

Where is your rupture?
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Lutz Bacher

Where is your rupture?

SI/NY - The Swiss Institute, New York

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Lutz Bacher

by Liz Kotz

Watching Lutz Bacher's recent videos, the ostensible subjects always seem to slip further and further out of reach. After sitting through almost 12 hours of conversations with Bacher's friends, colleagues and family discussing the artist in *Do You Love Me?* (1994), we emerge exhausted, knowing somewhat more, and also somewhat less, than when we started. Over two dozen people share their anecdotes, reminiscences and analyses of "Lutz" (also occasionally referred to as "Susan"); most of them seem fairly close to the artist, though certain perhaps "key" individuals (husband and son) do not appear. An artworld viewer might recognize one or two curators, artists, writers or dealers, but it's not necessarily a power scene.

Faced with the admittedly awkward prospect of addressing the viewer about the person who is (off camera) interviewing and recording them, the subjects often can't seem to figure out who they are addressing: they shift back and forth between "she" and "you," sometimes try to bypass their interlocutor and address the camera (and imagined viewer) "directly," sometimes keep glancing up awkwardly as if trying to forget that they are being (belatedly) observed. If all statements are implicitly constructed with an imagined recipient in mind, the spoken statements in *Do You Love Me?* seem to falter on this precipice – among others – and fall into perpetual vagueness, repetition, endless anecdotes, and overcompensation. In the end, we are left with details like one woman (Pat Hearn) chiding the artist for her odd, "childlike" clothes and shoes or another (me) admitting she didn't even know the "real" name or age of the person she considers a close friend. Needless to say, these details do not add up to anything like a coherent, intelligible picture, and we are left with a growing hole in the center of the "image" – a recurring void that incrementally comes to stand for the huge gaping hole at the center of all subjectivity.

A simple underlying structure (Lutz interviews her friends talking about her) has the potential to generate seemingly unlimited amounts of material, and the extreme temporal distention produces epic implosion. The ratio of "noise" to "signal" quickly becomes overpowering, as hours and hours of hesitations, false starts and asides frustrate and undermine any narrative or informational build. The tape begins to remind one of the Bruce Nauman videos in which a simple, seemingly meaningless activity ("Bouncing two balls around my studio," "Manipulating a fluorescent light around the perimeter of my body") is rigorously executed to the point of exhaustion, rage or enervation, as fatigue takes its toll on performer and viewer alike. In Nauman's work, what keeps his minimalist structures from looping endlessly is the unforeseen outcomes his "tasks" produce, the metaphorical and narrative elements that gradually emerge through repetition – in particular, the overriding effort to control, to produce a repeating structure, which ultimately always *fails*. Bacher ups the ante by honing in on the emotional center of every bid for attention: as the title itself proclaims, the very subject of Bacher's video is the demand for love – though who is asking, and to whom it is addressed, seems at the least open-ended. One is reminded of Lacan's dictum that "love is something we don't have that we give to someone who doesn't exist."

One of the truisms of psychoanalysis is that any two-person relation actually involves a suppressed third (or even fourth) person or position: from the family triad (mommy-daddy-me) on, desire is always the desire of another, or for another. The woman is exchanged to cement the bond of two men, the joke exchanged between two people to aggress upon a third, the love object chosen to both reproduce and replace the lost original object, and so on. And love triangles, as we know, are often messy. And as Freud demonstrates in "A Child is Being Beaten," these positions and the relations between them are intrinsically unsteady and reversible: love transmutes into hate, active into passive,

male into female, and a single individual can occupy more than one position at once.

One of the recurring structures in Bacher's work is the setting up of situations in which these configurations repeatedly come together and come apart. In *Do You Love Me?* the points in the structure interviewee-artist-viewer keep coming apart, as if we're drawing a triangle where the lines perpetually overshoot, undershoot, cross, miss their mark, go a little haywire. As speakers project their own stories and concerns onto "Lutz," they are in turn projected in video onto the wall of the gallery. The collapsing of analogous psychic and technical operations reinforces the sense that the real subject of the video is literal (psychic) projection. This triangulated structure of projection condenses and intensifies in the more compact "Amy" section of *A Normal Life* (1995-96) where a young woman tells Lutz a story about what happened between her and an (other) older woman. Yet what one is left with most powerfully after *Do You Love Me?* is the strange pathos created by the absence of the very subject of the tape, of this figure supposedly at its center. As a speaker at the end of the tape (the writer Laurie Weeks) analyzes the situation: "it's about being erased, this gap... The artist's body is absent, but really *present* in its absence, it's a glaring hole."

This notion of a structuring hole or absence animates much of Bacher's subsequent work. Talk, rather than providing a vehicle for apparent "content," increasingly feels like a device for keeping the demons of loss and emptiness at bay. In the center section of *A Normal Life*, two women's heads are reflected together in a window as they pursue a routine conversation at a family get-together: "So Marge, what've you been doing with yourself lately?" "Don't ask me, time just comes and goes." "Isn't that *creepy?*" And Marge proceeds to recount her days - filled with doctors' appointments, watering the grass, and attending other family functions - as a louder male conversation in the background constantly verges on drowning her out, and the two small heads bob slightly in the empty expanse of the window. It's a moment echoed in a later work, *You Could Live Forever* (Dec., 1996) in which we look on while gallery owner Pat Hearn nods her head slowly, spending what seems like hours engaged with apparently mundane phone conversations: "okay, okay, yes, alright, that's fine..." At one point, on the phone with a doctor's office, she has to spell out her name, "H - e - a - r - n..." The interaction feels unexpectedly tragic, as we witness this weird moment which is both completely personal and completely depersonalized. Spelled out, the name becomes emptied, a mere point of interface with the bureaucratic system: breaking down the word, down to its smallest parts, effects a complete pulverization of meaning.

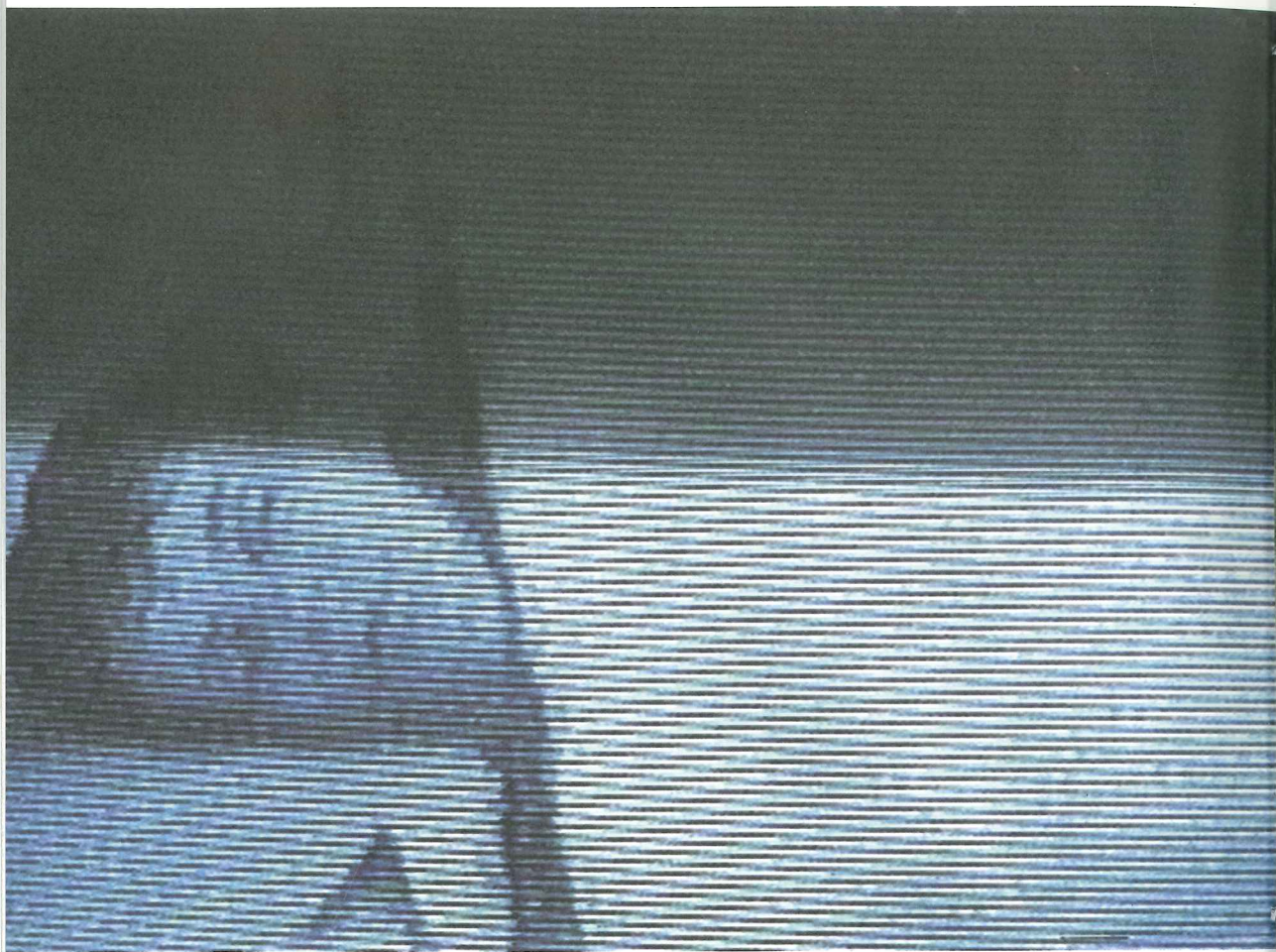
This close attention to the use of language in everyday social situations is both maddening and heart-wrenching. Increasingly evacuated of meaning, language proceeds by interminable repetitions, hesitations, pauses and indirectness. Yet the viewer is nonetheless left with the incredible emotional load of all this inarticulateness. Subsequent videos, from *Sleep* (May, 1996) to *Blue Moon* (June, 1996) to *A Closed Circuit Installation* (1997-98) follow a transition where the subjects get more and more attenuated, talk dies down, and much of the apparent "content" is drained away so that just a basic structure or configuration remains: a person alone in a room (Lutz sleeping, Pat in her office) and a separating pair: the moon and its reflection, which keep pulling apart until just an empty black screen is left. This increasing tendency towards abstraction, with its apparent minimizing of represented content, pares these videos down to an emotional core. In *Sleep* and *A Closed Circuit Installation*, the use of a time-lapse video surveillance recorder has the effect of greatly abstracting and pixelating the image, breaking down movement into crumbling jerky gestures. The wide rolling scan-line in *Sleep* repeatedly obstructs the image of Bacher's face, blocking out entirely her (nearly inert) figure:

a multi-hour performance in which apparently "nothing happens," the work formally and thematically addresses the complete eradication of the artist's subjectivity. The figure of the completely effaced image, reduced to the limit of emptiness or unintelligibility, recurs throughout Bacher's more recent work. In *Olympiad* (1997), the disruption of the video signal causes jerks, stops and flare-outs that at times completely efface the image. And at the close of *Blue Moon*, as refrains of the song "Danny Boy" and other ambient sounds are heard in the distance, the light of the moon hovers at the extreme edge of the frame, leaving an almost empty black image on the TV monitor. Despite the seemingly pure formal abstraction of the image, melodrama leaks out of the soundtrack, provided by the sound from an off-screen television set. In her incremental eradication of the image, it is as if Bacher is testing the limits of the minimum visual presence necessary for empathy and emotional involvement.

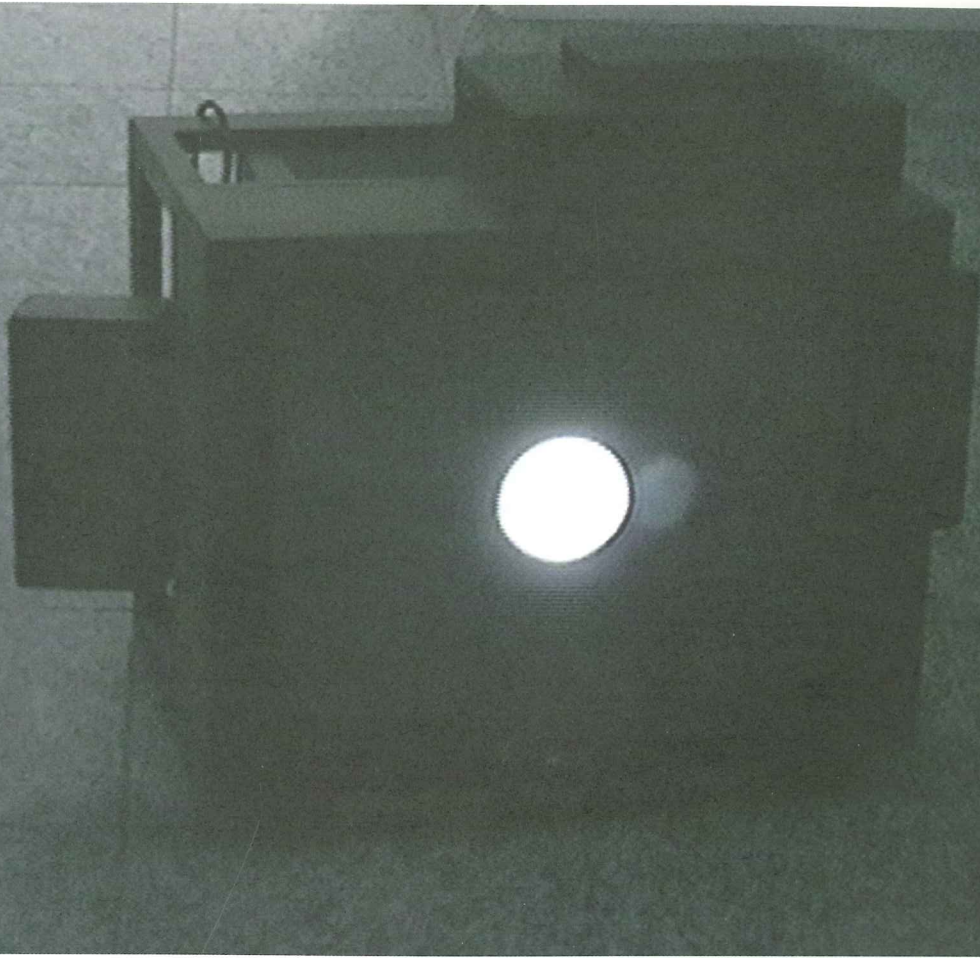
In *Untitled* (1997), the subject is literally absent, dead: the video loops a short segment of Princess Diana's coffin as it is carried through Westminster Abbey by members of the Welsh Guard, accompanied by the harshly dissonant sounds of an organ and tolling church bells. Again propelled by a structuring absence, the tape presents Diana's lurching coffin, continually pressing forward into the frame, as a pulsing figure for the constant propping up of a continually effaced and eroded subjectivity. As the tape begins, it's already over: the girl is dead, we already know all the stories, Bacher is not going to tell us anymore, not going to use any of her surrogates to do so. It's over. Yet the tape goes on, and on: the video loop creating a visceral, throbbing, sensuous presence that is arguably the most sensually intense (in terms of sound, color, rhythm, etc) of any of Bacher's works. The uniformed men carrying the coffin, propping up this (dead) subject, perpetually reanimate the corpse: topped by madly swaying flowers, the coffin keeps lurching forward, looks for a moment like it's going to fall out of the frame, then restarts its apparently endless movement.

Despite what would seem like a violation of the minimum conditions for human subjectivity – the absence of the living figure – subjectivity nevertheless endures, shorn up by sheer will and desire on the part of the viewer: the sign for this being the only fragment of language which appears in the tape, the word "Live" which hangs on the top left corner of the image. In Bacher's work, perhaps "Diana" is a figure for this intensely palpable absence that we perpetually mourn and perpetually remain in thrall to. She becomes the dead girl, the missing person, the stand-in for an endless list of others: "Pat," "Laurie," "Amy," "Lutz," and all the rest. The continually-looping re-enactment of her absence is doubled by the other figure of relentless repetition: the overpowering, almost psychotic dissonance of the bells as they echo and cascade over the murmuring drone of the organ, the two rhythms forever out of sync. It is in this pulsing, throbbing presence that "death" and "life" seem to converge, each propelled on by the uncertain rhythms of the human body and mechanical repetition, harder to separate than ever.

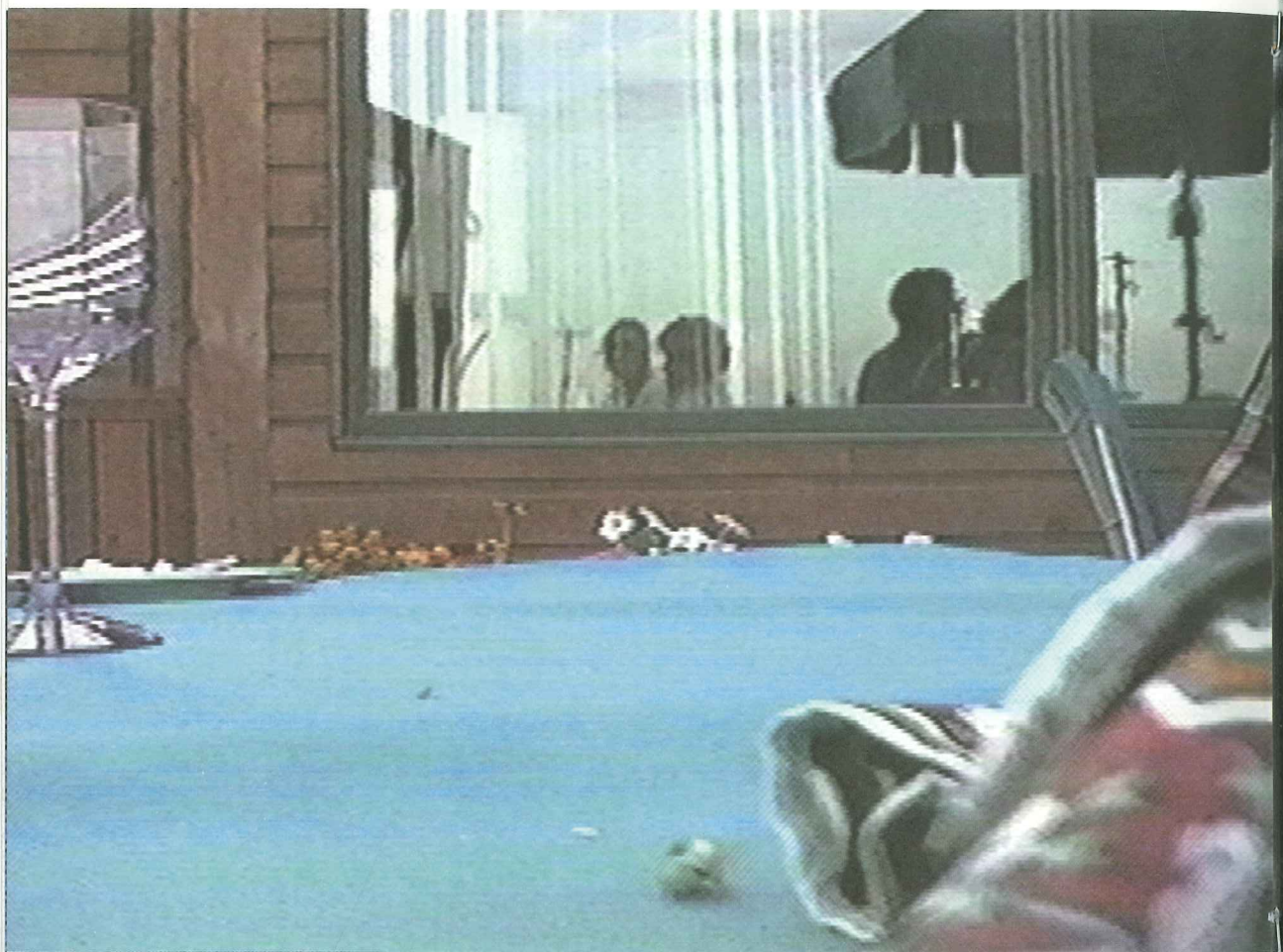




Sleep, 1996



Blue Moon, 1996



A Normal Life, 1995-96



Do You Love Me?, 1994



A Closed Circuit Installation, 1997-98





Olympiad, 1997



Olympiad, 1997

Video by Lutz Bacher

You Know More Than I Know, 1995-96

3 split-screen VHS color with sound 1 hour each
Three tarot readings over the course of a year by phone/video link from San Francisco to Los Angeles. With Kristen Morse.

Sleep, 4-6 May, 1996

Time lapse VHS black and white no sound 72 hours
Lutz writes: A real time performance with closed circuit TV of me sleeping and trying to sleep in the Gramercy Park Hotel.

Blue Moon, 1996, June 30

VHS color with sound 78 minutes
Single 27" monitor or multiple monitors in different locations.
Ambient sounds of home TV and street are heard as the moon and its reflection move inexorably across the sky in opposite directions.

A Normal Life, 1995-96

VHS color with sound
Three screen projection, 13 minutes
Two people tell about their past and a third person returns to her past in the form of home videos.

Do You Love Me?, 1994

EP VHS color with sound 12 hours
Large scale video projection installation
Lutz writes: In this tape, friends, colleagues and family talk about me as I remain unseen behind the camera.

A Closed Circuit Installation, 1997-98

Time-lapse VHS color with sound
A year-long real time constant monitor of Pat Hearn working in her gallery.

You Could Live Forever, 1996

VHS color with sound 45 minutes
Single channel video
Camera roll study tape for year-long-closed circuit TV of Pat Hearn working in her gallery.

Olympiad, 1997

VHS black and white no sound 36 minutes
Video projection installation
A walk through the Olympic Stadium in Berlin in June 1997 displays the tracking problems, burnouts and other artifacts of a corrupted tape processed through a time base corrector.

Untitled, 1997

VHS loop color with sound 2 hours
Large scale video projection installation
The Welsh Guard carry Diana's casket through Westminster Abbey as chimes and organ repeat.

Lutz Bacher

Lives and works in Berkeley, CA

ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 Simon Watson, New York
1991 Men in Love, Mincher/Wilcox Gallery, San Francisco
1992 Sex with Strangers, Trial Balloon, New York
1993 Playboys, Pat Hearn Gallery, New York
Jim & Sylvia, Matrix Gallery, University Art Museum, Berkeley
1995 Do You Love Me? TRI Gallery, Los Angeles
1995-96 Pat Hearn Gallery, New York
1997 Video by Lutz Bacher, Bunny Yeager LA, Los Angeles
1998 Olympiad, Rupert Goldsworthy Gallery, New York

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1990 The Clinic, Simon Watson, New York
How Can They Be So Sure? LACE, Los Angeles
Video Installations, New Langton Arts, San Francisco
1991 Miss California, Mincher/Wilcox Gallery, San Francisco
White Room, White Columns, New York
Dismember, Simon Watson, New York
Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York
AIDS Timeline/Group Material, Whitney Biennial, Whitney Museum, New York
The Body in Question, Burden Gallery/Aperture, New York
1992 Dissent, Difference and the Body Politic, Portland Art Museum, Portland; Otis/Parsons Gallery, Los Angeles
Update, White Columns, New York
Clinic and Recovery Center, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Los Angeles
1993 The Subject of Rape, Whitney Museum, New York
Coming to Power, David Zwirner Gallery, New York
I Am the Enunciator, Thread Waxing Space, New York
Privacy, Forum, Milan, Italy
1920, Exit Art, New York
Tri-Sexual, TRI Gallery, Los Angeles
1994 Game Girl, Shedhalle, Zurich, Switzerland; Kunstverein, Munich, Germany
Pop Politics, Tyler Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia
A Selected Survey, Pat Hearn Gallery, New York
Ciphers of Identity, Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York
Bad Girls, New Museum, New York; Wight Gallery, UCLA, Los Angeles
New World (Dis)Order, Center for the Arts, San Francisco
The Use of Pleasure, Terrain, San Francisco
1995 In a Different Light, University Art Museum, Berkeley
Altered States, The Forum for Contemporary Art, St. Louis
The Outburst of Signs, Art Forum, Munich, Germany
1996 Rupert Goldsworthy Gallery, Berlin, Germany
La Toilette de Venus, CRG Gallery, New York
Real Fake, Neuberger Museum of Art, SUNY, Purchase
1997 Figure, Betty Rymer Gallery, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago
1997-98 A Closed Circuit Installation, Pat Hearn Gallery, New York
1998 Spectacular Optical, Thread Waxing Space, New York
White Noise, Kunsthalle Bern, Bern, Switzerland
100 Years of Sculpture, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis
American Dreamin, Art + Idea, Mexico City, Mexico
Diana 98, Museum of Contemporary Art, Zurich, Switzerland
1999 Searchlight, Logan Center for Contemporary Art, San Francisco

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

1993 California Arts Council Grant

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

Museum of Fine Arts Houston
Walker Art Center
Kunsthaus Zurich
University Art Museum, Berkeley

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

- 1990 **The Body in Question**, Aperture, New York
How Can They Be So Sure? LACE, Los Angeles
- 1991 **Contemporary American Women Artists**, Photovision, Madrid, Spain
- 1992 **Dissent, Difference and the Body Politic**, Portland Art Museum, Portland
Update, White Columns, NY
- 1993 **The Subject of Rape**, Whitney Museum, New York
Lusitania, Vol. 1, No. 4, New York
Dirty Looks, BFI Publishing, London, England
Atlantica #6, Canary Islands, Spain
- 1994 **The Use of Pleasure**, Terrain, San Francisco
New World (Dis)Order, Northern California Council, San Francisco
- 1995 **In a Different Light**, City Lights, San Francisco
Altered States, Forum for Contemporary Art, St. Louis
The Outburst of Signs, Art Forum, Munich, Germany
- 1998 **Spectacular Optical**, Threadwaxing Space, New York
White Noise, Kunsthalle Bern
Kathy O'Dell, **Contract with the Skin**, University of Minnesota Press
MATRIX Berkeley: 1978-1998, University Art Museum, Berkeley

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1991 Kenneth Baker, "Art That Runs Off in All Directions," **San Francisco Chronicle**, September 19
Maria Porges, "Lutz Bacher," **Artforum**, March
- 1992 Liz Kotz, "Sex with Strangers," **Artforum**, September
Robert Mahoney, "Lutz Bacher, White Columns," **Arts**, January
- 1993 Sarah Ballister, "Playboys," **Flash Art**, December
Laura Cottingham, "New York Fax," **Art Issues**, November/December
Michael Kimmelman, "Lutz Bacher Playboys," **The New York Times**, September 24
Faye Hirsch, "Playboys," **Art In America**, November
Elizabeth Hess, "Gallery of the Dolls," **Village Voice**, October 19
Holland Cotter, "At The Whitney Provocation and Theory Meet Head-On," **The New York Times**, August 13
Christopher Knight, "Disputable Assertions in 'Body Politic,'" **The Los Angeles Times**, February 26
David Bonetti, "Fresh Reading on Relationships," **San Francisco Examiner**, February 19
Glen Helfand, "Rough Sex," **SF Weekly**, February 10
- 1995 Susan Kandel, "'Love Me?' Shows Off Self-Obsession," **The Los Angeles Times**, April 6
- 1996 Howard Halle, "Lutz Bacher, Pat Hearn Gallery," **Timeout New York**, January 10-17
- 1997 Susan Kandel, "Intimacy and Terror," **The Los Angeles Times**, March 2
Peter Frank, "Tony Oursler, Lutz Bacher," **L.A. Weekly**, April 11-17
- 1998 Holland Carter, "Lutz Bacher: Olympiad," **New York Times**, May 8
Claudine Ise, "Babes," **The Los Angeles Times**, July 24

