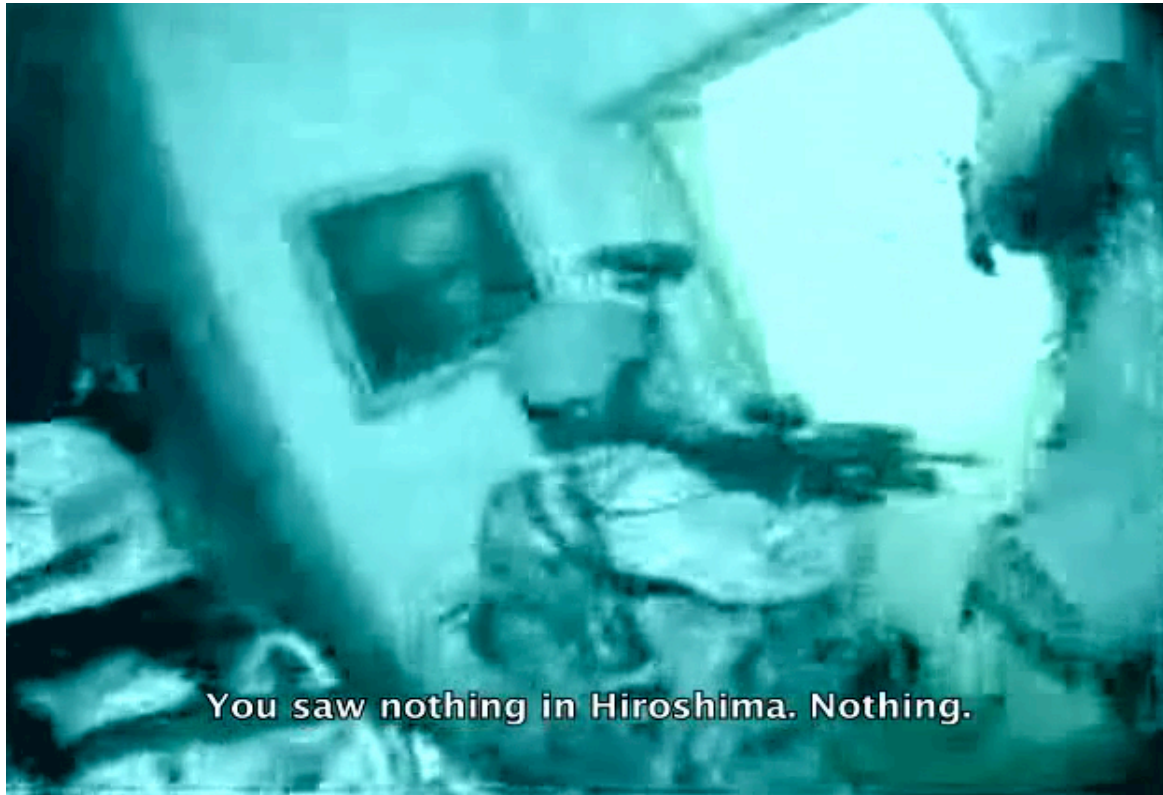


Models of Intervention: A Discussion between Michèle Thériault and Silvia Kolbowski

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After Hiroshima Mon Amour, Silvia Kolbowski, 2010. Video/Film; 22 mins. Video still.

MICHÈLE THÉRIAULT: Both *an inadequate history of conceptual art (aihca)* and *After Hiroshima Mon Amour (AHMA)* take historical moments, entities, events – a period in art and an approach to art making called conceptual art and a film that reflects on the cataclysm that was Hiroshima, namely Alain Resnais’s *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) – and recasts them into the “here and now.” Both projects do this in such ways as to makes us reconsider the “then and there” and how it extends, transforms, and is transformed by, the present. There is a continuous mise-en-abyme in both works, because they continuously weave in and out of the past and the present, concerned as they are with the myriad ways that the past meets the present and vice versa. However different these two works are, they form a reflection on history and historicization that is founded on disjunction. Disjunction – and the multiple points of views that arise from it – seems crucial to how history intersects with contemporary life for you and in your desire to address history in these works.

SILVIA KOLBOWSKI: “How the past meets the present and vice versa” are of great importance to me. The reciprocity that you point out is all-important, because of the fluidity with which the psyche forms an understanding of the world we inhabit. In other words, the past is filtered through the present, and the present is filtered through the past, which involves psychological processes such as identification, projection, and displacement. There has been a tendency, at least in the U.S., to separate out “history” and the political present from such psychological processes. I think this is a big mistake on the part of academics, not to mention journalists, pundits, and politicians. For example, how governments solicit compliance with regard to policies that are so clearly detrimental to society is not something that can be understood without understanding these processes.

So in this way I guess one could say that *aihca* is a “case history” that takes into account both how we historicize a particular moment of aesthetic production, as well as how we historicize the past in general.

With regard to *AHMA*, Resnais himself was at pains to point out that what people referred to as cinematic and narrative “flashbacks” in *Hiroshima mon amour* were not actually flashbacks, because he considered them to be memories experienced *in the present* by the characters. That was a very provocative comment for him to make, because it is a point of view that insists on the mutability of the past. That is, all histories are mediated through the present, or one could say that they move backward and forward through time, and are not affixed rigidly to a time-line. This view does not, in my opinion, undermine the necessity to understand historical facts and events as connected to a particular moment as well. Historicity matters, but it is more complex than just finalizing data on a timeline.

As for disjunction, coming of age as an artist in the 1980s I absorbed the legacies of early 19th century Modernism as well as the tenets of cultural post-modernism in the U.S. And in both instances, disjunction played a methodological part. For me, disjunction is important in various ways. I suppose I do still believe, although it may not be a popular view at a moment when linear narrative is privileged, in the modernist notion that disjunction creates a more engaged spectator. But it has other subtle effects as well. Recently I screened *AHMA* in Poland, and the art historian Agata Jakubowska pointed out something very interesting to me. She said that when she read a particular title in the video – “This could only happen in one city. Hiroshima.” – and the image that was lined up with the title clearly showed a street in Iraq (or somewhere in an militarily-occupied middle eastern country), rather than Hiroshima, the misalignment of words and image created a space for her to project another – a Polish – city, or cities, into the space created by the disjunction. She noted that in general the disjunctions between titles and images in the video allowed for transgeographic and trans-historical entry (projection, identification?). To me, this was a very important comment, given how reluctant Poland has been to look at its own history as aggressor, passive bystander, and victim.

MT: It is striking to me how much both works are paradoxically constructed around a visual absence, and that lack is an important part of the visitor’s experience when encountering these works. For instance in *aihca* one never “sees” the conceptual artwork described by each person based on what they remember. In *AHMA*, as war and love are juxtaposed, direct aggression, a nuclear explosion, and the act of lovemaking are never seen. Is their absence replaced by their presence as inscriptions in history? Is seeing/sight in this process wholly inadequate? How do you see its status in the context of remembrance and trauma?

SK: On the one hand, the absence is a methodological strategy. The omission of the referent allows the spectator some space for projection and reflection that is at least partially anchored by the spoken and written language that I include (so that meaning is open, but not completely openended). The speakers in *aihca* are referring to specific artworks, but due to my request that they not refresh their memories, the speaker does not occupy a position of certainty, and in turn the spectator of the project occupies a position that is in a way parallel to that of the speaker. The spectator hears the speaker trying to recall an experience of an artwork from memory, and can try to formulate an image or experience of the work in their minds. In this sense, the perception of time, and what time does to memory and knowledge, becomes part of the spectator’s experience. I hope there is always a sensation of doubt with regard to that process, so that many things can be placed in doubt – including the unilateral assumptions of much historicization.

In *AHMA*, I am paralleling the strategies of Resnais and Duras in *Hiroshima mon amour* in their incorporation of several potent omissions. You could say that *Hiroshima mon amour* deals with the ethics of representation through omission, by blocking ready cinematic identification in scenes involving only limbs of naked bodies, as well as scenes where there are no reverse shots, a strategy which creates a complex form of identification for the spectator. Resnais and Duras create a spectator who has to come to terms with various moral dilemmas that the film represents – i.e. what role does the psyche play in recasting the past? In what ways can such cataclysmic suffering *and, importantly, its aftermath*, be represented? How can one gain knowledge of an event that was meant to obliterate life? And where does one position oneself, as a spectator, in terms of national and cultural legacies and present ethical transgressions? In basing my work on theirs, I wanted to raise questions for the contemporary spectator that resonate with these earlier questions. Resnais and Duras took on the challenge of excavating the

aftermath of a morally unjustifiable attack that caused death and suffering to hundreds of thousands of people. The dropping of the two nuclear bombs on Japan were carried out in full knowledge – at least by the U.S. government – that the Japanese were willing to surrender, and did, in fact, eventually surrender on the same terms that were offered before the bombs were dropped. The spectators of my video are witness to – in the media and as citizens – unjustified incursions into places like Iraq and Afghanistan, and witness to the passive violence to which New Orleans and its impoverished inhabitants have been subjected.

But interestingly, in light of your question, I think that there is also a kind of surplus, an excess, of the visual in *AHMA*. This excess takes the form of not only the unnaturalistic colors in some scenes, but also takes the form of using 9 actors to play the two actors of *Hiroshima mon amour*, and casting actors who are of various ethnicities and racialities. So the spectator has to deal with a visual excess that may result in a questioning of cultural assumptions based on visuality. In a way, in *AHMA*, there is too much to see.

On a personal note, I have a different kind of connection to the absence of the visual. Having been taken out of my country of birth at the age of 6, and having returned there only four times in the subsequent 48 years, I've lived with mostly mental images of formative childhood experiences of places and people. Being wrested from that culture was most definitely a traumatic experience, so one could say that the obsession with the absence of the visual has both historical and personal meanings for me.

MT: To follow through on the subject of visual excess and omission, I can think of another paradoxical manifestation of it. It is in the use of the projected video image on a large scale. A large-scale video image is always already an apparatus of visual excess to which the viewer and the artist can be easily subsumed. It is increasingly difficult to work *with* video, as opposed to video *working* you, the artist. In the light of the importance in these two works of what escapes the visual, cannot be captured by it, and your continuous investigation of a realm that lies outside of it, how do you negotiate “working with video”?

SK: In my first two projects that incorporated video, in 1996 and 1997, I worked with small monitors because I couldn't rationalize presenting the video on a bigger scale, other than to compete with large-scale painting, or cinematic impact. I was determined, in each instance, to use a scale of projection/presentation that was appropriate to the work, rather than increasing the scale to that of the museum or gallery room, which was quite prevalent then. I ended up with the sense that the small scale I used did not satisfy the contemporaneous spectatorial and curatorial appetite for large-scale projections.

But in historical terms I still could not rationalize moving to a bigger scale just to make the work appealing. With *aihca*, in the late '90s I moved to larger scale projection because I did not want the hands in the work to be presented in a scale that was naturalistic. And I wanted the scale of the projected hands to contrast with the small but concentrated materiality of the Bang & Olufsen CD player in the adjoining room. So I blew the hands up to a monumental scale, which also magnifies the expressive aspects of the hands – the signs of aging that situate the speakers historically, the hypnotic gestural movements. And it exaggerates a visual pun, where the hands stand in for the missing artists, and for the missing visual information on the artworks.

With *AHMA* my reasons for projecting the work at a large scale are two-fold. The large scale allows the spectator to feel drawn into the narrative of the video, to become implicated in an almost bodily sense by it. Painting the walls of the projection space in a color that is found in the video (as I did at LA><ART in Los Angeles, and as is the case at the Ellen Gallery) extends the space of the video and envelopes the spectator within the “image,” so to speak.

The large scale of the *AHMA* projection (although at about 11 feet across, it is fairly modest by contemporary standards) allows for a perceptual advantage that I only noticed when I first viewed the video at a scale larger than the monitor scale at which it was edited and reviewed during post-production. At monitor-scale, my sense is that the spectator struggles somewhat to take in the titles – which are almost constant – simultaneous with the moving imagery. At a large scale, the spectator can comprehend the meaning of the titles while absorbing the signification of the moving imagery in an almost

atmospheric manner. I'm sure it has something to do with the ways in which the brain takes in visual and textual cues and meaning at the same time, and I was somewhat surprised to see that the spectator's capacity for absorbing the quasi-narrative was so much improved through a large-scale projection.

That said, although I do consider the scale of projection carefully in my work, there exists a kind of unspoken pressure to produce installations at a visually impactful scale, and ideally with a captivating twist in the projection format. I think this exists for several reasons. On the one hand, artists have been competing with Hollywood's amazing computerized special effects since at least the '80s, and also with the popular appeal of large-scale painting, sculpture, and photography as they appear in increasingly large-scale museums, at least in an American culture where bigger is seen as better. It will be interesting to see the impact on time based art of the proliferation of tiny-screen mass distribution (i.e. downloadable movies and TV shows), because there's a generation that seems to not distinguish too much between the scales of projection, while privileging narrative content.

MT: Both *aihca* and *AHMA* point to important shifts in art making, filmmaking and writing that occurred in the 20th century. In *aihca*, the redefinition of the terms of art making represented by Conceptual art is the underlying substance around which the work evolves. In *AHMA*, your focus in working off Resnais's film is not to reassess the new forms of visual and textual narrative that it introduced and came to so beautifully exemplify. However, you nevertheless make full use of the flashbacks that slice through the film, joining past and present, and of the disembodied and fragmented narrative of the screenplay and dialogues that draws together as it separates, to enable in your video the coexistence of multiples points of views and of the public and private realms. Just as these two installations shift between the past and the present, how do you, today (in the current art world), position yourself in relation to these radical attempts to rethink the conventions of art making, filmmaking and textual narrative?

SK: For me, methodology and subject matter are inextricably bound together. The politics of representation are as important as the representation of politics. This is why I find both Conceptualism and the Resnais/Duras film to be so interesting. In historical Conceptual work of the '60s and '70s there is an attention to the ways in which meaning is produced – whether through art's association with institutional contexts and mediums (museums, galleries, magazines, discursive commentary, the paratextual, etc.) or through a kind of deconstruction of sites of enunciation (for example, through the displacement from conventional mediums to performative ones, where the body takes the place of the art object).

I was, and continue to be, fascinated by the ways in which the past is interwoven with the present in *Hiroshima mon amour*. Resnais utilized specifically filmic strategies and vocabularies that are very interesting to me – the ways in which the camera positions the spectator, the particular uses of montage to blur the boundaries between time frames, the use of music as both a voice and a way of “coloring” the imagery, the alternation of newsreel footage and narrative footage, the disconnection of voice from image through framing, so that in the early section you're not sure whether the bodies framed by the camera are connected to the voices heard simultaneously on the soundtrack. And these approaches are representational strategies that can't be disconnected from the script. Duras's script itself formulates a way of working with language, time, memory, trauma, and questions of ethical responsibility that Resnais then visualizes, and *augments*, through filmic strategies. It's not a flawless film, in that Resnais and Duras had their historical blind spots, but I find it fascinating how in this instance it was not a case of a filmmaker instrumentalizing a script produced a priori by a writer, but a very enmeshed collaboration. Form and narrative – it's hard to tell where one ends and the other begins in terms of the way meaning is created in *Hiroshima mon amour*.

As for how I position myself in relation to these earlier strategies, I would say that I'm not iconoclastic in my approach, meaning that I gladly welcome whatever legacies are still relevant for the present moment. My focus is on what might be meaningful to contribute to a dense world of images and sounds. I have never really understood the need on the part of some artists to “kill the father,” so to speak. Or the mother, for that matter. That goal seems impoverishing to me, unless such a paradigm shift would be capable of allowing us to consider differently the social conventions that we take for granted.

MT: I am interested in the reach of your comment "... what might be meaningful to contribute to a dense world of images and sounds." When we met in New York, you said to me at one point that you had more than once considered stopping making art. I was impressed by your candor and actually felt for some time after the weight of your comment's implications, the seriousness of it. And that for me is tied to the nature of your work. Every single work you have realized has been carefully researched, and seems to come to be after what appears at times a long process of honing, of subtle adjustments to get it right as if this subtraction or that addition will determine that "meaningfulness". It appears to be a difficult and meticulous process that signals to me a kind of *prise de position*. I would like to link this to a concern with ethics that marks your practice. You spoke of an ethics of representation earlier in relation to what Resnais omits visually from *Hiroshima mon amour*. Rosalyn Deutsche, in her essay "Inadequacy,"¹ refers to Jacqueline Rose's "ethics of failure" as a productive frame for the "inadequacy" in your project on Conceptual art.¹ And you state in a short text reproduced in this volume that *AHMA* offers to the spectator "the possibility of ethical inquiry".

SK: I think that my response to the way in which the art field and the art market "blew up" in the late '80s was to reduce my output, rather than increase it. Given my age, I caught the tail end of an art scene in New York that was dramatically smaller than it is now. That scale created a sense of meaningful exchange – between artists, between artists and critics, and between artists and audiences. And I was also fortunate enough to come of age in the early '80s when appropriationist art had permeated an extended network of academic and social discourses and publications. So I experienced a more intimate scene in which one could mount an exhibition and actually feel like it was making a contribution to critical exchanges and discourses. That experience dropped away in the late '80s due to a focus on the market and object making. And because of the market growth and the media attention this created, graduate degree programs in fine arts proliferated, as well as a kind of gold-rush attitude on the part of young students/artists (and sometimes their tuition-paying or rent-subsidizing parents) who saw it as a field that might be financially viable rather than marginal. It started to be thought of as a calculated economic risk. Frankly, I knew then and I know now that dizzying financial rewards in the art field are few and far between. But that fantasy dies hard. In any case, that shift had a destabilizing effect on me. It became impossible to feel like one's contributions to the field and to audiences had much meaning, or to work at an individual pace that wasn't geared to the market and its networks – fairs, galleries, etc. I wasn't calculating about producing less, but it just felt better to exhibit work less frequently than to get caught up in a whirlwind of endless group exhibitions and a myriad of gallery shows. Later I ran across a comment that Duchamp made toward the end of his life when he was asked how he felt about Warhol's work. He said that he found the work interesting, but that the main difference between he and Warhol was that Warhol always tried to make as much work as possible, while he tried to make as little as possible. Two models!

I think a second profoundly destabilizing moment occurred for me around 2004, when it was intensely apparent that the havoc that the Bush administration was wreaking was pervasive on a global scale, and resistance was difficult.

In both instances, the question raised for me was how an artist could possibly intervene in the face of the instrumentalization and degradation of so many lives. I think that the honing process you refer to is the attempt to craft a publicly meaningful response to this kind of overwhelming power. There is no surety in the process, which involves trying to understand what sort of audience the work creates. For me, the taking of a position as an artist has to involve visual, aural, and written languages that are not common to other disciplines. Otherwise, why not just move into those disciplines? There should be something we can glean from art that is different than what we can glean from all other fields. And recently I have been wondering whether electoral politics haven't become quite useless in precipitating needed change, therefore making cultural contributions more important. It might seem odd that I'm saying this as Obama is about to be inaugurated as President, but given most of the appointments he's made to his cabinet, it's hard to feel hopeful about electoral politics providing something other than a site of discourse. That's certainly not nothing, but it is confusing given that the rhetoric around this presidency-elect concerns pragmatic action above all in the face of the mess that the Bush administration has left behind.

What I mean by an ethics of absence in *Hiroshima mon amour* has to do with the ethics of the camera to

a large extent – what Resnais chooses to show or not show of the suffering of others and of the ways in which cultures record such suffering. He is also precise about where the visual point of view is at a given moment in the film. That is an ethical decision, because a visual point of view so often makes the spectator feel the certainty of commanding an image. But those choices are also inextricably bound to absences in the script. What the characters don't say is as important as what they do say, and what their *affect* conveys without speaking. And language is also important for a film that had to deal with the difficulty of connecting two cultures with different experiences of a traumatic and evitable event, the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan. In *AHMA* I initially used a French language voiceover for the whole video (with English titles). But I was never comfortable with that voiceover, and after months of editing I realized that the video was lacking silence. That's why it now has English titles and only one short scene with a French voiceover. Of course, while silence and absence can sometimes be used in an ethical manner, lack of action can also be very aggressive, as in the case of New Orleans, or in protecting residents of Iraq.

MT: Do you think *aihca* provides a form of ethical inquiry about the intermittent manifestations of conceptual art during the past half-century, as manifested in the ways this art is remembered?

SK: I began the *aihca* project in order to try to slow down a process of historicization that was proving to be quite fast and narrow. It's not to say that a methodology that slows down historicization is always an ethical one, but in this instance I think that the inclusion of certain practices that had been overlooked is valuable. Why leave out performative and filmic/video work, as some historians and curators had done? In doing so, most of the women artists who worked at that time were left out. Was there an anxiety about having the performative, the body, "feminize" the history of conceptual art? But the project was also an attempt to slow down the process enough to question the mechanisms by which histories come to be validated. The process inscribed a questioning of authority in the authoring of historicization. This is emphasized through the anonymity of the speakers in the project – who were artists, not professional critics – as well as the inclusion of faulty memories, and my literal silence in the work.

This is what Deutsche and Mignon Nixon² took up in their analyses of the project, in part through Rose's concept of the "ethics of failure," and in part through psychoanalytic concepts. A historicization of events and movements that does not take into account displacements, projections, screen memories, etc., seems to me to be problematic, if an ethical approach can be considered, at least in part, to involve an understanding of how "otherness" is created...

MT: You commented in an interview with Hal Foster on spectatorial passivity and on ways to counter that. And you stated your dislike of bringing story and body together, finding manipulative an overemphasis on personal experience in art and media.³ I think you want an "active" spectator/exhibition visitor who not only physically moves between here and there (the audio and the images of the hands being situated in different rooms in *aihca*), but whose senses are also brought forcefully into play in the experience of the work (for example, in *AHMA*, the richly saturated colors of the military action sequences interspersed with the shimmering, luminescent intertwined bodies of *she* and *he*; the silence followed by the hard and invasive sounds of the military actions; or the disembodied ring of each speaker's voice in *aihca* in relation to our *embodied* listening of it; the insistent presence of touch in both). And a spectator whose cultural assumptions are tested (the various actors and actresses of indeterminate race and ethnicity who play the couple in *AHMA*). I could go on, there are so many permutations of this fracturing that creates, as you say earlier in this interview, "a more engaged spectator", a more critical one.

I find it fascinating how the body and the "story" are in a sense irrevocably and inextricably linked, but at the same time are kept apart in these two installations. The coming together of the two are kept in check as they permeate the space of the exhibition and our experience of the two works.

SK: That's a very interesting parallel that you draw. I had not been consciously aware of the fracturing qualities in *AHMA* as produced by the contrasts of silence and sound, and saturated color and non-color, etc. While I had intended the disjunctions between the Duras synopsis/ dialogue and Resnais' montage in relation to the contemporary imagery I culled, I hadn't thought about it as paralleling the fracturing in

aihca. I would have to agree that it's fascinating how the coming together of body and the story are kept in check. Now, if I only had a little more control over such thinking as I was making the work...!

MT: I'd like to end this interview on a question about exhibition contexts. The critical nature of your practice has always reflected simultaneously upon the apparatus of presentation and representation of the society of which you're a part, and the apparatus of your work – your art making – *in* that society. That includes, of course, the apparatus of the art world). Many of your projects have directly questioned the status, function, or site of exhibition (*Enlarged from the catalogue: the United States of America*, 1988; *An example of recent work ...* 1990; *Enlarged from the catalogue: Michael Asher...*, 1990; *Once more with feeling*, 1992; *These goods are available at _____*, 1995; *Like the difference between ...*, 1995). Clearly, the exhibition site, space and context shaped the specificity of the work. In the interview with Foster you state that some of those projects could not be done today; they would be unreadable because the changing aesthetics of display styles and marketing techniques have blurred the boundaries between the culture of consumption and of art. And the legibility that you desire for your work required you to rethink your strategies and techniques as they intersected with the public realm, resulting in your readjusting your work process. You describe developing a “more detached work process that could make [you] less subject to endless cultural permutations, while still letting [you] remain alert to cultural and political events.” *aihca* and *AHMA* are projects in which, as you say: “the exhibition site became virtually unimportant, and in some ways the institution did too, except with regard to history (for *aihca*).”⁴ That is quite a statement and a shift. Does that mean that a critique of the space and institution of exhibition is no longer possible, or that it has been superseded by a more pressing critique? Or has the nature (the rich transhistorical content and visual and aural means of presentation) and imperatives of these two installations shifted to another site or transformed your relationship with the spectator and the institutional space?

SK: There is a primary importance for me, as an artist, in being able to make an environment for myself in which I can actually be creative and produce work. A painter may focus on the physical space of the studio and its light, but for a post-studio artist the “studio” is the world, to some extent. And the world is harder to regulate than the studio! With “An example of recent work may be seen in the windows of Harry Winston, Inc...” I was able to start a series of inexpensive projects situated in various cities, without getting the approval of city governments and officials (which had frustrated me in the late 1980s). I did this by using the paratextual elements of exhibitions to direct spectators to sites, and sometimes around cities. So I by-passed the censorship normally imposed by nervous officials; often artists engage in self-censorship even before a project gets to the approval process. I also devised a class that I taught for many years, in which art and architecture students were required to develop budget-less projects that addressed and were situated in various sites in the cities in which I taught.

The “workaround” projects of this period helped me to create a form of exhibition space that was specific, unregulated, and uncommissioned. But the rituals of perception in cities started to change dramatically in the 1990s. The melding of design, display, art, advertising, and technology grew to be overwhelming. So I moved on to more internally reflective works that made their own environments, so to speak. It was a way of moving back to the gallery or museum without having to wait for commissions, without dealing with “white cube” issues. Because, after all, how many times can you foreground the “white cube” for spectators? The critical elements did get more internalized in the work. Using time-based work allowed me to do this more easily. I'm still sensitive to issues of installation and the situatedness of the embodied spectator. But I focus less on the mechanics of institutional signification because I noticed in the early part of this decade that the strategies of revelation and exposure at play in a lot of “institutional critique” were not making anyone uncomfortable. Like the blasé public attitudes of this decade toward certain practices - torture, rendition, illegal invasion, the transgression of constitutional rights, and government corruption - the exposure of complicities in relation to art institutions was not rattling anyone. So while I value enormously the legacies of institutional critique, it seemed a good time to move on to different approaches. The world is an intensely complex place today – the wielding of power is both more brutal and more subtle than it's ever been. And understanding our imbrication in this spectrum is quite a challenge. I feel fortunate to have a *métier* through which to comment, as well as feel my way through.

¹ Rosalyn Deutsche, “Inadequacy”. *Silvia Kolbowski: inadequate...Like...Power* (Vienna: Seccession and Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2004).

² Mignon Nixon, “On the Couch”, *October* 113 (Summer), 2005.

³ “Hal Foster Interviews Silvia Kolbowski,” in *Silvia Kolbowski: inadequate...Like...Power* (Vienna: Seccession and Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2004).

⁴ “Hal Foster Interviews Silvia Kolbowski,” *ibid.*, p. 163–165.