

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE **JULY/AUGUST 2012**



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**Holly
Zausner**



"A Conversation," 90 x 60", archival pigment print photo collage, 2012. Courtesy the artist.

in conversation

Holly Zausner WITH RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

A few days before Holly Zausner's exhibition of recent collages and film opened at Postmasters (June 21 – August 3), Raphael Rubinstein visited the artist in her New York studio to talk about her work across various media and why she decided to title the show *A Small Criminal Enterprise*. Next year Zausner will show in Berlin at Loock Galerie.

RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN (RAIL): As I see your development as an artist, at least so far, there are two shifts that seem to have deeply changed your work. One is the discovery of film, and the other is when you began to live for long periods in Berlin. Did those things happen at the same time or are they connected in any way?

HOLLY ZAUSNER: They are connected though they didn't happen exactly at the same time. I started going to Berlin in 1996 and at that time I was working strictly in sculpture, making figures out of hydrocal. In Berlin, I started using photography with sculpture, photographing these inert figures to create ideas about movement. Back in New York, I went up to the roof of my building and was throwing these roughly made figurative cloth sculptures into the air and photographing them. I realized it wasn't working and that I needed to make something more substantial, so I made a rough rubber sculpture of a female figure and started tossing it up against the New York skyline and photographing it as it was rising and falling. Every time I threw it and photographed it, both the shape and the meaning changed. As it rose and fell, it would expand and compress in unexpected ways. This choreography seemed to be about freedom and failure. I kept doing this for a year, using the entire 360-degree view, at every hour of the day and night. Amazingly, no two images were the same.

When I went back to Berlin, I made even bigger rubber sculptures and did live performances throwing around these big rubber figures in museums all through Europe. The performances involved around 30 sculptures of different sizes, weights, and colors. As I threw them against different sized pedestals, the effect could be quite violent and emotional. At the end of each performance, what remained was an installation that was like the

colorful image of a disaster. Then I thought I would experiment with a simple video, something very easy, just a small addition to my practice. I started working in video, but I was unhappy with the quality and aesthetic. Some filmmakers I knew said maybe you should be working in film. They put me in touch with a very good cinematographer, Jakobine Motz, and we started working together. So Berlin and film did actually come together at that point.

RAIL: In some ways, your trilogy of Berlin films could be seen as the chronicle of a foreigner encountering a city, piecing together her new geography.

ZAUSNER: Some of the scenes in the first film, *The beginning...*, feature well-known buildings like Mies van der Rohe's Neue Nationalgalerie, which I insisted on seeing the first day I arrived in Berlin, and the Deutsches Historisches Museum. A lot of the images came from these memories of my first day in Berlin. For the second film, I found sites that even the Berliners didn't know about: tunnels, cultural storage places, hidden but important sites. I tried to make a film that wasn't touristic, but instead used sites with weight to them. I thought about the fact that my first audience would be Berliners, since *The beginning...* premiered at Kunst-Werke. The second film was shown at the Neue Nationalgalerie, and the third film was shown at a historic sculpture museum, the Bode Museum. Berliners were my first audience. I didn't want to be the American tourist.

RAIL: You wanted to show them Berlin from a different angle, even when scenes involved famous buildings like the Neue Nationalgalerie with its enormous flat roof.

ZAUSNER: Before I began shooting there, no one had been on the roof, not even the head of the museum. There wasn't even an easy way to get access to it. I had to hire a lift. In essence what I did was use the Neue Nationalgalerie as a Modernist pedestal.

RAIL: When you approached the Neue Nationalgalerie, you were not an artist who was particularly well known in Berlin, but they listened to you. I remember joking with you at the time about what would have happened if you asked the Guggenheim Museum in New York to make a film on their roof. If you weren't Matthew Barney or some other super famous artist they would have never even returned your phone call! The people at the Neue Nationalgalerie evaluated your work on the quality of the idea, not the reputation of the artist. To me this points out a difference between Berlin and New York.

ZAUSNER: That's the beauty of Berlin, at least when I did my first three films, that people just listened and if they liked the ideas and they respected the work and they respected the artist, then they would do projects with you. Berlin was also such a small community and not a marketplace. It was an island culture and it was a little bit like the '70s in New York: very small, very intimate.

RAIL: The scenarios in your films often involve risky actions. In *Second Breath* (2005) you jump into the Spree River. There is the explosion that narrowly misses you at the start of *Unseen* (2007) and the two tigers you bring into the sculpture garden at the Neue Nationalgalerie. Is it important to you that the artist risks her own body?

ZAUSNER: There's something about pushing myself to my limits that I feel is important. For the explosion they warned me that I had to wear high boots and a long coat. It's not like I have a death wish, but I do like to push things to extreme limits.

RAIL: Another way you've pushed things to extreme limits was shooting your first film in 35mm.

ZAUSNER: Once you see 35mm, it's really hard to say no. It's such a beautiful medium, but also very difficult and very expensive. After 35mm, I switched to Super 16, which also can be a difficult medium to work in.

RAIL: You've found a lot of support in the Berlin film community.

ZAUSNER: Yes, I have been very lucky. I get free post-production and free sound work from two companies for the rest of my life. I think maybe after them seeing all my films, maybe they think it will be a short life since I take so many risks, but they actually believe in the work. They find it liberating and exciting to work with a creative artist. The post-production house, Das Werk, was started by Wim Wenders. The sound studio, Studio Mitte Cooperation, works on full feature films. The soundtracks of my films are very important. Mostly I've worked with sound libraries, choosing the right effects for the birds, the traffic, the skywriting. I find this a fascinating process. In contrast to my studio work, film is a very collaborative medium. I've been lucky to work with such great people.

RAIL: Is this one reason why you've made three films in Berlin but none in New York?

ZAUSNER: I hope to shoot part of the next film here in New York but it takes a long time for me to organize a film. All the films took two years to organize. After *Unseen* I decided to do studio work and collage for a while. I can only actually focus on either filmmaking or making sculptures or collage.

RAIL: You work in these different mediums: film, collage, sculpture. It isn't so unusual for artists these days to be working in different modes, but what is striking in your work is how each medium is folded into the others. The films feature you interacting with your sculptures. The photographs are stills shot for the films, which frequently include sculptures in the frame. Then out of those photographs you're creating the collages which are both film stills and frames, extracted and printed. There's performance, too, running through your work. Is this interconnectedness something that you consciously pursued or did it arise more intuitively? And do you see sculpture at the center of this expanding field?

ZAUSNER: It starts with sculpture. That's always the first thing that I make. I build the sculptures for what I want to do in the film. With the collages, sculptures, and film, everything is thought about at the same moment. I don't have all the sites in mind, exactly what I'm going to be doing with the sculptures in each site, but I know what kind of sculpture I need for filming: They're soft, they respond to the body, they're heavy, they're of a certain color, they have a certain skin, they have a certain kind of flexibility.



Portrait of the artist. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.

RAIL: And they're male and female.

ZAUSNER: Yes, but they're not naturalistic. Some images of my collages are taken directly out of the film, but some of them come out of this parallel project of still photography. Collage keeps on growing. The further I move away from the film in time, the more new things I find in the imagery.

RAIL: In the collages you're re-editing the film and also transposing it into another medium. To me, there's something very painterly about your collages. I can relate them to Jack Whitten's mosaic paintings, or even to Chuck Close, though in some ways it's the opposite of Close. He builds recognizable images out of abstract forms; you take representational images and make abstract compositions with them. Speaking of painting, did you encounter Philip Guston when you studied at the Studio School?

ZAUSNER: Yes. Guston used to give full-day crits. Even though he didn't actually give classes there, his presence was very felt. I studied sculpture but I was imbued with painting because it was really a painting school. With the collages I think I have come back to ideas from the Studio School. For weeks and weeks I am forming them and shaping them, not being satisfied. It takes many revisions to create the collage. It is a wonderful, annoying process of actually finding form and shape and movement and rhythms and meaning and structure and content.

RAIL: They're very obviously handmade.

ZAUSNER: I really enjoy physically handling the photographs. I did actually try to do it on the computer and it didn't interest me. I like the hand in the work. The hand is in all of my sculptures, and I think the hand is in the films as well. To me, film is a very physical medium. I approach the collages with ideas about color and structure and scenes, and I start at the bottom and I work up.

RAIL: Your sculptures have always been figurative. That wasn't an obvious choice for an artist of your generation, to work with the human figure.

ZAUSNER: Well, I was very obsessed in art school with Alberto Giacometti and Medardo Rosso. Those were big influences on me. So were Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, and there was that famous photograph of Louise Bourgeois holding a phallic sculpture that Robert Mapplethorpe took. I always think that was a very collaborative photograph, that it wasn't just Mapplethorpe's idea. I'm sure that was Louise's. I always think that's a really powerful image.

RAIL: Art history is a recurring theme in the films. I'm thinking particularly of the sequences in *Unseen* shot in the Bode Museum with all of those



Explosion, 2007. Digital c-print. Courtesy the artist.



Neue Nationalgalerie sculpture garden, 2007. Courtesy the artist.

Baroque, Gothic, and Renaissance sculptures. Throughout the film, we see you carrying your figures around Berlin, taking them through train stations, amusement parks, through city streets. It's as if you're trying to find a place for art, a place for sculpture. This quest leads you eventually to a museum, a very traditional museum. At the end of the film, you leave the blue male figure lying on the floor of the Bode Museum. Then the last shot is of you carrying the female figure, disappearing into the distance along a wide avenue. Do you think you are trying to find a home for homeless art?

ZAUSNER: I don't know—

RAIL: I'm thinking of "homelessness" in a Heideggerian sense.

ZAUSNER: Maybe I'm trying to find a place for the artist. Of course the sculptures are surrogates. Is there a place where you can absolutely stay? No! One has to keep on moving, just as in films where the next image keeps on replacing the image before it.

RAIL: I was wondering about the Christian iconography in *Unseen*. You often cradle the sculptures in Pietà-like poses. And in the background of some shots in the Bode Museum we see a Pietà sculpture that echoes your actions.

ZAUSNER: I still remember seeing the Michelangelo *Pietà* in the World's Fair. I was just a little girl and my father took me there. You went past it on a moving platform. I remember it kept on moving back—and I wanted to see it more. When I first traveled to Italy, all of Michelangelo's work was enormously moving. I'm not Christian, but I find the imagery of suffering, redemption, and grace universally quite powerful.

RAIL: Your constant physical involvement with the figures reminds me of Franz West, who likes people to get intimate with his sculpture.

ZAUSNER: I love Franz West! My interaction with the sculpture is very personal. Without me they just lie on the floor lifeless.

RAIL: Your films have no dialogue, no music, and no actors, apart from you and the sculptures, but they evoke cinema history, especially postwar European films. I see echoes of *Last Year at Marienbad* in the way that you film the sculptures at the Bode Museum, for instance, and your eye for dystopian locations of great formal elegance reminds me of *Alphaville*.

ZAUSNER: And don't forget that in *Contempt* Godard actually films sculptures.

RAIL: That's true. In some of the films we see you wearing a white trench coat. You could have stepped out of some old film noir, a female version of the detective Eddie Constantine plays in *Alphaville*, though you also look like a character in some 1960s mod-era TV show about spies.

ZAUSNER: Both of those references are absolutely there. I've been thinking about *Alphaville* in Berlin for many years. I was also thinking about the science fiction of deserted cities. Something has gone wrong in the world—but what, exactly? Why are tigers patrolling the sculpture garden? Why is the bread factory still producing bread, but there are no people? Newspapers are being printed, but there are no people to read them. I'm also looking to German documentary films of the 1920s and '30s, like *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* by Walter Ruttmann and *People on Sunday*, which was made by Curt and Robert Siodmak, Edgar Ulmer, and written by Billy Wilder—an amazing group of people.

RAIL: Where did those tigers come from?

ZAUSNER: They came from Lübeck, a very beautiful port city in Northern Germany. I worked with a 70-year-old tiger trainer, and it took us and the museum six or eight months to develop a structure where everyone, including myself and my camerawoman, would be safe, and so we could create a scene that wouldn't destroy the sculpture garden.

RAIL: I know that you are a great fan of the French filmmaker Claire Denis.

ZAUSNER: Yes, especially for her ideas about camera movement and non-linear narrative.

RAIL: Her film *Beau Travail* is the source of "remorse is the beginning of freedom," which you use as the epigraph for *The beginning...* Your films are about the architectural past, psychogeography, sculpture, performance, and art history, but this phrase suggests some deeper emotional, existential undercurrent. Remorse is the kind of thing that concerned 19th century novelists, not contemporary artists.

ZAUSNER: I thought it was a perfect quotation for Berlin in terms of its own history and maybe some aspects of my own history.

RAIL: There is a sense throughout your work of unfinished narrative, of something that must be constantly rearticulated.

ZAUSNER: That's true of the collages. I continually change the structures. Each one is a handmade grid, which comes with inherent flaws. They operate in negative and positive, and even though nothing stays still, I'm not trying to make a film with them. It becomes more about the idea of looking to drawing and painting with the ingredients of a film, but from a distance or a memory. The further I get away from the film, the more it's about memory, about the imprints a film can have.

RAIL: The opening sequence of *Unseen* involves a kind of drawing—skywriting.

ZAUSNER: My idea was to put content into credits the way Saul Bass did for Hitchcock. I've always loved skywriting, and I wanted more than just animated credits. From that point the title was partially dictated by the number of letters I could write, which was actually a helpful limitation. The one skywriter in Germany who I began working with died tragically in a plane accident two weeks before filming. He was taking a family up and they all went down in Hamburg and only the father survived. I was devastated. I was devastated for the pilot, for the families involved. It was just awful. I was in a depression. Many people suggested that I should think of something else. I continued searching though and discovered to my amazement that there were a lot of stunt pilots at all these small airports around Berlin. I started talking to them, but none of them had the right kind of plane. The first person who said he would do it actually went up in his plane and thought he wrote "unseen." It looked like a Jackson Pollock. Interesting, but it really didn't make sense for the film. Finally I met the James Bond of pilots. We practiced five times. One week later I filmed it five times and one time it worked. Originally I wanted the letters to all be visible simultaneously, but when I saw the word "unseen" disappear one letter at a time as it was written, it gave the meaning to my original sense of title design. You have to keep your eyes wide open for unplanned events, which are sometimes better than your original ideas.

RAIL: Does this happen with the collages as well?

ZAUSNER: Yes. I start without actually knowing what the whole collage is going to look like. Things move and change all the time. After establishing the initial structure, I will replace from 30 to 300 images in a single collage to create a pattern throughout the collage that has meaning.

RAIL: You improvise a lot in the collages and the films, not unlike Godard writing new scenes on location as his crew and cast wait around.

ZAUSNER: Yes, we figure out a lot of things on site. It's very exciting, stressful, horrible, and wonderful to make a film. And every time I make a film I say I'll never make another one again.

RAIL: Do you do multiple takes?

ZAUSNER: Of course with things like explosions and tigers, you can only go once, but in both the films and collages there's a lot of repetition. To get a shot right I will often repeat it 10 or 20 times. I liken the repetition to a writer working out a sentence or creating a novel. I used to be an obsessive reader of the Russians: Tolstoy, Gogol, Turgenev. Speaking of great literature, the title of the Postmasters show, *A Small Criminal Enterprise*, comes from Roberto Bolaño's *Antwerp*, a short book of poetry and prose that he wrote when he was 27.

RAIL: It's a wonderful title, especially for New York, a city that is home to so many big criminal enterprises. What appealed to you about it?

ZAUSNER: Precisely that—the criminal enterprise of art-making and the stature that "enterprise" may or may not still carry, especially within the context of a place like New York. The film itself was mostly made illegally. I didn't have proper permits. More generally, I think it's an excellent description of what it is to be an artist. ☺

HOLLY ZAUSNER

A Small Criminal Enterprise

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