

Essays Projects About
 Interviews Elsewhere
 Reviews Other Forms

Stories, Cities, Makeshift Structures

« Previous / Next »

March 2, 2015 / Old Title, Reviews



Shelly Silver at [Slought](#)

By Kelsey Halliday Johnson



Many of the works by Shelly Silver exhibited in *Stories, Cities, Makeshift Structures* at Slought brought to mind the remarkable Allan Sekula. In the late artist and theorist's writings, he made a passionate case for lens-based media to become a sociological art (in his words, "critical social documentary"): mirroring our world to open up a metaphorical space where political and social conditions could be different. As Sekula lamented, "Documentary has amassed mountains of evidence. And yet in this pictorial presentation of scientific and legalistic 'fact,' the genre has simultaneously contributed much to spectacle, to retinal excitation, to voyeurism, to terror, envy and nostalgia, and only a little to the critical understanding of the social world." While Shelly Silver certainly plays with the inherent edges of voyeurism within the documentary gaze, her work brilliantly probes the viewer to consider critical human questions about identifying within and across communities.

Slought's window on Walnut Street featured the rear-projection of *in complete world* (2008) made entirely of street interviews with strangers. The participants answered provocative questions on camera posed by Silver, like "Are we responsible for the government we get?" While shot in New York, these faces and perspectives feel right at home walking the streets of Philadelphia (with the notable exception of a visible Yankees hat). While its nearly feature-length (53 minutes) was ambitious for the attention spans of passers by, it made for a uniquely self-referential installation and a fitting conceptual introduction to the social connections and urban spaces Silver's work excavates. Many of her works have been bound to screenings and film festivals in the past, but this installation demonstrated the evocative possibilities of a gallery setting.

Silver's narrator in the video work *What I'm Looking For* (2004) ponders: "What am I capturing now? I don't know. Perhaps very little. Perhaps nothing. Small truths. Mostly lies... projections." Poetically narrated by Icelandic artist Katrín Sigurdardóttir, this line of thought by its semi-fictional narrator, can extend to most of Silver's work. As we watch her video pieces, the audience is left challenging conceptions of identity, both imposed on and projected by the subjects of her films. With an approach kindred to Sekula, Silver blurs the boundaries between documentary and fine art video, and posits the role of the lens-based artist as one of social urgency. Silver's humanity, her concerns with both local and global identities, and her unearthing of social power dynamics are quickly brought to the fore with her masterful film editing in the constellation of works on view at Slought.

What I'm Looking For feels the richest – in stylistic conversation with the photo/video work of Chris Marker, hints of the intimate voyeurism of Sophie Calle, and a similar pacing to the voiceover works of Janet Cardiff. Yet Silver presents a uniquely human perspective and tantalizing narrative style all her own. I watched the film nearly in its entirety (15 minutes) without the intended headphone-supplied sound, entranced simply by the still photographs progression on their own aesthetic merit and structure. While the work is indeed a video (with varied pacing) it had moments that paralleled with the raw intimacy of Nan Goldin's hybrid photo/moving-image installation slide projection work. As slide projectors were commercially made for families and as a pedagogical classroom tool, the act of watching photographs projected continues to establish a conceptually provocative relationship between the audience and image. The street photographs that begin the piece are marked by an overt but chilly voyeurism that slowly progress into intimate portraiture, both self-conscious and sexually performative. The actions of her characters are quickened and slowed through use of the motor drive on her camera, and brought in and out of focus with clever depth of field use that illustrates the ennui of the piece's first person narrator.

As a narrative, *What I'm Looking For* takes us through the urban environment as the protagonist – the photographer of the images – seeks intimate perspectives of internet strangers in public spaces. That quest leads to meeting her subjects in a Starbucks, with an arrangement that they will meet to let the narrator take a photograph "revealing something about themselves." At one point she meets a man only to shoot his naked armpit, sheepishly narrating: "Instead, I show this. What I'm looking for? I'm not sure." After numerous false starts and frustrations, the narrator meets a subject who begins to hold her attention, a man who makes connections between his experiences with the 1945 bombing in Hiroshima and the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center train station. The tone of the work quickly escalates from a meandering lost narrator unclear of what she wants to a more intense exploration of desire for human connection. Silver's practice is maturely feminist: her propositions of a female gaze (in public, private, and virtual space) in many of these works feels fresh and socially urgent.

In this latter half of the film, we are abruptly reminded that Silver was soliciting these strangers through an online dating website, an environment potentially predatory and founded on a different sort of desire. We have only been subject to the photographer's desire, but not that of her subjects. As the film turns towards a sexually exhibitionist subject, Silver removes us from the street and into the virtual photographic space of the online personal ads the project began in. As Chris Marker's *La Jetée* eventually breaks its own structural rule with a simple (literal) blink of the eye, so too does Silver. Her careful photo pacing does not move towards illusionary threshold of video speed, and instead becomes a more frantic montage. Playing with the persistence of vision in quite the opposite way of Marker, the film moves from the slow, careful stuttering of consecutive street shots to a digital vision disjointed by darkness. These later images, seemingly provided by the stranger on the dating site, are edited with sudden cuts to black frames, the phenomenological afterimage on our retinas quickly following within the dark space. A red square on the black screen eventually becomes a black square, shielding our view from the penis of a nude male torso, followed by the preceding image's censored genitalia engulfed in black space. Eventually the explicit images take on a strobing effect – difficult to look at and quite invasive – a radical photographic product of the voyeurism and unguarded intimacy the narrator once longed for.

Silver poignantly compels the audience towards examining context: where and when the recorded footage takes place, and where and when we find ourselves watching it. Many of these works are difficult to separate from our post-9/11 understanding of street photography, and further in our cellphone era of iReports and citizen surveillance. Many urban Americans remember the ramifications of the Gulianni era, when cameras were cast away as suspicious tools in public spaces. In the piece 7, one of her shorter works at only 3 minutes and 12 seconds long, Silver quickly embodies that situational tension by simply filming a police officer scanning a crowd for suspicious activity. A work spanning two screens made from a single shot (each screen with half of the footage) creates a surveillant two-camera piece. The camera can be seen as an aggressor, with its obvious telephoto lens, however depending on one's politics the question of power can become muddied. Silver undoubtedly means to manipulate our reading – the footage is set to the lonely, mellow score of Miles Davis's *Take 1 & 2* (running simultaneously) of *Nuit Sur Les Champs-Élysées*. The track is part of the original score of the 1958 French crime film *Ascenseur Pour L'Echafaud*. Memorably used by Louis Malle, the original film followed Mrs. Tavenier (Jeanne Moreau) while she looks for her missing husband in a series of long tracking shots on the streets of Paris. Here, the simultaneity of Davis's renditions primarily in 1992-93 in Berlin, finds itself in a nation four years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and painfully disjointed. The work is urgently relevant to a contemporary American audience fraught with immigration and citizenship politics, and larger questions of belonging. Sociological in approach, Silver tasked herself with interviewing citizens on the street with a simple set of 25 questions, hoping to understand if one could determine if someone was from East or West Berlin. Masterfully edited, the film climaxes into a portrait of xenophobia, the blinders of nationalism, and the boundaries of acceptance. Not a mere time capsule or documentary film, the work becomes a touchstone of the ever-relevant global issues of fluxing borders and rapidly changing populations. At one point, a dismissive comment of one Berliner states: "Foreigners who were born here don't consider themselves foreign." This is quickly followed by a shot of a visibly nervous person identifying himself as the rather neutral question, "What does the word foreign mean?" Eventually the question positions citizens of Berlin against one another, showing the lasting impact of the Berlin Wall.

Here, Silver is allowed to show her often witty film editing and her masterful weaving of larger cultural narratives. Uncomfortably funny, the piece was whittled down from 180 hours of footage. In her artist talk at Slought, Silver confessed that she "kept filming because the situation kept changing," and only stopped when her assistant said: "if you shoot another frame I'm going to quit." While apparent in her filmmaking, this ultimatum surely illustrates Silver's insatiable curiosity for the problems of communities unfolding in front of her. The film, which Silver confessed was received poorly in Berlin when it was first shown, is now critically acclaimed. The endemic problems that hurt our communities the most are sometimes the ones we require outsider's perspective in order to lay the foundation of future understanding and social change.

In a Fall 2002 *October* essay, Allan Sekula poetically remarked, "In an age that denies the very existence of society, to insist on the scandal of the world's increasingly grotesque 'connectedness,' the hidden merciless grinding away beneath the slick superficial liquidity of markets, is akin to one's submerged ear with oneself in the position of an oyster rolling on the bottom far below. To insist on the social is simply to practice purposeful immersion." Silver, like Sekula, has certainly swum against the tide for periods where her work's reception has been complicated by context. Yet it seems these important works are only becoming increasingly relevant with age, as we find ourselves in an ever-complicating world in need of more purposeful immersion.

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