

Lin, Tan, "Less Creative Anachronism", *Artforum*, Summer 2007, pp. 199-200 (ill.)

Less Creative Anachronism

TAN LIN ON FREELANCE STENOGRAPHER

SINCE THE START of its media restoration project, The Kitchen has evolved from an artists' collective and non-profit performance space into a vast archive of some five thousand videotapes, five hundred audiotapes, and more recent material captured on digital video. As a home for various distribution mechanisms and artistic practices, The Kitchen seemed a perfect site for the dispersion strategies of Seth Price and Kelley Walker, in *Freelance Stenographer*, 2007, their first collaborative project. After all, here was not just a particular set of artworks to reproduce and redistribute but a mechanism—in fact, an institution—designed to do just that. In this sense, the pair's work was a kind of mirrorlike recording device inserted inside an avant-garde theater.

Appropriately, then, it was hard to tell where the piece began and where it ended. One evening this past March, the audience filed into The Kitchen's theater to see a woman sitting at the back of the stage and a photocopy machine off to one side. Debra Singer, executive director of The Kitchen, offered a brief introduction, and then a video collaboration by Price and Walker began: shots of the Manhattan skyline; footage (filmed by Jason Spingarn-Koff, as well as by Price and Walker) of Stefan Tcherepnin, Cory Arcangel, and Emily Sundblad reworking the 1999 dance hit "Better Off Alone," by Alice DeeJay, which they found on YouTube; the original video for the song (taken from YouTube but corrected for color and sound by Price and Walker); and footage from The Kitchen's archives of a 1982 restaging, by Debra McCall, of Oskar Schlemmer's 1923 *Gesture Dance* (set by Price and Walker to the reverberations of Sonic Youth's 1988 "Teen Age Riot"). Immediately following this a second film was shown, a quasi-trailer for a documentary (by Spingarn-Koff) about the virtual-reality world *Second Life*. Then Price and Walker held a Q&A, during which they explained that the woman onstage behind them, Casey Klavi, was, in fact, a freelance stenographer, who had been recording the event since Singer began talking. After a number of questions, audience members were invited to join the artists onstage for a beer, and the stenographer's text was Xeroxed and handed out.

What, then, was "the work"? Was it the recording made by the stenographer? The product of a Xerox machine? The film made by Price and Walker? And what exactly were the relations between the photocopy

and the desultory film of a music-making session? The cross-appropriations of the piece suggested a generalized or (possibly generic) cultural event in the process of being repackaged and reassimilated to various media: video, dance, xerography, stenography, post-event Q&A. Moreover, The Kitchen staff recorded the entirety of the evening on video; that record now sits in The Kitchen's archives, making the video an archive of an archive and blurring the distinction between pre- and postarchival. With its Sonic Youth sound track, double appropriation of Schlemmer's early twentieth-century work, and retro-stenographic format, the performance felt decidedly boundary- and medium-unspecific. It was hard to say, in the end, what it *was*. As a cultural event, it gave off reverberations of an anachronism in a contextual network of anachronisms. And yet with its mix of time frames—from nineteenth-century technology to mid-'80s music and an avatar-based social network—it wasn't exactly nostalgic.

Thus, from the initial framing of the piece to the photocopied "output," Price and Walker's collaboration raised the question of where to insert the production activity of contemporary art into a continually moving analog-to-digital event stream, with The Kitchen itself packaged and repackaged as a form of cultural theater and distribution. To put it more succinctly, Price and Walker staged their own performance of the archival or, rather, the archival's status and rights to reproducibility and legibility: How would it be possible to not merely represent The Kitchen but also and simultaneously to enter The Kitchen archive in real time, as an event subject to filmic or performative distribution—as well as the obsolescence, decay, and amnesia that are distribution's necessary backdrops. What *was* produced and distributed that night was a Xeroxed stenographic transcript, which provided a partially legible and incomplete account of an event

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Seth Price and Kelley Walker, *Freelance Stenographer*, 2007, still from a color video, 33 minutes, 6 seconds.

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that, to echo Derrida, is always already there. This event might be called The Kitchen itself.

In that sense, *Freelance Stenographer* staged various re-returns to a theme that has haunted contemporary practice, the downward evolutionary draft from the historical to the neo-avant-gardes outlined by Peter Bürger. If the conclusion to be drawn from Bürger is that any desire to critique commodity culture from a space outside it is naive, then even on the level of institutional critique, *Freelance Stenographer* functioned almost programmatically (i.e., it was designed to "fail") as a gesture directed at Conceptual art's documentary mode, which draws a line between an event and its (later) documentation. Thus, the performance employed a freelance stenographer and the "writing" known as a Xerox machine as inseparable parts of the performance, so that the two devices were used to capture an event at different temporal intervals. (For the record, the Toshiba e-STUDIO 55 produces fifty-five pages per minute; a skilled stenographer can record two hundred words per minute.) Klavi's presence was an ironic commentary on the archive's desire for total retention and cataloguing. Dating from the fourth century BC, shorthand is one of the oldest technologies for preserving rapidly evolving information.

One needs a tool to stage theatricality or point to its intervention. Someone to mark the performance and prepare it for distribution. That figure might be Hal Foster.

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Seth Price and Kelley Walker, *Freelance Stenographer*, 2007. Performance view, The Kitchen, New York, 2007.

Or it might be the Xerox machine (xerography was invented in 1937 and introduced to American offices circa 1960). Or it might be the stenographers, who transcribed some of the language of the evening, imperfectly. Or *The Kitchen* itself, which since 1971 has played a role in the continual reframing of materials: The Price and Walker event was filmed, as all performances at *The Kitchen* are, as part of the economy of the avant-garde. In this sense, no distinctions need to be drawn between the distributions made by the marketplace or by art institutions. One is a copy of the other. Any given copy is either more efficient (it generates profit) or less so. And so it is with all the various actor-distributors of the performance: They distribute copies of copies. *Freelance Stenographer* is a copy (Xerox) of a copy (stenographer's record) of various copies (the McCall re-re-creation, the band's reworking of a '90s song, the *Second Life* film-within-a-film, and so on).

What in the end is *The Kitchen*? Price and Walker suggest that, like the performance and perhaps indistinguishable from it, *The Kitchen* is a mix of various formats and methodologies and distribution strategies, which tend, in the words of Price and Walker, to render themselves as nonassimilable at any given moment in time, and that might be in need of retrospection brought about by repetition, appropriation, or sampling—or whatever is used to bring something into a temporary focus. Price and Walker worked to dissect *The Kitchen* and reveal it as a series of distribution strategies and formats that are indistinguishable from the cultural material it is transmitting at any given moment. A performance exists in one form, until it is distributed, when it becomes something else, and then it is redistributed, and it becomes something else again. In this sense, there is no such thing as a

single performance, locked in an archive—just a set of temporal parameters that are constantly being eroded as a particular piece gets retranslated and redistributed. Price and Walker outline a destabilized cultural situation where it is hard to tell the difference between a cultural event, its distribution, and the particular format in which it unfurls. In this sense, distribution is the new theater.

If temporality is a porous container for events, so are media, as are the genres that contain those media, as perhaps are the various human and mechanical "actors" that go into composing them: avant-garde work from the '80s that reconstructed an avant-garde work from the '20s, which was folded into an avant-garde work from 2007. The flip side of the equation is: All forms of distribution are forms of distortion and theatricality. Casey Klavi's stenographic account renders much of the evening illegible—e.g., "Q. I was [WO-PD] determining if the step nothing as is and all the media today can change Realty you can [KHA-EUPLG] fake the [RAO-ELTS], the second part"; the artists' re-rendition of the original leaves us with something stripped to a few sampled bass lines; and the Xerox flattens both the stenographic record and the performance. Attention is not a form at all but something punctuated by amnesia, unlicensed appropriation, obsolescence. Attention is a hole in the system of distribution. Anyone who has downloaded music for free knows that. In this regard, the piece was at times too readily assimilable to *The Kitchen*'s multiformat programming. The work did not disperse to any area outside the realm of avant-garde art practice—despite its mix of sources, there was no mistaking it for a particular form of artistic practice circa 2007. Thus, it was less dispersive than some of Price's other products (such as his "mix tapes"), a point reinforced by the not-so-incongruous clip of young art stars sitting around and sampling music on the fly. *The Kitchen* itself coded the activity as such from the beginning, as well as during and after.

Such a phenomenon points to a crisis that cannot any longer be regarded as a crisis but as something of a *laissez-faire* situation, and maybe, if the optimists are correct, an opportunity: The question is, if avant-garde

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techniques from Stan Brakhage's montage to Andy Warhol's reality-based screen tests have been fully assimilated by mass-cultural forms as diverse as Coke ads and YouTube videos, then what sorts of post-ideology critique appropriations are possible? Works by a number of contemporary artists—such as Arcangel, Wade Guyton, Jutta Koether, Reena Spaulings, and Beth Campbell, to name just a few—hint that the answer may lie in MP3 files, shareware, sampling, social networking platforms, open architecture, and open-source movements as they intersect with our everyday lives, all of which suggest new modes of taking hold of an archived "event" and unfreezing it by repackaging and redistributing it. In place of mass distribution there arises an expanding social network, multiplying forms of mass customization, or, in the case of Price and Walker, a private, off-kilter distribution network that punctuates clock time just a little bit differently. With its intentional obscurities and recourse to ancient and modern recording media, it might be read as its own coded resistance to its distributive process. Resistance is no longer directed at any singular entity.

Instead, Price and Walker's staging of an endless re-distribution of events touches on what the sociologist Manuel Castells has termed the "space of flows," a society wherein information and distribution networks dissolve "time by disordering the sequence of events and making them simultaneous, thus installing society in an eternal ephemerality." The performance raises pertinent issues about art's relation to the social sphere. Does *Freelance Stenographer* merely mimic the endless distribution operations of the world, or does it critique such operations? Such a question may itself have been made outdated by the rapid acceleration of such processes, as everyone now has the ability to produce and distribute (in theory, anyway) his or her own goods. If mass-cultural products fueled by various file-sharing formats, shareware, wikis, and hacking have turned the tables on Warhol appropriationism, they have done so partially because they are endlessly replaceable and short-lived. In this sense, the packaging in *Freelance Stenographer* takes the form of machine writing that removes a work from the place where we thought we experienced it. Our experience of the work lies somewhere in the surrounding social network that produced and distributed it. □