

Cinderella Syndrome

Ellen Cantor

brings together a small number of works from the estate of (1961–2013), a prolific artist who was based in New York and London. Cantor aimed to contest the secular neutrality of the exhibition environment through the sincere personal disclosures that drive much of her work, often appropriating familiar imagery from cinema that became, in Cantor's hands, loaded with volatile and excessive emotional force. Ready-made materials are combined with diaristic notes and sketches to probe her perceptions and experiences of personal desire and institutional violence. In her drawings, paintings, collages, and videos, she lifted from iconic films, reorienting the ideological transmissions of the source material. Fictional figures from Disney cartoons, cult horror films, New Wave cinema, and family movies provide a visual foil to her intimate narratives. Magnetized by the doleful naivety of characters such as Snow White and Bambi, Cantor would, in her drawings, extend their narrative horizons to include vivid sexual encounters and crisis-ridden relationships.

My perversion is the belief in true love is the title Cantor gave to the only survey exhibition of her videos held in her lifetime.¹ This title, framed as an address from the artist herself, introduces a sincere admission of being victim to romantic idealism but also can be understood as an affront to the structural “perversions” of normative desires. This discordant gap between personal experience and political conviction becomes rich terrain for Cantor, whose work always proceeds with a certain force of will: explicitly feminist, remorselessly emotional, dramatic in tone, and, as she herself liked to put it, adult in subject matter.²

¹Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna, 1998, curated by Gerald Matt

²Interview with Hartmut Austen, *DETROIT*, 2008



Ellen Cantor, *Within Heaven and Hell* [still], 1996

Just as the saccharine ambivalence of the title *Cinderella Syndrome* suggests, this exhibition emphasizes the constant duality inherent in Cantor's approach: her commitment to the meeting point of seemingly impossible extremes. *Within Heaven and Hell* (1996) incorporates footage from Tobe Hooper's 1974 slasher film *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and Robert Wise's 1965 musical drama *The Sound of Music*. The voiceover is provided by the artist herself recalling a past love, her story spiraling from erotic abandon into dysfunction and pain. Scenes of family bliss in the von Trapp household amid Nazi rule are spliced with the notoriously graphic portrayals of serial killer Ed Gein's revenge upon the nuclear family. These dissonant depictions are skillfully equated in the editorial rhythm imposed by Cantor, whose approach to montage relies on the regular interruption of an empty black frame, as much as the blurring of materials through double exposure and superimposition.

In her essay *Remember the 14 Days and Nights*, Cantor quotes *The Stream of Life* by Clarice Lispector: I refuse to become sad. Let's

be happy. If you're not afraid of being happy, or just once trying this mad, profound happiness, you'll have the best of truth.³ A sense of this wild and insistent affirmation is deployed in *Evokation of my Demon Sister* (2002), the only video in this exhibition in which Cantor's own voice or body is not present. Using material from Brian de Palma's *Carrie* (1976), the work zooms in on the moment when the shy and friendless 17-year-old protagonist is humiliated, explodes in rage, and finds herself capable of exercising havoc through telekinetic powers. Cantor considered *Evokation of my Demon Sister* a tribute to Kali, the Hindu goddess of destruction. It is said of Kali's total and transcendental nature, just as all colors disappear in black, so all names and forms disappear in her.⁴ Cantor re-situates the female hysteric — a figure that is so often constructed to perpetuate the misogynistic dismissal of female experience — as the harbinger of absolution, a destructive equalizer whose unchecked emotions could signal radical and permanent disavowal of the existing order of things.

In the final eight years of her life Cantor

³Ellen Cantor, *Remember the 14 Days and Nights*, 1997, p 5

⁴*Mahanirvana Tantra*, Sir John Woodroffe, 2007

worked on the feature-length film *Pinochet Porn*. The film originated in a suite of over 80 drawings named *Circus Lives from Hell* (2005), which subsequently developed into a storyboard for *Pinochet Porn*, an episodic narrative about five children growing up under the regime of General Augusto Pinochet in Chile. In *Circus Lives from Hell*, each child becomes a container for their distinct and multifaceted experiences of dictatorship, from the privileged indulgence of Pinochet's (fictional) identical twin daughters to a young boy who is orphaned when his mother becomes a victim of the military junta. History is observed through Cantor's fictive speculations on private experience within a totalizing political order. The story ends with a question: Is tragedy a choice?

Shot on 16 mm film and featuring a complex narrative structure, *Pinochet Porn* remains an unfinished and ongoing project. This hugely ambitious feature-length work currently remains in postproduction, overseen by an editing team appointed by Cantor before her death. The film features a cast and crew of Cantor's closest friends, a deliberate decision

that provoked startlingly intimate forms of collaboration. In *Circus Lives from Hell*, Cantor seems to conflate the traumas of childhood with those of adulthood; relations that extend from the largest historical catastrophes, to the most personal misfortunes.⁵ *Pinochet Porn* ultimately came to tell an additional story, that of its own construction, in which the close contact between Cantor and her collaborators extends far beyond the frame of the film.

⁵Ellen Cantor, "Pinochet Porn in Progress", *MAP* magazine, Issue 19, August 2009

Keep your mind in hell, and despair not⁶ is the opening line of Gillian Rose's posthumously published book *Love's Work* (1995). Rose's memoir, written as she was dying of cancer, uses "love" and "life" almost interchangeably, with an exuberance and melancholy that insistently loops back to the proposition of the book's opening sentence. There is a resemblance here to Cantor's own methods, in which films become surrogates for memories, and rapidly rendered drawings are imbued with an almost mystical potential and appear, at times, to resemble astrological charts or Kabbalistic diagrams. Unabashed in subject and passionate, even violent, in its execution,

⁶Gillian Rose, *Love's Work: A Reckoning with Life*, 1995, p. 1

Cantor's work takes place in the shadows of the historical recitals usually provided by academic or journalistic practices. Mortality is acknowledged, sexual urges are awakened, and private confidences are compelled into dialogue with the structures of imperialism that surround artistic expression.

Cantor's approach is distinctive for its emboldened vulnerability and its libidinal critique of the repressed forms of exchange that define the art world and, more broadly, emotional life under late capitalism. She pursued, unapologetically and without irony, an artistic transmission that would intensify relations between author and viewer into a heightened bond that might equally be formed through arousal, repulsion, and critical engagement.

Fatima Hellberg & Jamie Stevens

Pinochet Porn *in Progress*
Ellen Cantor



Ellen Cantor, *Pinochet Porn* [stills], 2012

Walking through Tenerife wearing a hand-drawn clown mask, nearly mad from grief, I realized I could no longer safely draw on love for inspiration. For seven years he had been my muse, now I had to rethink my entire art practice.

I tried to think what else interested me enough to engulf my life — perhaps my friendships. I was thinking a lot about my friend Deborah Drier, an exquisite writer, editor, fashion diva; she had just had a double lung transplant and open heart surgery. I was wondering what aspects of our lives are free choice. Is tragedy a choice? What was her childhood like, a girl genius born in Queens 1948?

I thought about how the traumas in our childhood brought out parallel traumas in our adulthood, which seemed to extend from the largest historical catastrophes, to the most intimate personal misfortunes. And I realized how little I know about my friends, their childhood and family history, just a bit from confidences, stories, gossip, but not much really.

I began to make a series of drawings that drew on my best friend who had grown up in South America; she had an extraordinary life. I found I could channel my own raw emotions through her dramas. These drawings *Circus Lives from Hell* tell an epic story of five kids growing up during the Pinochet regime, and

their subsequent adulthood. Each child has experienced the dictatorship completely differently, from the dictator's identical daughters, Paloma and Pipa, who grow up like princesses and marry the same man, to Jaime who is sent as a child into exile when his mother "disappears." She was imprisoned, tortured, in the end went mad. It is a soap opera — tragic, comedic, fictionalised and historical. The drawings with their specific stories and dialogue were meant to be a film script, although I was never quite sure how this film could be made.

Last summer I made an exhibition at Participant Inc in New York, the main work being this drawing script. The director, Lia Gangitano, and I had the idea we would begin creating a film during the show with the help of some of the filmmakers in the gallery, projecting the footage under the drawings as we progressed. My brother, who works in banking, thought this plan was ridiculous, and tried to prepare me for its utter failure. He said that no one was going to devote their time and skill to someone else's work if they were not getting paid — to get real!

This really riled John Brattin, an artist filmmaker working in Super 8 who I really admired (*Eros is Sick*, 2008, *The Triumph of the Night*, 2006). He became adamant that we would make this film happen — and from his past experience he started teaching me how to organise the shoots. He took on the huge job

as lighting and cameraman. A filmmaker I had never met, Elizabeth Subrin, loaned me her lighting kit. Then Lia and I ran into Jay Kinney on Houston in the pouring rain. He said he would be our art director. He took me to his mad house on Bleecker Street, showed me his props (tarantula, scorpions, alligator, human skull, bibles, crosses, toy soldiers etc), told us we could use his flat for sets, and offered up his neighbour's apartment, baby, and bar.

The intention was to film some sequences to make a trailer, shooting directly from my drawings. We started with the scene showing the dictator who always fucks his maids, his wife perpetually crying, and the children hysterical. A butch lesbian and her femme girlfriend were going to be the dictator and the maid. But they blew us off. Two friends, Nicola and Laurie, said they would love to do it, but Nicola got busy; then Urs was to be the dictator, but he didn't answer his phone; Timor suggested prostitutes from the Chelsea hotel, but my work is not about the sex industry. I thought to play the dictator and the maid myself, gender bending. Everyone on the crew hated that idea. Then they thought of Jim Fletcher, a famous New York actor who had been the child murderer in John's film *The Triumph of the Night*. I had also seen him play a cannibal in a theatre production at Participant. More than the rest of us, he liked to prepare his lines to get into character. It was completely embarrassing when

I had to call him long distance and tell him that his three lines were keep dusting bitch, bend over you little slut and suck it harder! Describing the scene, I told him it could be played real or fake, and asked him if he could choose someone to be the maid.

Jim didn't find a maid. So in the end, I said I would do it. I had already been the maid in another scene. And it was getting tiresome trying to convince other people to take their clothes off. The plan was since I'm not an actress I would follow his lead. Coming into the kitchen after a camera break, Jay and Jim had found my wooden spatula and invented a kind of porno scene — this spatula was a present from my ex-boyfriend. My mother had given me a fancy Calphalon pan and he bought a wooden spatula as a symbol of our future domesticity. Unfortunately, that did not last too long and was utterly dire. At last I understood the meaning that revenge is best served on a cold platter!

Going back to our first shoot where the dictator and maid didn't show, rather than lose the night, John's boyfriend Andy went into my closet and came out "the aggrieved wife." Lia reluctantly agreed to become the hysterical child. She was concerned about her professional relationship to the art world, but she said she would be in this shoot if we didn't show her face. However when we started to shoot, John kept saying I can't see your face, can you look this way. We set up

the scene like Garcia Lorca's play *La Casa De Bernarda Alba*. Both Andy and Lia were really crying. Andy's father had just gotten ill, and Lia was working at PSI, so they both had real reasons to cry. I could see Lia was amazing. I was very apprehensive through the week about how to ask her to be in the next shoot — the identical twin sisters who have grown up to be teenage bitches torturing their maid and boyfriends — surprisingly Lia agreed to come. She showed up with 10 sets of lingerie and high heel outfits, arranging them on my bed. She had picked her clothes from looking at my drawings carefully. Then I knew we had a movie, she was in — she is the star. John, who has known her for 20 or more years, loves filming her. She plays herself and her identical sister.

Paloma and her six husbands — Lia chose filmmaker Michel Auder to be her first husband, “the older man. . . he was rich but boring.” I imagined him to be fat and unattractive, but Michel is dashing. He marries Paloma, then Pipa, wearing the suit he married Cindy Sherman in. Naked, he is covered with sexy jewellery, going down on Paloma. During the bedroom shoot his openness made me realize how uneasy my generation is about our bodies.

After failing at stalking Leo Fitzpatrick from *Kids*, the artist Spencer Sweeney was Lia's perfect second choice for her second husband, “the young man.” They run away to a deserted

island (Robert Moses State Park). At the beach they danced together for one hour without music. It was beautiful to watch.

John Thompson wanted to be the third husband because he looks similar to the drawing — he's so tall. He is trained as a professional actor. He stayed in character, "the famous artist," lecturing Lia about why Hermes window displays weren't true conceptual art, patronisingly asking her if she was learning anything new?

Harri Kupiainen is perfect as the fifth husband, Guillermo the rock star. He broke his guitar for us! And Paloma and Guillermo really seem in love.

Jay picked Danny McDonald to be the sixth husband. Mainly he plays a comic role (a dummy-sucking masochist from Queens), but it was quite moving to see him become the grief-stricken fireman.

It transpires that Danny is actually from a family lineage of firemen — his father and grandfather. He became an artist. I was standing on Lafayette Street, lost, looking for the fireman store that wasn't there. At that exact moment Jay texted me the store's new address; it had apparently moved. Uncannily, he didn't know I was going shopping for a fireman's uniform. It was touching how synchronistic we had become in the making of this film. This is what is most satisfying about the making

of *Pinochet Porn* — the magical intuitive co-operation, especially as being an artist can often be extremely solitary. Essentially this film is a collaboration of friends; it is possible to shoot only with the contribution of each person involved.

Back in London, through a moment of divine (drunken) inspiration, Pablo León de la Barra has become the Spanish narrator.

This summer we will begin to shoot the first chapter in London: the story of Manuelo, the clown boy, who becomes enlightened but still bites his fingernails. This takes place in an ashram in which Cerith Wyn Evans plays Osha, the fucking guru, he taught his disciples about free love with no jealousy. . .

*Originally published in MAP magazine,
Issue 19, August 2009*

Ellen Cantor: Cinderella Syndrome is co-curated by Jamie Stevens and Fatima Hellberg and is made possible by Kulturstiftung des Bundes. Special thanks to Lia Gangitano and Participant Inc, New York, Mark Cantor, and Jonathan Berger. The exhibition travels to Künstlerhaus Stuttgart in spring 2016. Ellen Cantor's exhibition is presented in cooperation with *Gender in Translation*, a program of activities organized by the French Embassy in the US (San Francisco office).

The CCA Wattis Institute program is generously supported by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Grants for the Arts / San Francisco Hotel Tax Fund, and the Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation; by CCA Director's Fund contributors Patricia W. Fitzpatrick, Judy and Bill Timken, Chara Schreyer and Gordon Freund, Ruth and Alan Stein, Robin Wright and Ian Reeves, Laura Brugger and Ross Sappenfield, John Morace and Thomas Kennedy, and the Rotasa Foundation; and by CCA Curator's Forum. Phyllis C. Wattis was the generous founding patron.