

Cecilia Dougherty
Interview by Amy Sillman
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Amy: Your new piece, “Gone,” is based on a 70’s PBS documentary, “An American Family” about the Loud family in California.

Cecilia: 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 raced home from my factory job so I could watch this show. I went to college for a few years at Temple University in Philadelphia as an English major, and then I dropped out. I ended up in this factory in Phoenix.

A: How did you end up in Phoenix?

C: My girlfriend.

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— the parents seemed kind of young-ish and the children seemed kind of hip-ish. The second episode was the one I got sort of glued on because it was located in New York, and NY 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. Just 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 who was always getting into trouble. I saw the show once and thought about it for like 10 or 15 years, and finally got the opportunity to see it again. And then 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: 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, I could, but I thought they were really strange. I mean, like, Pat’s outfits and big sunglasses are things that my mother would never wear. Everything seemed to be a

really easy lifestyle, they did everything casually. They had all this stuff and they were so modern. It's like the difference between the East and West coasts. Where I was raised, one has cold winters and things get heavy and colors are dark... and there's all this Catholic stuff so things are serious, you know. I was attracted to the difference.

A: It seems like they (the Louds) offered irony or sarcasm to a kid who could understand what that is.

C: I'm not sure I understand what you mean.

A: Well, they were kind of flippant. At that age I didn't really know anyone who was always sarcastic and ironic, so for me the show was a view of people who had a developed irony. So, 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. He asked me what I thought the series meant, and I told him that I thought it's about lack of communication. Everything that happens on the series happens on the surface; all the meaning is *under* the surface and never ever comes up. When it does, the family just resorts to drinking. But really, 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 sort of using it as a map to make my own piece, and so I didn't need any factual verification about stuff. 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 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 like the electronic image because I feel it's richer. 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. I feel like the better I'm getting, the more difficult the work is getting. Both in terms of what it means, because it's starting to get more and more packed with stuff, and in terms of how it's seen.

A: "Gone" moves off your older work. How did you come to the two channel idea?

C: When I was editing "Gone" the first couple of scenes were very slow and very deadly, with no possibility for any psychological content or anything beyond what you could read in the frame. I didn't like it and I kept thinking about all this stuff that I wanted to have happen at the same time, and it just sort of slid over to two channels. And it made the space truly psychological—I could experiment with having dialogue happening in two different spaces-- which in my mind is really 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 Jill Johnston. These things opened up my life as it was and showed me how to play around in it and what was possible.

Kate Horsfield: What about your relationship to re-creation? You're re-creating something but it doesn't matter how close to the original. In fact the distance between the original and what you're doing is amazing to me. That's where your creative process resides. You always use something that already exists in the world... your remakes are not exactly remakes. They're just based on something. I would ask what has attracted you to these things from popular culture, but 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—but I didn't want to start out from my own experience as *confessional*, but from my own *perceptual* experience. And I believed it was a perceptual experience that was shared by a lot of people.

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

K: And its originality.

A: In “Gone” you had this 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 wierd game, what is she thinking? So though you're interested in immediacy, the script is really set down definitively. 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 tiny 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. Someone who looks and sounds and is interesting. I want to look or stare or spend time with them and have them spend time with someone else I think is interesting.

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 based on stuff that's all very accessible.

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.)

A: Can we talk about your process a bit more?

C: It's really a question of narrative in terms of video—which is really a recording medium much more than film is. Film is an image-capturing medium that is based on illusion. Its narrative is 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 strange form and the places of oppression and the places of impulse. For me, they all relate directly to—well, painting! What it's like to *make* a painting.

C: The whole process is questioning every step and every edit—the difference between a cut and a dissolve, how to use text—when something is working as I'm making it, I feel extremely happy. And this is not only shooting, but also when I'm editing. I used to develop ideas in tapes, and eventually those ideas led to an idea of ecstasy and beauty. The fact that my ideas led to an ecstatic beauty is sort of an ironic outcome.

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: It reminds me of something I was going to ask you about. 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 their work, I love a lot of it, but it's not what I do. I really have a fine arts education; I don't have a film education. I don't really give a fuck about the history of film. But I really like the history of art and it's 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 more like art. And yet you 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. Maybe it's against my nature. I've

always enjoyed having my work accepted and looked at, and I like talking about it, 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. A lot of it has to do with selling an object. And selling a videotape is okay for a collection or a library, but I'm not making limited edition objects to sell.

A: And 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: 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 you're going to spend some time in Dublin this year?

C: I am.

A: What are you going to do?

C: Well, we're (Cecilia with her girlfriend Susan O'Brien) going to open a bookstore. But I'm also going to learn web stuff. I have a couple of sites right now—
www.gonevideo.com and www.anthologystore.com.

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

C: Yeah, I suppose it will be all rainy and gray...

A: So you're going to be extra cheerful? Or you're going to become a painter?

C: Maybe... Ireland is landscape. I'm also thinking of horror. There are castles and cliffs and stuff. Really good horror elements right there.

A: Who's your favorite artist?

C: God, I don't know. I don't have a favorite. I have 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.

K: In April (2002) the installation will be installed at Gallery 312 in Chicago. And Cecilia will also be screening early work at the Gene Siskel Film Center in Chicago in April.

A: So pack your cars and get ready for a holiday in Chicago.