

Lutz Bacher

Closed Circuit

1997-2000, DVD, color, silent, 40 min, to repeat continuously

We watch a very slender young woman with close-cropped dark hair working at a white desk in a small, white, cubicle-like office. Positioned above and to the side of her desk, the camera's wide-angle lens distorts the scene, rendering straight lines as curves, and producing a sense of deep spatial recession in a confined room. Forty-minutes long, Bacher's video distills individual frames from documentary footage, reanimating them as a succession of stills. Time-code numbers at the top of the frame record the date and time of each image.

Depending on how much "back-story" we have, we know that the woman is Pat Hearn, working in her gallery on West 22nd Street in New York, and that two years after the tape concludes, Hearn died at age forty-five from liver cancer. These facts can seem to overdetermine any response to the work, rendering it a memorial to a specific person, one who happened to be quite celebrated in downtown Manhattan and Western European art circles. Having started out as an artist with a gallery on the far edges of the East Village, Hearn remained an icon of a "renegade" or "underground" sensibility in an increasingly corporate, market-driven art-world. Paradoxically, she was one of the first dealers to leave Soho and join Matthew Marks in Chelsea, a locale that soon came to symbolize the late-1990s trade in art as quasi-disposable luxury goods.

Bacher's *Closed Circuit* (1997-2000) began as a real-time project monitoring Pat Hearn in her office. From a small monitor perched in a passage-way between the front and rear exhibition spaces, visitors could observe video from a small lens in Hearn's nearby office, thereby gaining indirect access to that space. A time lapse VCR of the type used in commercial monitoring systems recorded all hours that the gallery was open. Documenting one year in the gallery's operation, the installation ran from October 1997 through July 1998. We can quickly grasp its relation to certain art of the late 1960s and early 1970s, from durational and endurance-oriented performance projects, and various genres of "site-specific" installation, to Bruce Nauman's well-known closed-circuit corridor pieces, which systematically split the positions of subject and observer.

Rather than assembling a shorter tape from an arbitrarily sampled series of video frames, Bacher instead focused on the recorded material's inherent narrative dimensions to make, in effect, a short movie. The work is almost classically-structured: early scenes, in October, introduce the scene and a set of characters, as gallery staff and visitors come through the office. Mundane props and objects – a small blue table, a functional black swivel chair and black folding chair – also behave like primary characters. A long period of entrances, meetings, phone calls and other day-to-day routines unfolds throughout the fall, as various artists (including, briefly, Bacher) and others drop by to see Pat, to greet and talk and do business, to move things around and change the art on the walls and even use the small office as a storage space for chairs, boxes, and folding tables at one point. Even this last scene is rendered strangely aesthetic, as two red notebooks left on the white desk recreate an arrangement of primary colors within a stark black and white grid. Then, in late January, accidental glare from Hearn's cheap black desk lamp alters the scene,



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which increasingly alternates between brightness and dark. As the light itself becomes a central actor, the human comings and goings become more frantic and more distant. At times the image itself breaks up or is obliterated. If we pay attention to the time code numbers, we notice that time is accelerating, and Hearn's brief absences appear more and more frequent. Figuring this absence, empty chairs shift positions without visible human animation, as if choreographed by the tightly-confined, box-like space.

This space, the box, has been the subject of the tape all along. With its white planes, clean lines, and vanishing point in the far corner, the box condenses a series of historical spaces: the rectangular picture-plane, detached from the wall of its architectural container, which renders an impression of spatial depth through a fixed-point perspective – a technology later embedded into the photographic apparatus; the shallow-box space of the theater, in which a stage-like room serves as the site of repeated entrances and exits; the stark rectilinear grid of the industrial warehouse or factory which, by the 1920s, became a model for home and office alike in De Stijl and Bauhaus architecture; the generic “white-cube” of the commercial art gallery; and, inescapably, as the metaphoric “prison,” the structures of psychic and physical confinement which must be reproduced internally to become a coherent modern subject.

Remnants of these histories litter the frame. Throughout the year, Hearn's office is hung with a series of small grid-like and monochrome squares, which re-enact early avantgarde painting practices. While these initially adhere to a primary-color scheme, by spring the grids and squares have taken on the day-glow hues of 1960s Pop Art. Frequently dressed in a dark leather coat and cap, Hearn's attire resembles that of countless young men in photographs by Rodchenko or films by Vertov – now accessorized with a tasteful black bag. Her reserved posture and movements, and the very repetitiveness of her daily actions, reinforce this experience of regulation and containment.

Using new post-processing technologies, *Closed Circuit* renders this “real time” situation into a highly-compressed series of ephemeral images, now displaced to the discrete space of the museum. The arrangement of the flat panel LCD monitor within a room-like space emphasizes the work's human scale, modular and pictorial structures. Produced at a moment when many younger artists were attempting to reinvigorate historical practices of “institutional critique” through surprisingly superficial “interventions” into museum and gallery settings, Bacher's installation targets far deeper and more enduring structures. Embedded in the very project of surveillance is an understanding that the spaces of the image, of the architectural container, and of the subject have an intimate and inescapable relation: maybe you can take the girl out of the box, but you cannot take the box out of the girl.

Liz Kotz



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