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Here today and *Gone*

Amy Sillman talks with **Cecilia Dougherty** on her works of portrayal, tension and process…

Cecilia Dougherty was a luminous presence in the LA and SF video worlds for two decades before moving to NYC in 1995. She has recently moved even further eastward to Dublin, where she and girlfriend Susan O'Brien are opening Anthology Books, a bookstore/art space that will feature all kinds of small press, alternative, progressive, queer, comics, and other hard-to-find stuff. Dougherty's work in video often involves subversions of existing pop/mass media material, though she has also produced a body of other work, such as a series of profiles on writers including Eileen Myles, Laurie Weeks, and others. Her ambitious double-screen-projection piece *Gone*, finished in 2001, took its cue from the 1970's PBS show *An American Family*, a proto-real-life show that chronicled a year in the life of the "typical" So-Cal family, the Louds. *Gone* appropriates Episode 2 wherein the mom, Pat Loud, comes to visit her newly-out gay son, Lance, who is living in the Chelsea Hotel. Dougherty's use of an almost all-woman cast speaking the original text verbatim amplifies and twists the complex tensions of the original, giving new light to the dynamics at work: the family's tensions and silences, Lance's desires, and the layered alienation of both the cultures and subcultures that we live in. Kate Horsfield and Amy Sillman talked to Dougherty about her work and *Gone* last winter before Dougherty left for Ireland.

• front page: Laurie Weeks as Lance with flowers. this page:Laura Weeks as Lance Loud

A: Your new piece, *Gone*, is based on a 70's PBS documentary, *An American Family*, about the Loud family in California.

C: There hadn't been a TV show like it before. *An American Family* was on in about 1974 when I had my first apartment. I was interested in art but I didn't have any language for it.

A: Were you in college?

C: No, I went to college for a few years at Temple University in Philadelphia as an English major, and then I dropped out. I followed my girlfriend to Phoenix and I ended up in a factory. I would race home from my factory job so I could watch this show.

A: Tell us about *An American Family*.

C: I was just fascinated by being inside the home of a suburban California family. The Loud family was so different from my own family—

A: You were raised in a working class family.

C: Yeah.

A: The Loud family was middle class, but could you still relate to them?

C: Well, the parents seemed young-ish and the children seemed hip-ish. I could relate to them, but I thought they were really strange. Pat's outfits and big sunglasses are things that my mother would never wear. It seemed to be a really easy lifestyle, they did everything casually, they were so modern. It's the difference between the East and West coasts; and I was attracted to the difference. Where I was raised, with cold winters, dark colors, things get heavy, and there's

Amy Sillman is a painter who lives in Brooklyn, NY with frequent trips to Tivoli, NY and Austin, TX. She is represented by Brent Sikkema Gallery in NYC where her next solo show will be in April-May 2003. She teaches part-time at Bard College, in particular as the co-Chair of Painting in the MFA Program every summer. Sillman met Dougherty at Bard in the MFA Program, an friendship that eventually led to her debut role as an actress playing Pat Loud (the mom) in Dougherty's video *Gone*. Also present for this interview was Kate Horsfield, the founder of Video Data Bank in Chicago, Illinois.

• Amy Sillman as Pat Loud

Catholicism so everything is serious. The second episode was the one I got glued on because it was located in New York, which was on my mind at the time as someplace that I would probably live. I could relate to Lance Loud— he moved to New York but he had no studio skills or background in any particular field. The fact that he was gay and on television kind of blew my mind. He was a lot freer, a lot looser than I was. I was a little dyke, which is very different from a little fag—a little dyke was a very different thing in 1974.

A: Do you think being looser and freer is a gender thing, or do you think that he was just a more cavalier person?

C: He was older and he reminded me of one of my sisters. I saw the show once, thought about it for ten or fifteen years, and finally got the opportunity to see it again. I thought it was just as wonderful as when I saw it before, only now I was more informed about how to analyze it. The family dynamic was the subject—there was no controlled plot and the episodes were not essentially episodic, except in the editing. I started thinking about the producer and the crew, and I knew that it was a very contentious space.

A: Did you ever meet Lance Loud?

C: No.

A: He's an important figure in your past, a media figure who really affected your life, it's funny...

C: Lance as a media figure meant so much, but Lance as a real person was a stranger. It wouldn't be cathartic in any particular way to [have met] Lance.

A: Did you have any contact with the producer?

C: Yes, I talked to the producer, Craig Gilbert, before I went into production. He was very friendly. I told him that I thought the series was about lack of communication. But my tape wasn't about the Loud family and it wasn't about the series. I was not doing a remake of it, I was using it as a map to make my own piece, so I didn't need any factual verification. There's no need to be faithful to the original when you are interpreting an idea through a different medium.

A: But they gave you whatever permission was required.

C: Well, Craig Gilbert gave me permission, but he doesn't have ownership of the copyright, so his permission was like... he thought it was a fine idea and he would help me.

A: Who owns the copyright?

C: Channel 13 [PBS] actually owns that.

A: *Gone* is a two-channel piece, projected onto a wall or screen by two side-by-side projectors. Can you tell us about how it's set up?

C: Two channels changes the aspect ratio of the horizontal to the vertical, which is really pleasant because we're not looking at the usual 3x4. It makes the image larger and I feel this makes a richer electronic image. The colors are flatter and brighter.

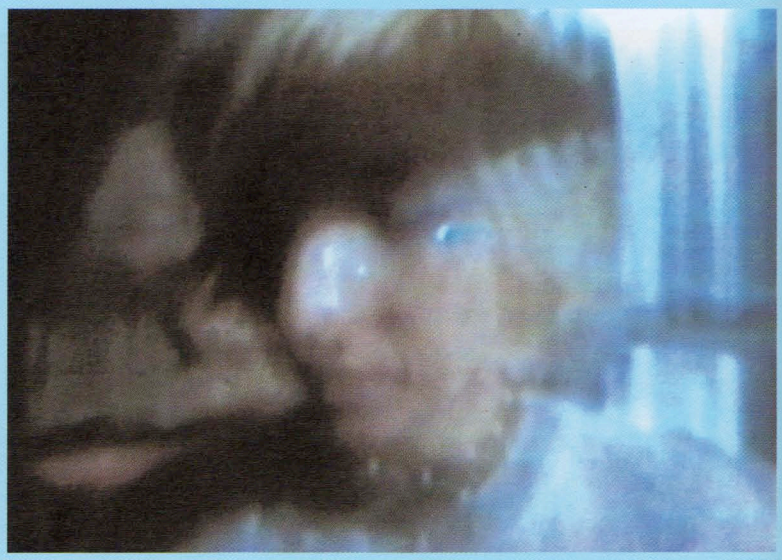
A: So you can only see it in a public space?

C: You can't rent it and watch it at home. The better I'm getting, the more difficult the work is getting, both in terms of what it means and in terms of how it's seen.

A: How did you come to the two channel idea?

C: When I was editing *Gone* the first couple of scenes were very slow, with no possibility for psychological content beyond what you could read in

• Frances Sorensen as Soren Ingenue



• Laura Weeks as Lance Loud

the frame. I didn't like it and it just sort of slid over to two channels. It made the space truly psychological— I could experiment with having dialogue happening in two different spaces, which in my mind is a true application of the original series.

A: In your work, you take forms from the media that you can subvert, virally – going into them, filling them with your own story and then sending them back out in this new form. Can you talk about the desire to put yourself into other narratives or images?

C: I did not approach artmaking from an academic perspective. I was interested in Pop art and popular culture that was entertaining to me, and that was probably my school. That's where I learned how to put things together, how things should be paced, what colors were nice...

A: What were some other early sources for you?

C: *The Flintstones*. I used to draw clothes for Betty and Wilma, new outfits. Obviously Andy Warhol. *The Village Voice* and writer Jill Johnston. These things opened up my life as it was and showed me how to play around in it and what was possible.

K: What about your relationship to re-creation? You're re-creating something but it doesn't matter how close it is to the original. In fact the distance between the original and what you're doing is where your creative process resides. Your remakes are not exactly remakes, they're just based on something. I would ask what has attracted you to popular culture which you're taking into a completely different space. Why? Or how?

C: I think it's a combination of a really strong interest in conceptual art and the politics of art-making— politics meaning, "having to do with control of." A lot of this work started from the belief that one's own experience is the place to start out from— I didn't want to start out from my own experience as confessional, but from my own perceptual experience. I believed it was a perceptual experience that was shared by a lot of people— an experience of popular culture.

A: I think that your work relates to the history of modern art and its developments, its sense of representation.

K: And its originality.

A: Though you're interested in immediacy, your script is really defin-

I WANT TO GET THE STUFF THAT'S AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE, THE STUFF THAT'S OUT THERE THAT WE CAN ALL SEE, ON THE STREET, WHAT YOU CAN READ, AND HOW PEOPLE INTERPRET THAT...

• Cast members Lia Gangitano, Joe Westmoreland, and Susan O'Brien

• Mike Iveson, Cast member and writer/performer of the song "Fuck Me Raw"

itive. In *Gone* you had a very set script that we hardly varied from at all and you labored to get us to say the lines as exactly as possible. We were striving to be what you wanted us to be but we didn't really know what that was, it was like this weird game. What's your goal, artistically, in creating such an odd situation?

C: I'm not trying to create an odd situation! I apologize if it was difficult! [Laughs] There were a couple of pieces that were really scripted, *Jo-Jo* and *Gone*, and *Grapefruit* a bit, but the process doesn't have to be determined by that.

A: You do create an odd quality. You don't create mayhem, like in a Cassavetes film where everyone is getting drunk or things are getting out of control. You're keeping everything under tight control, but underneath it speaks of emptiness, desperation, entropy. The chaos is sort of tamped down, and the scriptedness is kind of on top, kind of oppressing.

C: Right. Because I'm not interested in drama. I am interested in the moment that the person is in front of the camera. And I'm interested in portrayal.

A: And you're interested in casting. How do you cast?

C: I cast by fascination.

A: But you're not really interested in the feelings of the actor. So, what is it you want to get from the person you so carefully cast?

C: I want to get what they look like, what they sound like, their take on a character, what is in their imagination. I want to get the stuff that's available to everyone, the stuff that's out there that we can all see, on the street, what you can read, and how people interpret that, how you re-create.

A: But you very specifically want to make the audience conscious of the fact that the person is doing something fake.

C: Yes, as opposed to method acting, or Stanislavsky.

A: Is that postmodern?

C: I don't know. [Laughs] It's really a question of narrative in terms of video as opposed to film—video is a recording medium much more than film is. Film is an image-capturing medium that is based on illusion, a device for creating an illusion. I am interested in video narrative and how *that* works.

A: You're also interested in the role of the director.

C: I want to develop the role of the director as the person who does the casting and sets up a situation—so that the idea can develop as it's happening. I never use a storyboard; I don't know the shots until I look through the camera. I want the immediacy of video and narrative to record an actual situation, not the creation of an illusion.

A: In your work, it's not just the content that's fucked up, it's also the form that's fucked up. And I mean that in the best sense. The form is strange and implies both oppression and impulse. For me, that process relates to the process of painting.

C: The whole process is questioning every step and every edit. When something is working as I'm making it, I feel extremely happy, not only in shooting but also editing. I used to develop [only] one idea per tape. Eventually ideas came together and led to an idea of ecstasy and beauty. The fact that my ideas led to an ecstatic beauty is sort of an ironic outcome.

•Lance and Soren

don't have a gallery.

C: I haven't pursued galleries. I come off as really curmudgeonly because I don't like the art world. I like art but I don't like the art world. I've always enjoyed having my work looked at, but it's very hard for me to sell it. I don't know why, I think it's about authority. The art world is an authority that I don't really accept or respect and a lot of it has to do with selling an object. Selling a videotape is okay for a collection or a library, but I'm not making limited edition objects to sell.

A: Galleries have their own set of politics that seem compromising for your goals. So, you're sort of an artist working in a free arena who ends up by process of elimination in video shows...

C: Or in film festivals or in schools. Actually I think the work is studied, screened, more in schools than it is anywhere else. There are a lot of students who know my work because they've seen it in their media classes.

A: Have you *gone* more towards pleasure, towards the delirium that you had looking at things you loved as a kid?

C: Yeah, it's really about pleasure. It's not the depiction of pleasure, it is pleasure.

A: I think you use abstraction in your work as a form of emotional content. I wondered what you would say.

C: I would agree. I really love abstraction. It makes me very happy.

A: I'm curious when you talk about the politics of making and selling work. You're not trying to make a Hollywood movie or even a "normal" movie. Where do you want it to go, to be seen and to be distributed?

C: That's a tough question. I feel connected to the film world, I understand the work, I love a lot of it, but it's not what I do. I really have a fine arts education; not a film education. I don't really give a fuck about the history of film. The history of art is much more interesting to me. Maybe the work is closer to the history of television.

K: A lot of it has to do with criticism. If painting and sculpture have a set of curators and critics, and film and video have a set of curators and critics, they don't really cross over that much. It's too bad.

A: For me it functions like art, and yet you

A: This is like an open call for galleries to take this work and show it.

C: Yes, take this work and show it.

A: And when you do sell your work...?

C: The Video Data Bank in Chicago sells the work.

A: So what are you going to do in Dublin?

C: Well, we're [Cecilia with her girlfriend Susan O'Brien] going to open a bookstore. I'm also going to learn web stuff. I have a site right now, www.anthologystore.com.

A: Do you think your stylistic sense will have to change when you move to Ireland?

C: I'm thinking of horror. There are castles and cliffs, really good horror elements. Ireland is landscape.

A: Who's your favorite artist?

C: I don't have a favorite. There are a lot that I like.

A: Such as...?

C: Andy Warhol was the first, and I still don't think I've exhausted all of that. Mario Bava and George Romero, they're filmmakers. And Eileen Myles.

A: So if someone wants to see *Gone* they have to wait 'til it comes to a local place.

C: Yes, but that could be a gallery wall.

(In April, 2002, the installation was installed at Gallery 312 in Chicago, and Cecilia also screened early work at the Gene Siskel Film Center in Chicago. Contact her at www.anthologystore.com for updated info about future shows of Gone.)