

## Eva Diaz in conversation with Josh Melnick

**Eva Diaz** Richard Kostelanetz wrote a book called *Conversing with Cage* in which he covers John Cage's long history as a public figure through many interviews, then weaves those into a story, along with subplots from other elements of Cage's work. You don't notice the interviewer. It becomes a natural narrative, which is nice because you can take a little bit from one person, a lot from somebody else.

**Josh Melnick** That sounds similar to what we have in mind for this book, the idea being that everyone is in conversation with everyone else.

**ED** Thinking of a book, though, I can't imagine that a reader could get an accurate sense of the timing of this work from stills.

**JM** True. I have no idea how the ideas will transfer in the book, other than through conversation. Perhaps I should have you try to describe your

experience of looking at one of these.

**ED** Well, they're thirty seconds to a minute long—

**JM** No, four minutes long. Three to four minutes long.

**ED** Well, that might say something about how it feels to see these films. You're seeing such an abbreviated time period, less than two seconds of real time over a span of about four minutes. So, even my guess about the length of each clip indicates that what I think I see is not what I see.

Here, what you experience as several minutes was actually only two seconds of the subject's life. Every single gesture that she made [*referring to screen*] has been extremely extended. The narrowing of eyes into a blink seems monumental. It even has a sinister connotation. You go through so many associations to decipher the other's state, when you're merely witnessing a biological process of

blinking in extreme slow motion. It's a test of how you read gesture. Your own assumptions are questioned, these habits of association—for example, thinking that narrowed eyes mean intensity, when they are just a blink, just a very small fraction of a moment. You get a sense of how people's faces move and that somebody may be many people at once—there's a composite self. Even in two seconds, a range of expression occurs. There is an entire repertoire of gesture that we're just not sensitive enough to grasp, normally.

I think of Lacan and the tin can looking back at us. We're not just autonomous subjects creating the world with our perception. We're seen by others, and in that reflexive process, which is largely based on the gaze and vision, we understand certain things about our subjectivity. Namely, that we are partly comprised through the vision of others. Lacan borrows a lot of this from Sartre—the idea that reciprocal gazes are understood, and that there's an asymmetry to this. We are only one subject, whereas there are many possible gazes directed toward us, whether from tin cans or from people. The whole world looks at us, so our subjectivity must be structured defensively. In cities, we adapt many different ways to armor ourselves, such as not looking people in the eye.

I also notice that lights inside the subway car don't flicker, whereas the lights outside the car, seen as the train is passing through stations and tunnels, flicker in ways that create a sense of

movement. The flickering is a kind of pulse. The result is that the people, who are in a pretty tight close-up, almost seem to move toward you in three-dimensional space. They seem to be in sculptural relief, against a moving background.

The fact that you're capturing things that can't be seen with the naked eye—the way the train is moving, the way the camera is moving, the sense of time slowed down—creates an effect that is disorienting. At first, it's pleasurable to look because you are getting a chance to see people in this new light, but the technique is also doing something to them and to us. They seem at times to be moving toward you, as a spectator.

As a curator, this work interested me because it occurs in a familiar space—the subway—where one has both a sense of privacy and a sense that one is in the most public place in the city. I co-curated an exhibition with an architect and curator named Beth Stryker a few years ago called *Mind the Gap*, which was about artists intervening in interstitial zones of the city. When I did that show, I was reading Krakauer, a German philosopher from the 20s. Krakauer asked what it is to be a citizen of modernity. He wrote about a hotel lobby as one of the first places, historically, where strangers were very proximate to each other physically without acknowledging one another's presence directly. In the same way, a subway is a modern place. A situation like a hotel lobby or a subway car, where

you're sitting inches from or practically in the lap of someone you don't know, wouldn't have occurred in pre-modern, pre-industrial, pre-urban periods, when everyone in a community knew who belonged and who didn't.

Another aspect of the subway that interests me is that the motion of the train can be physically lulling. Rather than simply sitting in the hotel lobby, people on the subway are being moved through space in a way that many find calming.

So, on the subway, two nearly opposite things happen: one is surrounded by unacknowledged strangers, but one is also having a moment of privacy, perhaps even feeling comforted by the physical movement in space. This raises questions for me about what privacy means in a very public context. Can we have privacy in a world in which we are so close to people? At the same time, do we have any sense of community in the subway car, where everybody is doing the same thing, but each is doing it alone?

**JM** I love riding the subway. I find it to be a strange experience, where I'm neither detached nor present. It's a place where we want to look at people, but as soon as they catch us looking, we have to look away.

**ED** That makes me think of the *flâneur*, another key historical idea for artists thinking about public space. *Flâneur* is a nineteenth century term for someone

who travels through an urban space, walking and looking, within a jungle of gazes. The *flâneur* was typically a man of independent means who was regarding women prostitutes, or the poor, with the detachment of an aesthete. He was a powerful, autonomous subject. In the twentieth century, this idea was considered problematic, but I think it's fair to say that the city remains a mesh of indirect power relationships—among so many people, one has the constant, pronounced sense of being looked at. We're never in a position of autonomy and control.

Your project continues a long conversation about the experience of being in the city, but from a perspective that is more akin to Walker Evans', in his illicit photographs of everyday people on the subway, than to a *flâneur*'s. Chris Marker and Michael Haneke have also photographed in the subway or have depicted subway photography in a similar way.

**JM** I think Walker Evans was really trying to capture a specific place and time. You can practically smell the clothes his people are wearing. I've wondered instead whether a portrait can disappear as such.

Another important difference between what Marker or Evans did, or what Haneke depicted—all part of a long history of subway photography taken with hidden cameras—is that all of the people who appear in *The 8 Train* knew that they were being photographed. I had to talk to them; I had to ask their

permission. I had to direct them in some small way, even if that direction was based on something I saw them doing, like "You were looking up. Would you just do that again?" In a sense, these are documented situations, but in another sense, they are contrived.

**ED** Walter Benjamin once asked something like, "What does the light that is falling on bones have to say about the inner subject?" As we move through the world, we're always being looked at. How one is understood is often reduced to the outer-surface—or performance—as opposed to the inner experience one has of one's self. This brings me back to an interest in technique, which here shows us something that is not usually visible. It's a good working definition of what art does: Art gives attention to the unattended. It allows us to perceive consciously what we normally would not.

**JM** Yes, though a degree of technical savvy or spectacle in art is found inherently suspect lately. Obviously, the allure of consumerist spectacle is not eliminated simply because a few artists forego certain techniques. To make something inaccessible on a formal level can even be hostile, in a way. I bring this up because, for me, this was a politically motivated project. On a basic level, it's about using certain technological means, as far as craft; social means, as far as context; and discursive means to examine our awareness, particularly of how we see other human beings.

**ED** In the early days of the Soviet regime, artists like Rodchenko were interested in understanding how cutting-edge, capitalist forms of seduction could be deployed meaning so intensely and successfully. To Rodchenko, the advertisement was the preeminent mode to study and emulate. He wanted to *détourner* it, to use a later, Situationist phrase—to take the advertisement and play its successful technique against itself, in order to allow other meanings to come out.

One characteristic of much of the successful art in our culture is that it sits on the knife-edge of technical sophistication while turning the conventional use of that sophistication towards other ends. I hear from many artists, those who are frustrated with advertising and technological pleasure and the plentitude of gadgets that people have today, that they feel art cannot compete with such seduction.

**JM** It does compete.

**ED** This is a core question for artists. What are people interested in looking at? Many artists feel the worry or the tension or the responsibility to keep up with what is available to the spectator now, without emulating or reproducing it—to do something else that doesn't just fall into the model of entertainment, that doesn't become about performance of presence. Entertainment creates a moment that holds you and gives you a sense of everlasting, but then it ends. It doesn't connect you to other realities.

That's the spectacle.

This is a tension that you can speak to because you move between advertising and art in your life. You have access to the forms and gimmicks of advanced seduction, of commercial media, but using them to move people is a dangerous proposition. Move them to what? I don't know whether works of art can ever achieve political efficacy. However, I can understand why there is a discussion now about why many artists, for example Isaac Julien, have been criticized for it. Some people consider Julien's work too beautiful—that there's an inherent tension between beauty and meaning, or beauty and politics. I think these questions of how a work engages you, and of what it engages you to do, have much to do with how the work is situated in a discursive realm. As a curator, part of my role is to help create this realm.

When a work is presented, there is an implicit trust, not just between artists and curators, but between artists and viewers. Viewers have certain responsibilities to situate works, and artists have the responsibility of giving viewers tools to do that. On the other hand, we have to be careful about the ways that we assist a discursive construction of the work, to do so without over-determining the meaning. What is that [*referring to screen*]?

W I's a lens flare from a light off-screen that is bouncing off the coating inside the lens. Normally, it would be a quick flash, but because this is slowed

down so much, you're actually watching it travel.

ED Oh, I see. It looks like it's blowing out perfect spit bubbles!

Back to what I was saying, framing is really important. There has been some discussion about forms of video practice derived from Bill Viola, using hi-def, slow-motion techniques to create seductive effects, but with portentous topics—life, death, fire. In the end, there's no specificity; it just becomes a "wow" effect. You talk about wonderment, but wonderment must be coupled with revelation—something more than superficial knowledge of the broadest ideas in the world, a failing for which I think Viola has been critiqued.

This brings me back to why exploring the relationship of the body to the city is important to me. The body is a biological body, but also a social body. How do we construct networks of vision and gazes, and how are they maintained? What does the camera do when it becomes another kind of vision? It's important for these circuits of knowledge to be part of the work, too. Again, that happens in a discursive way. Work must be made to mean something. Meaning is not self-evident.

Eve Diez is Assistant Professor in the History of Art and Design at Pratt. She is a freelance art critic and is formerly a curator at Art in General.

This conversation took place in a screening room in downtown Manhattan in December, 2009.

## Josh Melnick and Cara Starke: Artist Interview

**Cara Starke** Is it important to you that your work involves direct engagement with strangers?

Josh Melnick Not as a rule. Initially, with this project, I was curious about what would happen with different degrees of artifice. I brought in a couple of people I knew and I hired some actors, but in the end, I cut most of the actors.

To answer your question in another way, though, I am interested in art that shows us something we don't already know, or presents us with a scenario that we wouldn't have otherwise experienced. In this sense, I am generally interested in work that involves *strangeness*, at least, if not strangers.

Even still, I hadn't anticipated how important my relationships to the subjects of the portraits would become until I was actually down there, in the process of filming them. We would just follow these strangers for a little while on their journey, a bit like a leaf floating along streams, with no sense of

direction. Between each shot, we had to wait ten minutes, which was simply a technical requirement. (Ten minutes is the amount of time it takes to download the four gigs of information from the RAM on the camera to the flashcard.) During those interim periods, I would wander through the train, to recruit the next participant. Once I found someone, we would often need to wait awhile, until the camera was ready, before we could shoot again. Sometimes, we would talk then, or we would just sit in silence. Sometimes, the person would agree to participate, but would need to transfer at the next station, so we would go with them. I spent time with each person, going wherever they happened to be going.

**CS** How did this project unfold?

JM I grew up in New York City, and like most New Yorkers, I've spent a lot of time on trains. There is a long history of artists photographing in the subway

# Josh Melnick

## The 8 Train

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