

(DE)CONSTRUCTING THE EVERYDAY



JOY EPISALLA

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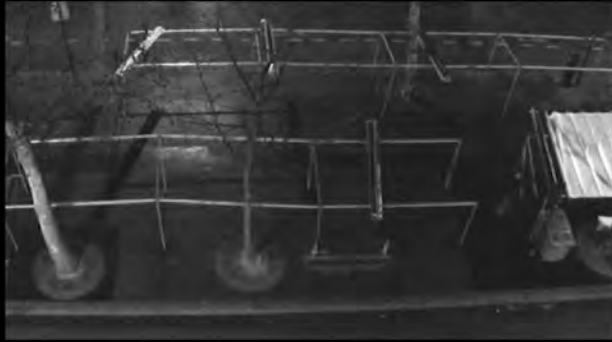
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Les Psychanalystes et le Marché

2015-2022

video / audio installation

1:08:00







In Three Parts: Death – Transformation – Memory

Kate Forer

“Death changes everything....” This is a statement found on innumerable funeral programs and sympathy cards, acknowledging the transformative impact of a lost life on the family and community from which it has been withdrawn. If pains are not taken to keep the memory of the departed, their present-day impacts may persist but become obscured and disconnected from the now-absent person. The details are forgotten or “lost to time.” This happens not just in the case of individuals, but also with groups of people who have been abruptly lost, as when a plague or genocide suddenly subtracts a large group of people from a community. Documenting lost

people, objects and places is a goal of genealogical, familial and societal attempts at historical preservation. We use such efforts both to preserve some hold on the past and to understand how it has helped shape the world that we survivors now inhabit. This allows us to appreciate not just that death has changed everything, but the nature of those changes.

The themes of death, transformation, and memory permeate the work of Joy Episalla. Born in 1957, Episalla grew up in Yonkers and then Elmsford, New York. They have maintained artistic and activist practices since the 1980s. Episalla is an interdisciplinary artist

who has worked in many media; photography, video, installation, and sculpture are common components of their practice.

Episalla’s extensive activism around the HIV/AIDS epidemic has heavily influenced their work. HIV/AIDS had a devastating impact on the queer and arts communities as the virus spread during the 1980s and 1990s. The impact was particularly dire in large urban centers such as New York City, where Episalla was living and working. Political and government entities of the time responded to this catastrophic public health disaster with a mixture of indifference, denial,

paranoia, persecution, and hate, as related in contemporary histories such as Randy Shilts' *And the Band Played On*. In the '90s Episalla worked with ACT UP, a direct-action non-violent political group with the motto "united in anger" that was formed to combat the pandemic and to support people with AIDS. This organization included many other members of the arts community of the era, including well-known writers such as Larry Kramer, and visual artists such as Keith Haring. Designer Avram Finkelstein was also part of a collective behind the iconic ACT UP "Silence=Death" project that exemplified the group's commitment to increasing public awareness as a means to motivate research and other policies and programs that could save lives threatened by HIV/AIDS.

During their time at ACT UP, Episalla became a member of The Marys. The Marys was an affinity group within the organization who performed bold, high-risk actions to challenge and confront inaction and hostility. Their activities included invading newscasts and staging political funerals to

connect the general public with the magnitude and impact of AIDS. Episalla recounts, "We took that coffin and hit the Citicorp building at lunchtime, where we dumped the coffin with 'bloody' [chicken] bones [covered in ketchup] ... we dropped these flyers down which were of all these different people of different genders, race, age. And it said on the back, 'This is a person who died of AIDS. They can be your brother, your sister, your mother, your lover, your father. They had dreams and they had hopes and they were interested in this, and they were interested in that. This is what's been lost.'" (Episalla, Joy, ACT UP Oral History Project, a program of MIX -The New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, December 2003, interview by Sarah Schulman.) These actions publicized and memorialized the stories of people who died of AIDS with the goal of eliciting a stronger and more productive political and public engagement in fighting the epidemic.

In 1991, Episalla became a founding member of the feminist art collective fierce pussy, in New York City. Episalla

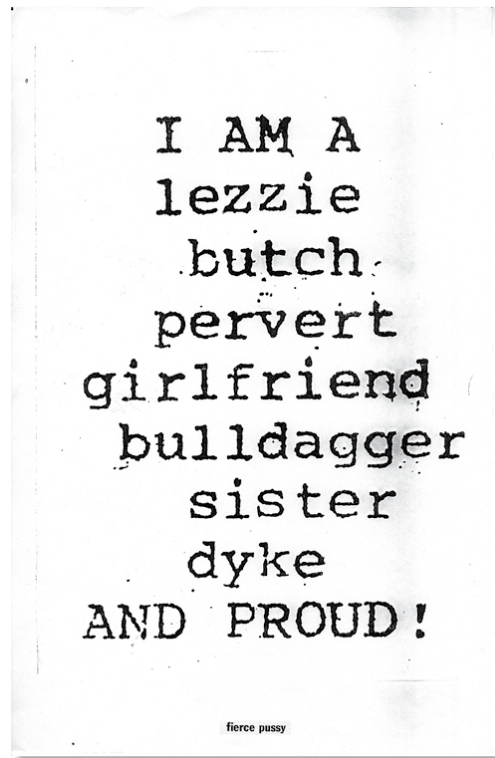
"This is a person who died of AIDS. They had dreams and they had hopes and they were interested in this, and they were interested in that. This is what's been lost."

–JOY EPISALLA

continues to collaborate with three of the other original members of this collective: Nancy Brooks Brody, Zoe Leonard, and Carrie Yamaoka. Using low-budget methods, fierce pussy designed confrontational posters addressing issues facing lesbians and queer women, and wheat pasted them in guerilla actions around New York City's streets. Increasing lesbian visibility and making queer identity public are important topics for this collective.

The video work produced by Episalla continues to engage with these themes: acknowledging loss and increasing the

visibility of elements that are present but overlooked or unacknowledged in life. Objects and places serve as proxies for lost individuals. In the hour-long *Les Psychanalystes et le Marché*, Episalla documents the installation and deinstallation of a market in Paris from the aerial perspective of the terrace of the apartment of a psychoanalyst



"List" poster, fierce pussy, 1991 -, black-and-white photocopy, 17" x 11" fiercepussy.org/posters

couple. *removed* is a documentation of the methodical dismantling of Episalla's mother's couch, eventually transforming the couch's frame into 6 segments, wholly different from the original. Both of these videos feature a narrative alongside the "action" of the piece; in the first piece Episalla describes the process of documenting the market and relates intimate encounters with the couple who allowed the artist to film the market from the terrace of their apartment, while *removed* presents footage of conversations between the artist and their mother about the couch and its planned fate. The perspectives of the artist, the object or event, and the witnesses/participants are all critical components of the pieces. Additionally, both pieces are documented in a three-channel format, with each separate "screen" showing a different moment of the narrative, all at the same time.

These works are grounded and matter-of-fact, unromantic yet tinged with a lingering sadness. They are documents of change, whether these changes are permanent or cyclical. As a result of

the three-channel format, each piece takes on a heavy narrative aspect (aided by the verbal storytelling that occurs throughout the duration). The three channels suggest a traditional story structure - a beginning, a middle, an end. Perhaps they become less linear, less grounded in the standard notions of time, as they blend together into one moment. This creates a rich and immersive experience of what was, what happened, and what now remains.

Through the changes that are shown in each video piece, something is undeniably lost by the end of the transformation; still, there is a sense of inevitability and finality to these processes, and the actors present in these narratives move on after the documented events are complete. Episalla's camera bears witness to these transformations, documenting and preserving the original state, the sequence of deconstruction and the final form or forms of the investigated structures.

In both videos, there is an echo of the memory of queer grief that permeated



Steven Barker, *Funeral March*, single image from a bound portfolio of 25 pigment prints documenting the political funeral of Mark Fisher (1953–1992) on November 2, 1992.
danielcooneyfineart.com/artists/stephen-barker/series/funeral-march

Episalla's community; they present and record events where people and relationships that grow and are shaped by abject loss, in analogy to the impact of the human losses inflicted by AIDS upon the queer community. Through video documentation, moments transform into records and stories, deserving to be shared and preserved. In a 2016 interview, Episalla said, "...the loss is not only the loss to you losing this person you love, it's also the loss

of what they could have given to the world." (Oral history interview with Joy Episalla, 2016 February 23 and March 17. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.) The pain and loss felt by the queer community is undeniable and persists to the present day. Memory is a powerful tool, and it serves to preserve in some form those things, which have been irrevocably altered or lost.

removed

2000-2022

video / audio installation

0:28:00







Activism and Art :

A Conversation with Joy Episalla

This interview took place over Zoom on April 28, 2022. It was led by Caitlin Lenox and transcribed by Zachary Cervenka. Questions and responses have been edited for clarity.

-Caitlin Lenox- I think in *removed* and in *Les Psychanalystes et le Marché* we have the literal process of your documenting what is going on around you as you are filming. What is the purpose of breaking the fourth wall as the artist in that way and letting the

viewer into your process? What does that serve for you and why is that a preoccupation of yours?

-Joy Episalla- I am really interested on one hand slowing the world down, on another to see if I can get you, as the viewer, to start observing things that you might not see. I think of this as if you were reading a book. When you look up for a second, and you see something, and then you go back to the page. That movement in there, that is the place

that I am always thinking [about], that is the place I like to play in. That is the place that you notice something, and you bring it back to the page. You are sitting somewhere, and you are thinking about something, or you see something, and it enters [into] your way of thinking. *Les Psychanalystes*, for example, what the camera sees is the market, from an aerial viewpoint, right? It is first this empty sidewalk, then you see this market built, and you see people using it and purchasing things. Then eventually

it is taken down, the street cleaners come through, and in the meantime what you are hearing is what happened on the other side of the camera in the psychoanalyst's apartment balcony.

The other thing that you get in the narrative is color, because *Les Psychanalystes et le Marché* is in black and white, and the only place the color is mentioned is through the words of the narrative. So, if you allow yourself to be in the state of being told this story while you are watching this, there is this spatial quality of the viewer becoming the camera, or being positioned in the place of the camera. How you synthesize that and how you move through that space, -- that is where I think there is a lot of energy and magic. That is the place where I want you to occupy, and I am always trying for that.

-CL- That actually is a good transition into my next question, and I would like to ask you more about the audio sort of aspects of your work. Before we do that though we will show a little clip of the next piece. [Visual & Audio from *Les Psychanalystes et le Marché*, 0:00-2:25] I really loved your description in that

piece, it is very rich. It is like almost being told a literary sort of story like a prose poem. You did talk a little bit about the audio in that video already. I am curious, there is you and your narration in that piece, but then there are also these whispered voices that you hear in the background, aubergine and a la banana. I am curious where that little bit came from?

-JE- Those whispering voices are basically listing or telling all the items that are sold in the market, underneath my narration. So there is this bubbling up of these whispering voices, reciting, carotte, and aubergine. I thought, it was ironic because what the viewer sees is the market stalls covered, and people are entering and they are leaving with packages, and you never see what is sold in the market. I thought, "Okay, that is interesting. What about, if underneath all this we have these other voices in French, reciting all these items that you never see but now you hear them."

-CL- I think with *removed*, not only are we getting the conversation with you and your mother about what is going

to happen to this couch, but actually seeing it take place sort of around you. It has this great impact that it would not otherwise. During our studio visit you spent a lot of time talking about how you feel like you are sort of a witness. That is your role as an artist, is to be a witness to sort of things that are going on around you and in your activist work. I think this idea of you being a witness but also the viewers of your work being witnesses is interesting. I know there is a lot of talk about artists you know being careful observers, but observer has this connotation of neutrality, whereas witnessing is a very sort of like responsibility laden act. Would you mind describing how you show this witnessing through your work,

"...but I am sort of asking, or maybe seducing the viewer, let us say, into paying attention in a certain way."

and maybe how viewers might ideally manifest that quality by viewing your work, or take on this responsibility?

-JE- Hmm! When I speak about being a witness in terms of things that I have been through in my life, it is more about for example if we take the early nineties and the AIDS crisis, I lost a lot of people during that time. I feel I have a responsibility, not only to be able to tell their stories, but also to try and live a life that can meet that. All those things that we went through, I feel like I have a responsibility to not only retell their stories, but also to tell a story about, or put across certain ideas. All those things maybe come up in the work. I do not know if I am so much asking you to

"It is the space in which one can notice something, or something can happen, or something gets transformed."

be a witness, but I am sort of asking, or maybe seducing the viewer let us say, into paying attention in a certain way. That slowing down is not just "taking your time," it is also allowing oneself to pay attention to what is around you. I think I learned some of those ways of paying attention from a lot of things I did, have done, or continue to do in the political arena of activism, or whatever it may be. I feel this is a way of showing a point of view, and opening up that point of view, or subverting what seems to be the norm. If you step away and take your time with something and you see something that is now changed or transformed-- , that may open up a different way of looking at it.

-CL- I know in your interviews about your ACT UP activism you talked about this 30-second rule that you all had. Where you had about 30-seconds to do something and leave before people really realize what was happening to them and to start paying attention. It feels like this is almost like the opposite of that, slowing things down so people really do have the time to pay attention and be aware.

-JE- Yes, when I was speaking before about that moment of time where you are looking at something and you momentarily look up and you see something and you subconsciously take it back to what you were doing, that strange space in there is that 30-seconds. If you have seen earlier work of mine where something is sitting on the floor and leaning against the wall, that space between the leaning against the wall and the floor is like that 30-seconds. It is the intervening space in which one can notice something, or something can happen, or something gets transformed. That is the place I am very interested in.

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