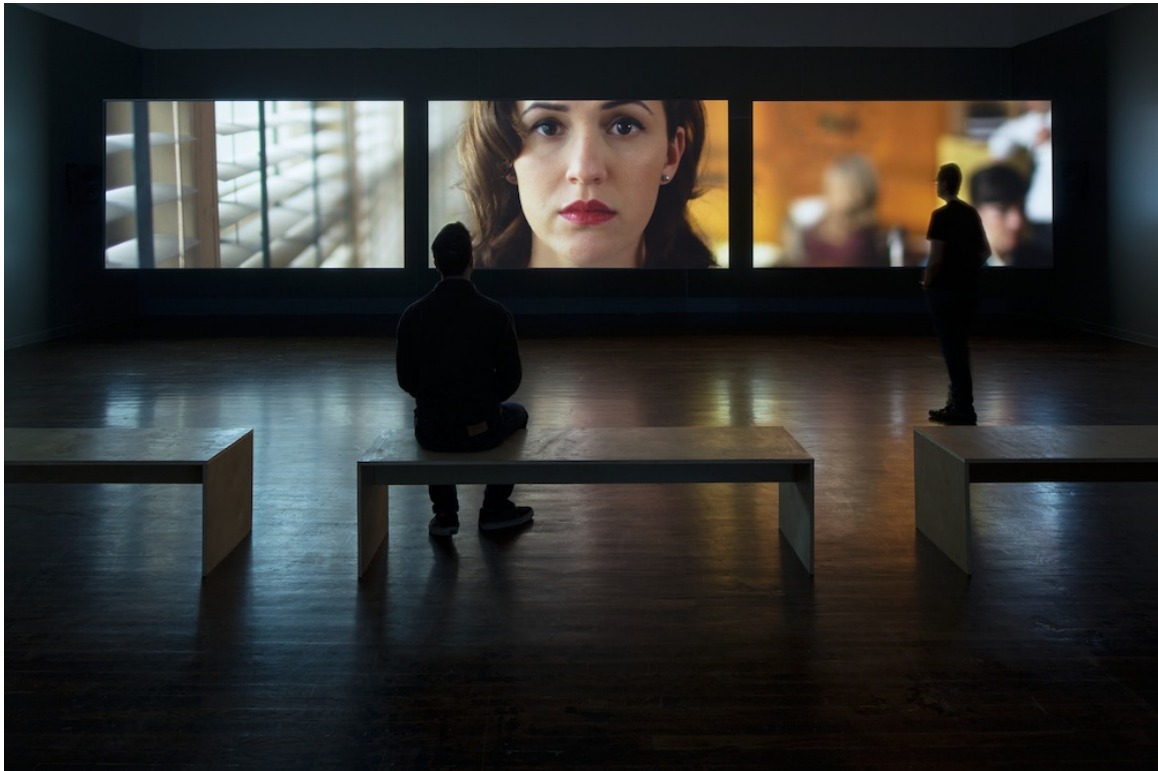


BOMB — Artists in Conversation

Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler

Where cinema and video overlap: the filmmakers on their subjects, process, and recent exhibitions

By Irina Arnaut



I met Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler in 2011. They were teaching at Bard, where I was getting my MFA. That summer I was working on a video of four ambiguously related vignettes that included, among other scenes, a talking mushroom and a woman slow-dancing with her dog. The narrative approach tended toward the experimental, but the aesthetic sensibility was unabashedly cinematic. One day, during a small critique, a fellow student said, "If you're going to be doing anything filmic, you should probably meet with Teresa and Alex." I promptly nagged them for a visit. Working in the obscure space where cinema and video overlap, I was grateful to talk with Teresa and Alexander about the possibilities of developing a nuanced, critical relationship with an audience, a narrative, and even the camera, through the structures that cinema offers. We had this email conversation on the occasion of *Eight, Eighteen*, their recent exhibition at Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, and *Sound Speed Marker*, a show that includes a trilogy of videos shot over the last five years, at Ballroom Marfa in Texas, which is up through August 10.

Irina Arnaut You made *Eight* without plans to make *Eighteen*. What inspired you to return to *Eight* and make a follow-up? When you were seeking out the actress from *Eight*, Anna Reyes, had you already considered what shape you wanted a follow-up work to take?

Teresa Hubbard We started looking for Anna more than a year ago and eventually located her in Boston, where she is studying and practicing contemporary dance. We had a number of conversations with her about the intervening years since we last saw her—her interests, disappointments, and aspirations, as well as our own. We knew that given our recent experiences with the works in Sound Speed Marker, we wanted to engage Anna in a near documentary kind of role—one incorporating and performing a version of herself. Anna created her own dance choreography for her character in the scene in the empty swimming pool. On our side, we felt that eighteen, as an age of transition, is exactly an appropriate place to push the complexities of in-betweenness.

Alexander Birchler The show at Tanya Bonakdar was connected to and definitely influenced by another body of work we've been making: a trilogy of video installations that explore the physical, social, and psychic traces that moviemaking leaves behind on a location. Those works, titled Grand Paris Texas, Movie Mountain, and Giant, form the core of Sound Speed Marker. The development of these works is entirely process-driven and has involved multiple durational trips to specific locations over an extended period of time. For example, we were driving back from teaching at Bard in upstate New York and we decided to take a detour and stop by the town of Paris, Texas. Both Teresa and I as teenagers — me growing up in Switzerland, Teresa in Australia — had seen Wim Wenders's film Paris, Texas and we were curious to visit the actual town. When we arrived in Paris, we did what we do in pretty much every town: we went to see what the downtown movie theater looks like. The Grand movie theater was closed. It was unspectacular—and that was interesting to us. Once we got home, we did some further research and found out that the cinema had been unoccupied for more than a decade and belonged to the city. There were no existing images of the interior in its current state, so we organized getting permission to go inside. When we returned to Paris, some city development officers met us outside the building, unlocked the front door, and gave us masks to wear. We walked in and realized that the officers were not going to come inside with us. So, with our flashlights, we continued on into the building alone. The interior was completely dark and I was walking a few steps ahead of Teresa. I stepped into the main auditorium and in the semi-darkness, I saw wings flapping and startled pigeons flying up and circling overhead. I turned back to Teresa and said, "This is it!"



TH That was the start of a two-year period of making research trips to Paris about every other month. The process of these trips—to find out what had happened to the Grand theater—lead us to meet many people and to find connected sites, including a half-erased VHS tape of Wenders's Paris, Texas for rent at Hastings, the only video store in town.

IA The dance scene in Eighteen was really entrancing. It seemed like the first instant in the work when the sense of anticipation had momentarily burst and I could catch a glimpse of what the future holds for Anna. The scene was so affecting, in great part because of the presence of the boy. It's such an intimate encounter, and this forging of intimacy is really one of the first things we experience independently of family. Did you start thinking of the dance scene as soon as you learned that Anna was studying dance? How did you decide to include the boy in the scene?

AB As soon as we began talking with Anna about her life and her interests we knew that she needed to dance in this work. It's a great question about this intimate encounter and we tried to make this encounter in the pool complicated. In

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the beginning of this transition Anna slips between being an outsider observer onto her own scenario, sitting on a diving board looking down into her apartment where her party is taking place, while she uses the same diving board as a very different kind of observation deck as she looks at her friend—a possible boyfriend?—while he skateboards around the empty swimming pool. There's a kind of competitive exchange of displaying their talents; she watches him and then he watches her.

TH When Anna observes what's happening far below from the perspective of the diving board, it's from a risky vantage point. And when we see her down in the empty pool dancing—yes, there is a moment of expansiveness for Anna's character, and her world, of what's to come. She's fully aware and empowered by this intimacy of exchange—this tension of watching and of being watched, of self-admiration and of being admired. It's also a scene where for a moment she demonstrates self-confidence.

IA There's a lot of cross-referencing between Eight and Eighteen. The birthday cakes in both videos are nearly identical, and even the number of birthday candles lit on eighteen-year-old Anna's cake is a subtle call back to Eight. In another scene, eighteen-year-old Anna stands at a glass door at the end of her shift at a pizza restaurant, watching the downpour outside, just as eight-year-old Anna stood at a window on the night of her rained-out birthday party. This interweaving of both stories happens on the level of the soundtrack, too—watching Eighteen, I suddenly



recalled Eight, when the sound of the rainstorm from those scenes filled the space, and vice versa. While these resonances can be considered a practical consequence of making a movie starring the same actress, it also got me thinking how these moments can become anchors in a person's life, never to be outgrown. Do you think there's some necessary commonality between both ages? One on

the eve of puberty, the other of adulthood? Do you have a sense that in some way Anna is both eight and eighteen at once?

AB When we were developing Eighteen, we consciously wanted for the two works to be nested into each other, so they can reverberate, echo and bounce off of each other.

TH Spending time talking with Anna about our initial ideas and directions, it became clear to us that in Eighteen, the terrain of Anna's journey needed to be unstable. This is why the camera choreography of Eighteen seamlessly straddles interiors and exteriors, different seasons, day and night. We see Anna in a year of indeterminate waiting, longing for something to happen, of what you beautifully described as "making time." There are examples of this throughout Eighteen—for example, in a long tracking shot where Anna and her friends are hanging out, lounging, and dozing off at the local public swimming pool. The scene is in high summer and there are families with kids running around and relaxing by the pool. As the camera passes over Anna and her friends lying on beach towels, the grass on which they are lying seamlessly becomes the littered, dirty floor of a fast food restaurant. As the camera passes over the debris and lifts up from the floor, Anna and her friends are sweeping and mopping up in the restaurant. Summer has become Christmas; play has become work; day has become night; and bright sunshine has turned into a pouring, unrelenting rainstorm.

IA Your use of the loop, and especially those mesmerizing transitions between indoor and outdoor scenes and day and night settings are suggestive of a more psychic space, as if Anna is recalling these events, or is somehow outside of them as they're happening.

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TH What interests me about the loop are its disparate workings of detachment and trauma. On the one hand, a loop is like a science experiment in which samples of a system are subjected to observation under detached, controlled, repeated conditions. On the other hand, a loop is about the compulsion to repeat—it's a way of remembering that is resistant, symptomatic, and traumatic.

IA On the possibility of recollection versus happening in real time: I couldn't help but wonder as I was watching *Eighteen*, Aren't teenagers always texting now? I noticed the Sex Pistol's album *Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols* in one of the scenes, so it occurred to me that this narrative might be a combination of your and Anna's experiences of being eighteen. Still, I'm curious if portraying contemporary technology was ever a consideration for you in developing *Eighteen*?

AB We did consider how contemporary technology delivers possibilities of multi-tasking, and how that condition could be part of the work. We decided that rather than have teenagers literally using cell phones—texting, chatting—we preferred to embed the condition of multi-tasking in our choices of camera work and choreography. Each location and situation that Anna's character is in exists in constant state of a fragment and distraction, on the way to becoming something and somewhere else.

TH There are a number of different records and other kinds of props that are historical placeholders in the birthday party scene. *Never Mind the Bollocks* was certainly an important album for me at eighteen. And that pink color . . .

IA The loop allows the audience to engage with the work at any time without missing an essential part of the narrative. But *Eighteen* seems to ask more of its audience than just to watch the work once around. I watched *Eighteen* for a while and noticed that in one version of the loop, off camera, there's the sound, familiar to anyone who's experienced a dead battery, of a car that won't start. Anna—or at least I assume it's Anna—lets out a frustrated groan as she tries again and again to start the car. In the following version of the loop, while all the visuals remain the same, the car does start and then drives away, again off camera. It was a really exciting moment, expecting one thing and getting another. It inspired a new sense of alertness as I watched—I was wondering what else I had taken for granted. It almost feels naive to ask what you expect of your audience, but this small narrative inconsistency between the loops—and I couldn't find another—does feel like a call to attention that many viewers don't have when watching video work. Or is it your intention for people to come away with different recollections of what exactly happened?



TH At the opening at Tanya Bonakdar, someone came up to me and described seeing the second loop and questioning what he was seeing, what the repetition meant, and whether what he was seeing was the same thing looping. He described his experience by telling me that he wasn't sure if he was actually "seeing something that was different"—that is, seeing difference the second time around—or if he was "seeing differently." This was a wonderful response to hear.

AB What drives our work is a fascination for the space, condition, and wonderment of the frame—particularly, what is outside the frame. In the car scene you describe, within that loop, Anna creates an expansion of the loop; she forces an opening, an exit. It's not an escape we see, but sense. In *Eighteen*, the loop presents and implies problematics of self absorption, infinite regress, solipsism—but it also presents and implies the potentials for self-knowledge, insight, self-doubling, self-revision. The loop can be both an open and closed system simultaneously. This contradiction and potential has drawn us in like a magnet. Over the years, we've

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explored the loop in a number of different ways—through temporal and physical shape (Gregor's Room II, Eight, Eighteen, Detached Building, Single Wide); through paradox and double bind (House with Pool, Nightshift); and as a mode of near-documentary and historical repetition (Johnny, Grand Paris Texas, Movie Mountain, Giant).

IA Movie Mountain and Giant both prominently feature the sound engineer recording location sounds. Eighteen has a very carefully composed soundtrack, where ambient noise from one scene spills over into another. Obviously sound is a huge part of your editing process, and of the narrative that takes shape. How conscious are you of the sound you want to use as you're shooting? Is it a challenge to look and to listen at the same time?

AB In our work we've often returned to the idea of listening in different ways. We are very interested in how listening looks. We find there's a potential in how listening, recording, and making sound—noise or music—can become a visual element. In Giant, for example, at one point the sound recordist leans over and presses her ear right up against one of the wooden beams of the set. We do not hear what she is hearing. It's left as an image of listening as her own privileged, intimate space.

TH In Movie Mountain (Méliès) there is another sound recordist who is seen several times throughout the work. He is filmed carrying his gear and climbing to the top of Movie Mountain. When he reaches the top, he unpacks his microphone, which has a dead cat wind muff over it, positions it on a stand, and sets the recording levels. He puts his headphones on, listens, and starts the recording. Then, leaving the apparatus in recording mode, he walks away. The microphone becomes a placeholder for a figure.

IA All three works in Sound Speed Marker—Movie Mountain, Grand Paris Texas, and Giant—reference Hollywood movies that use Texas as a backdrop, either physically or as a concept. For me, there's a sense that the Hollywood movies are somehow mining the state's status as an untamed landscape independent of the rule of law. Watching Giant in particular I came to think of these Hollywood studios as some version of oil prospectors, trying to extract from the setting whatever they could. What's the relationship between Hollywood and Texas for you?



AB This is an interesting analogy! This idea about prospecting reminds me of Tom Ellison, a car mechanic and lifelong resident of Sierra Blanca, who appears in *Movie Mountain*. Tom talks about how he imagines the silent movie crew would have gotten from Sierra Blanca to Movie Mountain and how they would have used the land—what they would have hunted on their way out to Movie Mountain. He says, "I have no idea why they chose that site to take a movie." The works in *Sound Speed Marker* certainly explore some paradigms of the western. Over the course of developing the component works for *Sound Speed Marker*, we considered a number of different sites around the country and even a couple of sites in Europe. The three sites we chose to commit to and explore over time were challenging and resonant for us on a number of exciting and unknown levels. They all share the potential of a curiously missed mark—we're visiting these sites at the wrong time.

TH Regarding your question about the relationship between Hollywood and Texas, one way to look this is through the history of Gaston Méliès, the lesser known brother and business partner of the famous filmmaker Georges Méliès. In April 1911, Gaston relocated his struggling movie company, the Star Film Ranch, from San Antonio, Texas, to California. Although he'd moved his company from the northeast down to Texas because of the amount of daylight, Méliès found that it was too often too hot to work, so he departed with his film crew, actors, and equipment to try their luck in Los Angeles. Together they boarded the Sunset Express Train and traveled a route that stopped in Sierra Blanca, which at that time was the railroad's pivotal gateway junction to the West Coast. Our research suggests that during this journey, Méliès and his company took a pit stop: they got off the train in Sierra Blanca for several days, perhaps to film a movie. Afterward that place later came to be known as "Movie Mountain."

IA Your work is so composed. Is beauty something you think about, maybe aspire to?

TH In terms of composing shots, we are very attentive to the frame. We do consider it to be a charged space in terms of slippage or collision—especially in *Eighteen and Eight*—of having one time and place bleed into the next without explanation. We are interested in the disarming characteristics of the frame, how everything that is being shown, being seen, can actively suggest what's at the edge or just beyond the frame.

IA In regards to what lies just beyond the frame, it struck me that in *Giant* you're focusing on the lead up to the Hollywood production through a scene of a secretary typing out the location contract in an imagined 1955 Warner Bros. Studio office, and what remains of the production today, leaving out the implied climax—the making of the 1956 film *Giant*. Can you just talk about how you decided to recreate that particular scene?

TH We are interested in approaching the traces of George Stevens's epic 1956 film through the bookends of two events. These two bookends are interwoven and juxtaposed with each other. One is the pre-production: a reconstruction of a scene in which a secretary is typing up the original location contract between Warner Bros. and the owner of the land. The scene takes place in a bustling 1955 Warner Bros. office in Burbank. The typing of the text on a manual typewriter travels across three projection screens, and we think about the generating of this text as a landscape. The text methodically outlines the pragmatic details of pre-production: accessing the rancher's property, construction of the set and hiring 1,000 head of cattle and 100 horses for the shoot. The secretary typing up the location contract is surrounded by other women, all of whom are engaged in similar mundane office activities. They type other agreements, answer telephones, and file papers. A male supervisor walks around their desks, checking their work. Our lead secretary seems disconnected from her task—she pauses several times to look outside of the window, listening to and watching activities that take place outside of the frame. Several times she pauses, resting her hands on the still keys of her Underwood typewriter.

AB The other bookend is the post-production, which explores the skeletal remains of the movie set—a mansion called the Reata—which was left behind on the land

when filming finished. This footage traverses two years in which Teresa and I filmed the remains of the set throughout different seasons: drought, dust, and rainstorms, as well as following life cycles of flora and fauna on and around the skeletal remains of the set. The filming incorporates and acknowledges the arrival of a film crew onto the location. We focus primarily on a female sound recordist. There are multiple kinds of intersections of hearing and seeing that pass back and forth between the secretary (pre-production) and the sound recordist (post-production).

IA At the end of *Giant*, the secretary who's been writing up the contract, gazes thoughtfully out the window and then looks directly at the camera/viewer. I wondered about that for a long time. Usually with a movie you think of the lead actors and directors first, then perhaps cinematographers, producers, and so forth—never really the secretary who drew up the production contract. Throughout your *Giant*, this secretary is the only person we ever associate with the 1956 production of *Giant*. So in a way she comes to represent the making of the 1956 *Giant*. When she looks directly at the camera, I couldn't tell what she was thinking or what she meant except to claim her presence or existence—not confrontational, but certainly assertive. Were you interested in deconstructing or rearranging power dynamics often associated with the movies?

TH This is a perceptive insight about the secretary's stance. She is the presence and placeholder for what is absent, yet she wears and alters this representation through the unfolding of the narrative.

AB There are several moments throughout *Giant*—indeed in all the works we've been talking about in *Sound Speed Marker*, as well as *Eight, Eighteen*—where we consciously break the fourth wall, and, in different ways, employ strategies of Brecht's distancing effect, or *Verfremdungseffekt*. We are interested in establishing a terrain that offers immersion for the viewer, in order to twist and entangle that kind of viewing position with other meta-positions. In *Giant*, when the secretary looks right into the lens of the camera, she rearranges, recognizes and asserts the fiction of her character.

Sound Speed Marker is on view at Ballroom Marfa through August 10.

Irina Arnaut is a video artist based in New York. She received her MFA from Bard College in 2013. Her work has been exhibited in shows curated by Mira Schor, Carol Bove, and Jasmin Tsou. She is currently participating in a group show curated by Ebony L. Haynes and Taylor Trabulus at Martos Gallery. Arnaut was recently awarded a fellowship at Yaddo and Millay Colony for the 2014 summer session.