big impact on the academy in this country, although probably not as big as these politicians imagine.

HF: Absolutely, but that's also a fantasy about "tenured radicals" that bolsters their position, and it might be that people on the left, certain feminists, certain critics have fantasies of plenitude on the other side. Of course Bush and Rumsfeld use that kind of overbearing language, but there's more desperation there than we think.

SK: But that doesn't mean the desperation is read as such, and it doesn't make their language ineffective.

HF: My point is simple: sometimes, in a semi-paranoid way, we project a totality, a solidity, a power, onto a symbolic order that it might not fully possess. That's how I see many conventions and institutions in art today. They're been deconstructed and transgressed to the point of illegibility.

SK: I don't know that eclecticism is the result of deconstruction. What you and I think of as illegible, museumgoers think of as choice. It's just another kind of shopping! In any case, whatever we project onto the symbolic order, the symbolic order projects a plenitude and totality, in a context where all relations and perceptions are actually phantasmatic -

HF: Not all, bombs are real enough.

SK: But the relations that make it possible for people to drop those bombs are phantasmatic. I think you're underestimating the instrumentalization of plenitude in the culture we live in right now.

HF: I don't underestimate it. I think the critique of that phantasmatic projection, that phantasmatic instrumentalization, is necessary, but I think one has to have different kinds of critiques for different kinds of bad objects. Permeability is not communicability.

SK: But my project is not an inadequate history of George Bush! [laughter] Although that doesn't mean it's unrelated to the way political histories are written, or the way last week's history is written in a newspaper today. Inadequacy has a relationship to all modalities of recording. But these methodologies are not quantifiable, and if you equate legibility with quantifiability, then artists like me should stop working immediately!

HF: That's a good ending. [laughter] I simply wonder how legible conventions of advanced art practice are anymore.

SK: By advanced practice, I'm assuming you mean critical art practices, and that these practices are no longer working off clearly recognizable mediums and forms and genres. Those recognizable conventions still exist, along with the permutations and deviations. It's just that there's no hierarchy anymore, and there's a lot more art. But there is no option to go back to that more readable hierarchy, and we wouldn't want to anyway. In any case, I think transgression was always an unfortunate aesthetic fantasy - it's become a convention, so we have to find other ways to place critical art in relief.

1. "what was the right answer," Artists Space, New York, 1979. Photo installation with B+W photos/wooden shelves/texts.

2. *Sigmund Freud's Dora: A Case of Mistaken Identity*, 1980 Directed by Anthony McCall, Claire Pajaczkowski, Andrew Tyndall, and Jane Weinstock. Cinematography by Babette Mangolte.

3. "Change of Scenery," 1980, John Weber Gallery, New York. (This project referred back to Buren's earlier, 1973 project, "In and Out of the Frame.")
4. "Model Pleasure," consists of six composite photographic works, made between 1982 and 1984. Amongst other venues, they were exhibited in "Difference" The New Museum, New York, 1984/85. Kate Linker, Art Curator; Jane Weinstock, Film and VideoCurator.
5. "Here and There," Nature Morte Gallery, New York, 1986.
- 6 " Difference," The New Museum, New York, 1984/85. Kate Linker, Art Curator; Jane Weinstock, Film and VideoCurator.
7. Nature Morte Gallery, New York, 1985-1987; Postmasters Gallery, New York, 1988-1998; American Fine Arts, 1999-2005.
8. The "Enlarged from the Catalogue," series consisted of five projects in installation and text/image formats, 1988-1990.
10. "Enlarged from the Catalogue: *Michael Asher Writings 1973-1983 on Works 1969-1979* (The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1983," S. Bitter-Larkin Gallery, New York, 1990.
11. "an example of recent work may be seen in the windows of Harry Winston, Inc., from approximately 5:17 p.m. to 5:34 p.m., " Harry Winston Inc., and Postmasters Gallery, New York, 1990; "Already," Postmasters Gallery, New York, 1992; "These Goods are Available at \_\_\_\_\_," an exhibition in six commercial sites in London, and at Galerie Roger Pailhas, Paris, sponsored by the exhibition "Desiring Practices," London, 1995.
12. Donald Rumsfeld, Bush's Secretary of the Defense; John Ashcroft, Bush's Attorney General.