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IN THE PARK WITH SAM ANDERSON AND LIA GANGITANO

On April 26, 2017, while *The Park* was on view at SculptureCenter, the artist and her friend and colleague Lia Gangitano, director of PARTICIPANT INC in New York, engaged in a conversation about the exhibition in New York and its counterpart in Cologne, *Big Bird*, on view at the Kölnischer Kunstverein.

WALKTHROUGH

Sam Anderson: The outdoor work at SculptureCenter, *TV*, is both a public sculpture and a satellite for a television station. It's a pole with a rotating metal bowl-like element on top, which connects to an electronic dial inside. When the metal spins, a soundtrack in the basement changes to one of the eight different sound channels. Pete Cafarella and I composed all the piano-based channels, which are inspired by TV programs. One channel, for instance, has the sound of a bus pulling up in the rain. There's music, and there's the bus sound, and a rain sound. The patch we used was created in the 1970s, so there's a sense of that time. There are seven other tracks based on a detective program, a galloping horse, a crowded cafe, a jazz concert, a ballad, a minimal performance piece, and a PBS program.

The metal is moved either by the wind or by you—there's a set of pool cues outside you can use to reach it—but there are no instructions, and it's impossible to hear the sound if you're outside with the sculpture. So you figure it out or you don't. *TV* has two indeterminate elements—people and the wind—and a new channel can change the feeling of the entire show.

As you move downstairs, the sound becomes immersive. It feels like you're stepping out of the *TV*, and you're confronted with a group of sculptures (*E number 1-11*). They're each a similar figure repeated, sometimes reversed. The source material is a 1981 photograph taken at Studio 54 of a fourteen-year-old actress.

Lia Gangitano: I was going to ask if it was your mom.

SA: No, her name is Eva Ionesco. Her mother was an erotic photographer in the 1970s, and Eva was her muse. The photos of Eva were very controversial and attracted the attention of many directors. She consistently played Lolita-type roles. In this photo, she's throwing a resistant and hostile look at you, as if she's part of an audience watching you make a bad performance. I tried to reproduce that feeling in these eleven sculptures. They all represent the same girl, but each is distinct because they're handmade.

LG: They do have a cumulative effect. It's a strong look. You feel it right when you walk in.

SA: They're a tough audience. Not like the transparent figure in *Day Shift*, who resembles a waitress in her uniform. This resin sculpture is set into a window ledge in front of a screen with a rear-projection video. It's the first piece in a series of three, whose titles suggest different work hours (the others are *Early Shift*, which appears in Cologne, and *Late Shift*). The video is both documentary and stock footage of birds, mostly storks. And it repeats three times. In the second cycle, a piano soundtrack comes in. I added additional clips in this cycle—Coca-Cola cups on a table with finches, a crane balancing on a branch, a falcon killing a fish, a famous pelican named Petros—so it diverges from its ostensible documentary reality. The soundtrack plays with emotion. It's Blue Gene Tyranny's "Sunrise or Sunset in Texas." I liked that title, because of the either/or, and the song really has that quality to it. I invented a narrative to help me edit the sequence, based loosely on something I saw on the Lifetime Network. In the beginning of the loop, you see a female stork with two male storks fighting over food in her nest. Later she chooses a partner. The two mate at sunset. They have babies. The male stork flies away, and the female is alone with her babies. She gets upset and shits in her nest. She finds a different mate. This story doesn't translate, but the outline worked for me. The second version of this piece, *Early Shift*, reorganizes the same clips in a new pattern.

So, with *Day Shift* and *Early Shift* you have videos you can see both through and behind the transparent waitress—sometimes her outline disappears, or she becomes part of the video or is animated by the movement of the birds. Maybe the waitress is looking out the window on her break. She identifies with the birds, and physically resembles them.

LG: The waitress is pretty birdlike.

SA: There's a centerpiece in the arched hallway. It is both an abstraction of a town square and a horizon line, and is made of wood, gems, salt, pepper, glass, light, and found objects. There's also a "chapel" (*Chapel no. 1*), which has a formal relationship to *Day Shift* and *Early Shift* and is made of a lightbox and a draped skeletal figure looming over two wooden pieces painted white—a geometric "man and woman." There's a children's orchestra (*Kids*) that has a formal relationship to the audience of *Evas* (*E number 1-11*). And there's a horse.

It's called *Entertainer*, and it's ornamented like a parade horse. I originally imagined it as a public sculpture.

LG: Like in a park.

SA: I made a horse because I like Robert Ashley's *Perfect Lives*, and there's a line in it where he describes how the sculptor makes a horse look stupid. When I think of a park, there's a horse sculpture in it. And I think about the sculptor—whether it's a good or bad one.

There are two figures here, the same height. A young girl in overalls who's eating chips (*Girl with Chips*) and a teacher holding books and a pencil (*Teacher*). And there's *Dad*, waiting for you at the end of a hall with his arms outstretched. So, in this community there are two different kinds of audiences, there's a town square that is also a horizon, there's a waitress and a day shift, there's a pedestrian and a teacher. Architecture. Light. A chapel, a couple. Death. And a horse, and a public sculpture, and a TV station.

INTERVIEW

LG: As with many artists in my life, I met you through Michel Auder. You were my host when I substituted for Michel at Yale. I think it was a sculpture class, but Michel was basically video DJing, so I always imagine you working with moving images, even if they are sculpture.

And now I know that this moving image, this sort of portal space, is significant to this constellation of work. I didn't know if there would be video in these shows, but I was still trying to think about the objects in terms of their relationships to characters, or character actors. Or the fact that they seemed to occupy not necessarily a cinematic space, but a narrative space.

SA: I'm not usually interested in the protagonist's narrative—I like the side characters. Their uniforms define them. They are architectural, waiting in a space for you to show up. My mother is a character actress. She's typecast frequently, one or two lines, sometimes non-speaking. Even as Nurse #1 or Neighbor #2, she gives it her best. In a sense, this is reflected in a character actor's place within their industry—their job is to help move someone else's story along. I am interested in that limited person who exists to contextualize you.

The exhibition *Big Bird* includes three works, titled *Eyai Fishing #1*, *Eyai Fishing #3*, and *Eyai Fishing #4* (all 2014), that are clay figures portraying unhappy teenagers holding fishing rods, each isolated on a white tray filled with sand. Teens embody a kind of stasis even though they are in a growing, transitory state. They're self-aware, but restricted by their lack of power. I thought of specific overalls-clad country kids as decorative elements in ashtrays, forming a "smoking section"-type grid. What happens when the smoker is a protagonist and their smoke makes atmosphere?

LG: I was thinking about how the objects relate to moving images and sound. Whether they are presented in tandem or not, they maintain that quality you just described. Also, you touched on something that is of huge interest to me, around the idea of character actors, thinking about their relationship to ideas about success, or value systems. Their lack of centrality in a certain sense opens up all these other possibilities for defining themselves, or staying peripheral to a certain kind of scrutiny, or sometimes being a total scene-stealer.

SA: Yes. They're stuck in those places. Much like sculptures you find in educational exhibitions. It's interesting, because in my mother's case—and I talk about this a lot—since she has a certain body type she's cast in certain kinds of things. If she's of a certain age and is considered overweight by a director who thinks about types, they want her consistently in roles that are either matronly or asexual. They're just helpful ladies, with very entertaining personalities. Or they're of a certain class, removed from yours. How and why do we decide these things when we are constructing a characterization of a person? I think it's interesting because an actress or actor wants to do the opposite; they want a broad range.

LG: Or to be somebody else.

SA: Or to transcend their body, steal the scene, or give that character a complete beginning and end that the audience never sees. I make a backstory the audience picks up on or not. Or I create the characterization of something, which is different from a character. But a character or characterization is always a placeholder or reflection of something else—a lesson or an idea that's funny or sad. That identified persona, feeling, or idea can trap you in a sentimental space you can't escape. This also happens in my more abstracted works; any abstraction of material implies a characterization of a very isolated kind of drama. Even as the narrative is removed and the

remnants of the material world are left exposed, I like to keep the emotional trap open. The sculpture makes a gesture and attempts to transcend itself, but from the looks of it, it cannot. But it can be powerful, and it can come close. In the way that an actor is a placeholder for something you recognize, it is similar with a sculpture.

The "skin" works in *Big Bird* are arrangements of objects placed on found scraps of discarded leather. Each scrap was cut or stained previously by a stranger, and I let those shapes and stains help dictate the content of the work. *Texas*, 2014 took about five or six months to make—it was simply a slow accumulation of debris found in my studio that I then arranged into a rigid square. The shape of the leather already looked like Texas, so this piece became about a potential topography. A similar thing happened with *States*, 2015. *The Lonely Bull*, 2016 is different. I illustrated this confused, silly, wrong feeling I have about a song with red shapes. *Blue Girl with Frog Sheep Skin*, 2015 also comes out of something different. It's a drawing of both a stalker and their object of affection, made with three things. In this case, an upside-down frog skeleton is awkward and monstrous placed with its idealized figurine counterpart. But it's not totally important for the viewer to know that the sheepskin acts like a stage for potential horror.

Adjacent to the *Eyai Fishing* "smoking section" is a piece called *Food to Go with Drinks*, 2013. *Food to Go with Drinks* is based on a café setting, where I used what I had around me to illustrate different conversations at different tables. This didn't really line up, as the materials are very limited—glow-in-the-dark ping pong balls and sawdust replace one table, a small pair of skis replace another, a box of ginger candies replace another.

LG: I wonder how that relates to the town square, or grid, or the peripheral characters' placement on the grid. I love the way you have talked about the café or smoking areas. The way that certain designations function. When you talked about the viewer in the SculptureCenter exhibition being part of the group of girls, or an audience, it's like the way different grids or social arrangements have different options for networked relationships, without the attention being focused on what's at the center. There's some kind of displacement of what's at the center, even with the horse.

SA: Which is somewhat of an agreement with the given space that creates a formal, sometimes hostile, relationship to it.

The Kunstverein Halle is made up of eighteen floor-to-ceiling windows. I had to acknowledge them when arranging the works. What goes on outside changes what you see inside. I'm projecting this, but it's almost as if the windows become screens, and *Early Shift* is presented like an extension of one of these windows. Suddenly you become very aware of what the birds are doing on the ground outside, or notice the shape of the neon business signs or the red car parked across the street.

Other areas in the Kunstverein have very rigid rules about what you can place in them, which makes sense, as the building has an important history. In two of the spaces, materials cannot burn. I planned an abstracted work for the basement, based on ads for jeans I found in *After Dark* magazines. Both the material and the placement of works were determined by the building's rigorous fire codes. It became less about *After Dark*, and more about these Giacometti-like bones posturing and loitering around the Kunstverein basement.

LG: And was this basement space your dream grid, or is it a nightmare?

SA: It's both. It has a personality and a history. Same with the basement space at SculptureCenter. But I like starting with a given grid and composition, and it's almost like . . .

LG: A score.

SA: Making a musical score. I am very interested in music notation, and sometimes the grids I form with works are based on scores. I've already said mood and tone, but it is also about spacing, timing, and containing both fixed and unfixed elements.

LG: When we first started talking, you mentioned the sound of waiting at a bus stop in the '70s. I immediately pictured Gena Rowlands in *A Woman Under the Influence*.

SA: Someone said *TV* reminded them of the film *Being There*. I like how it changes for everyone. For me, the sound comes out of Norman Lear sitcoms, PBS, Ken Nordine, *Sesame Street*, lots of TV. For Pete, who played every note of music for this piece, it's about being trained a certain way as a composer and pianist—maybe for him it's related to Cecil Taylor, Marilyn Crispell, Stephen Sondheim, Pauline Oliveros. Pete is also an accordion player, so resonance and tone is very important to him; also, lots of cartoons and TV.

LG: As you said on another occasion, you're talking about the provisional or the peripheral, like a prototype?

SA: Yes, a prototype for what is familiar to you. And I think that familiarity is a tool.

Pregnant Kiwi Skeleton, 2015 is a replica of an actual skeleton with its head supported by a wooden block. This work is difficult to explain. For me, it is about proportion, because the kiwi's egg is nearly too big for its body to hold. The sculpture is somewhat about weight, burden, a trap—something willingly stuck between two bad ends. I think it's more of a prototype than a symbol of birth and death.

LG: This might be totally unrelated, but I'm going to bring it up anyway. I don't know if you saw the James "Son Ford" Thomas exhibition at 80WSE. The person who curated it, Jonathan Berger, recently told me how these sculptures are photographic, which I didn't really understand until we talked about how they function as portraits, or, more specifically, like a portrait of the artist's town. Except for the presidents and the animals, which I think he made for money, the others are all people in his town, and when they were arranged together, you got the sense of a picture of this place. I hadn't really thought about it that way, but it came to mind when I read about your work being a town square. So, this just had me thinking about communities and public space, and how we can convey that through placement, or accumulation of gangs of people.

SA: I like how Thomas depicts very specific people from his hometown along with George Washington, whose face is on a dollar bill that the lady at the bank is using or who's illustrated in a painted portrait on the wall. I can relate to that because everything comes from different dimensions.

LG: And you're pulling them together.

SA: Collecting specific things and compartmentalizing them. It has a lot to do with memory, and false memory. And it's about time. The scale doesn't matter so much, because you're making a picture.

LG: So, the issue of scale becomes a matter of necessity or function, not about aesthetics so much as "It's gonna be as big as I can make it right now"?

SA: Right. Scale is not something I think about as much as people like to talk about it when they talk

about sculpture. I do what I can using what I have. People love to use the word "small"—it's true sometimes, but beside the point. It's about limitedness, not smallness.

LG: Maybe it's borrowing from something like the staging of a play?

SA: It can borrow from the staging of a play or a minimalist opera, but it's not embodying either. As each work's drama is isolated and unique, if you want to think of narrative it's more related to fables. The story begins and ends with one mistake. These works could all be from different towns, or from nowhere, or they all walk into the same saloon and decide to be something else.

LG: I have one more weird association that I wanted to ask you about. In your video *Endless Love* you make reference to *Long Day's Journey into Night*. I grew up in the town right next to Eugene O'Neill's summer home. In the summers as kids we went to the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center, and did activities. Part of growing up in this place was seeing plaques on the houses where he stayed and the bars he liked.

SA: So that community has a local sense of pride, and being the summer home of Eugene O'Neill makes that town like the apex of a certain kind of culture, as represented by Eugene O'Neill. That's interesting.

LG: Also kind of gloomy and sad. O'Neill is a little different from Tennessee Williams, but every time I read their plays, I find that it's pretty much the same play.

SA: In most twentieth-century plays, it's about a certain kind of existential suffering or family stuff, or a downfall.

LG: And a basic inability to communicate.

SA: Every line is an applicable lesson. I'm sensitive to "lines," theater language that my mother integrates into her life even when she's not performing. She's consistently anecdotal. I collaged the dialogue from *Long Day's Journey into Night* with other things for *Endless Love*. I took lines out of context, and it becomes a narcissistic, rambling monologue attempting narration. I didn't tell her what the text was from and she didn't recognize it. She used this kind of rhythm in her reading, which I expected.

And she was really good! As you become a seasoned professional at anything, you fall into patterns you've picked up along the way that work for you.

LG: I notice that artists set up their own rhythm or pattern of making projects, for example going from very dark to a lot of light, or from moving images to still, flat, static ones. It's almost like a patterning of how you move on to the next thing. So, while we're talking about this video that has very specific words and dialogue, and particular sounds and human figures . . . this seems absent in *Day Shift* and *Early Shift*. You hear birds and ambient sound, but there's no language. Is that a conscious decision in this instance, or does it just happen? Or, in a sense, being in this particular site and situation—I'm almost imagining it as an aerial view—you don't hear the talking, or it's just a different perspective. It's like when you're in a different country and you don't understand the language, people are talking but it doesn't affect you the same way.

SA: Yes, there is a distance. And in *Early Shift* and *Day Shift* I wanted to use familiar language, but with music and sound instead of words. And music makes distance.

At Tanya Leighton, where I first showed *Endless Love*, the person who worked at the front desk told me that she became depressed listening to the video on repeat because, she said, "I think I've had these same thoughts about my life." I think it was because she couldn't escape it. *Endless Love* plays in the cinema at the Kölnischer Kunstverein, where it has a different kind of relationship to the audience, because there are seats, and the sound is confined to the cinema. The video doesn't make contact with the rest of the works in the show. You can focus on the film as it is. But that kind of citational language in this work still gets confused with your thoughts and feelings, like when you are half-asleep and don't know the difference between what's happening on TV and in reality. Imagine if on top of that, your mother is the murder victim in the crime show, and she's also in the other room, complaining about how you always leave the back door open. You can combine personal esoteric experience and universal language.

LG: And you're also bringing that in with the TV piece, right?

SA: And with *Day Shift* and *Early Shift*. There's a lot going on, and it's also simple. There's a sincere

poetry in the way the birds are moving. Sometimes it's cynical. And it's about how everyone loves to look at animals.

LG: The nature documentary.

SA: Yes, and we're constantly contorting animals, or putting them in frames or in clothes. And they're famous, but they don't know what that is. They're always filmed. The birds become more-or-less human. Like with the secret narrative of that piece—I couldn't help it, I had to arrange the clips into that *Lifetime* format, I had to project my own shit onto those birds.

LG: Family drama.

SA: Which is absurd given the footage. And I don't know which birds are male or female, they just become placeholders for . . .

LG: The actors.

SA: The actors. Or poetry. The lesson. The transparent waitress morphing into a bird . . . She's going to fly away! Or she's stuck. The characterization of a small-town person imagining a different life. Transcendence. Television life. Projection. The existential rut. It's also something beautiful. It's all of this.