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SFMOMA FEATURES VIDEO WORKS THAT EXPLORE THE ARTIST IN CONVERSATION

From July 3 to September 13, 2009, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) presents *The Studio Sessions*, a group exhibition showcasing conceptually-driven video works by five contemporary artists: Kevin Atherton, General Idea, Christian Jankowski, Mads Lynnerup, and Joe Sola. Organized by SFMOMA Assistant Curator of Media Arts Tanya Zimbaro, the exhibition borrows its name from the common title for music albums that highlights the recording process, while nodding to the tradition of the process-oriented studio performance in video art.

Taking a behind-the-scenes look at art production, *The Studio Sessions* explores the theme of the artist in conversation: turning the dialogue about one's own art into the subject of the work itself. Professional situations in which artists introduce their ideas and answer questions about their practice—studio visits, artist talks, press interviews—are usually considered secondary to art-making and the final exhibited result. In these humorous, yet poignantly human works, the artists adapt or subvert these forms of presentation in order to test out a concept or reflect on their working process. In doing so, they stage a larger discussion of how art is promoted to and received by different audiences.

According to Zimbaro, “these works share a degree of transparency about certain realities of being a professional artist, namely the act of presenting one's own work. These videos are self-referential, but they speak to the larger implications of moving from the private, preparatory phase associated with the studio to the public stage of exhibition. This transition brings up questions about the role of contextual information and the expectations of the audience. While contemporary practice has often transcended the studio, the notion of the studio as the intimate space for working out a concept, reflecting on one's process and history, as well as getting feedback from others, is taken up here.”

In these performance-based videos, the artists reflect on their position both as an individual and vis-à-vis the art world; however, the results are not overtly biographical or personal. Rather, the emphasis is on the process of critique and on engaging others in dialogue, asking fundamental questions at the heart of art-making, such as “What is the nature of this piece?” “What life it will have?” and “What constitutes a successful work or artist?”

Kevin Atherton



General Idea, *Pilot* (still), 1977; single-channel color video with sound, 28:56 min; Collection of the Netherlands Media Art Institute, Montevideo/Time Based Arts, Amsterdam © 2009 General Idea

Part of a generation that pioneered video and performance art in Britain in the 1970s and early 1980s, Atherton (Manx, b. 1950) has performed a number of pieces that adapt the structure of the press interview or the Q&A session of the artist talk. The work *In Two Minds—Past Version* (1978/2006), updates a piece done in 1978 by substituting a new set of answers. In this 2006 version, Atherton responds to the amusingly antagonistic questions posed to him by his twenty-seven-year-old self. The questions are about the work itself and concern the effectiveness of his idea—as well as the effectiveness of idea-based art in general. Frustrated, present-day Atherton not only justifies his intentions in creating a piece based on an internal dialogue, but also explains how the terms of the debate have changed, and how the piece has become more about life than just art. The work reveals not only how video art has technically changed in the interim, but also how the perception of video art has changed over the years, as it has become ubiquitous in contemporary art.

The original installation consisted of two video recordings of Atherton, made the same day and then shown on monitors at the Serpentine Gallery, in London, in 1978. Although the piece, at the time, was considered finished, the open structure of the work allowed him to “reenter” it almost thirty years later. The resulting work (two facing video projections) is receiving its U.S. premiere in this exhibition. In addition, Atherton has enacted *In Two Minds* as a live video performance at Tate Britain in 2006 and FACT Liverpool in 2007.

General Idea

The Canadian art collaborative General Idea (1969–1994) used television as one of their mediums for disseminating their work. Produced as a television broadcast for OECA-TV in Ontario, *Pilot* (1977) holds a mirror to the cultural clichés associated with the art star and artistic inspiration. AA Bronson, Felix Partz, and Jorge Zontal (pseudonyms) appear as the hosts, recounting the major projects and performances from that early ambitious period. Central to their discussion is their narrative of the mythic 1984 Miss General Idea Pageant, with the construct of the beauty pageant as a metaphor for the art world. In a number of related performances made in preparation, General Idea reworked the publicity formats of the television special and the press conference. These strategies grew out of their involvement with mail art, occupying the formats of exhibition notices and other support material connected to the reception of art. Artist statements (published as articles in their mail-art publication *FILE Magazine* (1972–1989), and in other projects) form the basis for a manifesto, which is delivered through voiceover. *Pilot* intersperses video documentation, photographs, archival material, and images derived from vintage architecture and fashion magazines.

Christian Jankowski

The tensions inherent in the expectation to deliver a strong work are revealed in the video projection *Telemistica* (1999), by Jankowski (German, b. 1968). For this breakthrough piece, Jankowski learned Italian in order to consult with the local-television tarot-card readers about his forthcoming contribution to the prestigious 48th Venice Biennale. Speaking live on the telephone to five fortune tellers, the artist asks them each questions about the artwork he is in the process of realizing, as well as about his future success in general. *Telemistica* belongs to series of works in which Jankowski collaborates with television personalities—from a televangelist to a talk show host—to expand on the notion of art in a way that is both sincere and humorous.

Mads Lynnerup

In his work *Presentation* (2001), Lynnerup (Danish, b. 1976) is absent but is the subject of conversation. We watch his mother (Anne Lise) briefly describe his various early performance pieces to her friend (Lis) as they sit in front of the artist website she has just finished designing for him. Without their notice, Lynnerup left a camera on a table across from them, affording us a voyeuristic view of their spontaneous reactions, from bewilderment to shared affectionate laughter. This low-key video document of this impromptu ‘studio visit’ underscores the vulnerability of presenting what one has produced for the consideration of others.

Joe Sola

Studio Visit (2005) presents eight performance views of Los Angeles–based artist Joe Sola (American, b. 1966) and his private audience of art world professionals. Through variations on the same setup, the artist explains to his seated guests the role of the cinematic in his oeuvre while an example of his work (the video *More Cinematic Los Angeles County Museum of Art on Fire*, 2004) is projected on the wall behind him. He explains that he is working on a new piece. Suddenly, in the midst of conversation, he then makes his great escape, diving and crashing through a window made of breakaway glass, leaving his bemused or shocked guests to register what has transpired before moving to the window to check on him. The performance embodies the climactic moments of the Hollywood action-film genre, bringing the illusion and fantasy of cinema into “the real.” Sola conflates the demo and final versions of the performance by choosing to stage it during the moment of curatorial research and artistic preparation, thereby disrupting the scripted routine of these encounters.

In conjunction with the exhibition, Zimbaro will give a related talk on July 7 as part of SFMOMA’s Free Tuesday Program. For more information, visit www.sfmoma.org.

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Visit our website at www.sfmoma.org or call 415.357.4000 for more information.

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