TOPTEN

Sadie Benning

Sadie Benning is an artist and musician who lives and works in New York. Benning was included in “NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star” at the New Museum and recently staged a solo show of new paintings and videos at New York’s Callicoon Fine Arts. Benning’s work will also be featured in the 2013 Carnegie International, which opens this fall at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh.

1.

VALIE EXPORT, SEEING SPACE—SPACE HEARING, 1973–74 In her 1973 film . . . Remote . . . Remote . . ., VALIE EXPORT sits in front of a large black-and-white photograph. She faces the camera with a bowl of milk on her lap and a box cutter in her hand. She starts to cut her cuticles. We hear a monotonous tapping sound. Fear builds. She starts to bleed. I had never seen anything like this. Seeing Space—Space Hearing is compelling, too, but in a different way. I like the formal awkwardness of its manual video-switching, its split-screen format, and the stodgy quality of VALIE EXPORT’s standing-still performance. The video deals structurally with the fragmentation of space, sound, and body, inducing anxiety as it counters viewers’ desire for syncopation and solidarity.

2.

HOWARD ALK, THE MURDER OF FRED HAMPTON (1971) This documentary about Fred Hampton—the charismatic, intelligent, urgently spoken Black Panther Party leader who was murdered by the Chicago police—captures Hampton’s death, but it’s also very much about living. Alk is a brilliant editor. He gives time and air to “being” so that you feel present in the atmosphere of the moment. He creates a kind of liveness in the film that promotes empathy and emotion without ever being corny, overwrought, or exploitative.

3.

GEORGE Kuchar, WEATHER DIARY #6, 1990 In the late 1980s, it seemed that everywhere I turned, someone was showing me yet another VHS copy of Kuchar’s work. Cobbling together sound tracks, overlaid graphics, and cutaway shots (sometimes editing in-camera), he made his films alone or with groups of friends and students to create experimental narratives that wove together his personal obsessions—in this episode, tornado watching, puppies, and faulty plumbing—which he recorded while vacationing in Oklahoma.

4.

KASE 2 I learned about Kase 2’s work from Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant’s 1984 book, Subway Art. But I first became interested in graffiti while spending summers in New York City visiting my father as a kid. We didn’t have a subway system in Milwaukee, where I grew up, and so it was really exciting to watch a train pull into the station covered top to bottom with cloud-bubble names. People called KASE 2 the King of Style, maybe because, as one of the most prolific and creative graffiti artists, he was always changing up and inventing new ways of writing—“computer rock” letters, camouflage, etc. For whatever reason, one of his pieces, El Kay, managed for years to escape “the buff” (a washing system for erasing graffiti). Over time, KASE 2 grew infamous, not because his art was a crime, but because it moved and traveled through neighborhoods, starting and stopping, never held in one position in space.
JOHANNES VOGT

5  Blinky Palermo, Untitled (Totem), 1964. Like his better known To the People of New York City, 1976, this work by Blinky Palermo strikes a balance between formalist structure—the selection and sequencing of colors and materials—and interpretive openness. I particularly like its in-between nature. Featuring five small canvases serially affixed to what can be read as an architectural remnant, it’s both a painting and a sculpture, a work made by hand that in turn suggests mechanical repetition.

6  Marlon Riggs, Tongues Untied (1989). I first saw Tongues Untied in Amsterdam in 1991 at a gay and lesbian film festival. I was very inspired by the work. Structured as a documentary, it combined experimental material with the poetry of Essex Hemphill to address contemporary notions of race, sexuality, desire, and loss.

7  Chantal Akerman, De l’autre côté (From the Other Side), 2002. When my father showed me Chantal Akerman’s 1976 film Le tu il elle (in 1989, on VHS), I had never seen lesbian sex in a movie before. But it was the image of Akerman eating a bag of powdered sugar that stayed with me. Decades later, the Belgian filmmaker continues to create indelibly affective meditations on space and time. And the properties of duration and size operate differently when her work is watched on video—or when it’s shot on video, as was the case in 2002 with De l’autre côté, a moving documentary about the US Mexican border told via the landscapes and stories of people living along this divide.

8  Alma W. Thomas, Spring Grass, 1973. Around the time I started to become interested in abstraction, art historian Solveig Nelson gave me a catalogue of paintings by Alma W. Thomas (1891-1978). Up until then, for the most part, I had always considered abstraction to be something outside of my own experience, disconnected from the everyday. Thomas helped me to see otherwise. Spring Grass is a particularly strong example of her direct and repeated line-making, the canvas’s entire surface filled with brushstrokes resembling tracks or treads or grooves.

9  Stan Douglas, Monodramas (1991). Douglas conceived of this series, along with Television Spots (1987-88), as works that would air during commercial breaks on Canadian broadcast television. Adhering to industry conventions such as crane and tracking shots, and sometimes featuring music or dialogue, these short thirty- to sixty-second sequences passed for regular ads—except that they had nothing to sell. The missing element was so disconcerting to home viewers that residents called into their local stations demanding to know what these mysterious episodes were about.

10  Roscoe Mitchell Live at HotHouse, Chicago. HotHouse was one of the main reasons that I stayed in Chicago for so many years. The brainchild of curator and activist Marguerite Horberg, its first iteration (which closed in 2007) was a great space in which to experience live experimental music and social/political events. Roscoe Mitchell is a jazz musician whom I first saw perform at HotHouse in 1996. His improvisational way of making sound and melodies is full of all that life has to offer—pain, pleasure, joy, humor, seriousness, spacing out, anger, calm, peace, and contemplation. }
GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

SADIE BENNING
The New York artist became an art-world sensation while still in high school, in the mid-nineties, thanks to works she shot on a Fisher-Price toy video camcorder. In the new, sixteen-minute-long “War Credits,” Benning applies her signature D.I.Y. style to obliquely political ends. She recorded and re-recorded the closing credits from three Hollywood war movies—“G.I. Jane,” “Black Hawk Down,” and “Full Metal Jacket”—on VHS tapes until they were no longer legible. Titles detonate in bursts of light and disintegrate into blurry white lines, accompanied by pop songs (notably the Rolling Stones’ “Paint It, Black”). The video is flanked by two abstract paintings on wood panels—one red and white, the other blue and white—as if to signal a nation divided. Through May 12. (Callicoon, 124 Forsyth St. 212-219-0326.)
Sadie Benning neither rushes nor rules anything out. At 19 she made a splash at the 1993 Whitney Biennial with a series of poignant yet knowing DIY videos exploring teenage sexuality and grown-up stereotypes. (One is included in “NYC 1993: Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star” at the New Museum.) By 2007, when Ms. Benning had her first solo exhibition in New York—at Orchard, the collective-run gallery on the Lower East Side—she had added small abstract paintings to her repertory. Her latest show is a succinct and terrific display of two videos, two paintings and a gouache. Larger and more complex than her previous works, the paintings draw handmade, they seem formed from pieces of solid color.

Ms. Benning’s black-and-white videos pursue other realities. The bleak, slightly monotonous “In Parts” (28 minutes) consists of 13 short segments, often shot with a stationary camera, all using ambient sound: a leopard in a zoo, clouds, a city at night. Views from moving cars and of an airport tarmac define the film as a travelogue, and the scenes as diary entries or slightly mobile snapshots.

In “War Credits” Ms. Benning actively reworks the opening or closing credits of three well-known war movies, using the accompanying dialogue or music. The credits are illegible, as if blanked out by a censor; they flash like lights against the dark, grainy backgrounds, evoking an experimental film with an ominous undercurrent. There is a surprising resonance in Ms. Benning’s reality, as suggested by the gouache, an abstraction painted on newsprint.

ROBERTA SMITH
Johannes Vogt

**Title:** ttttt (in the breeze)
**Length:** 1:24
**Program:** MULTIVOX!!!

**Sequences Used:**
- TTTT (main)
- Breeze (end)

**Lyrics:**

- Oh,
- Oh,
- Oh,
- Oh,
  
  release in the breeze
  in the breeze there's a
  will and a way
  oh girl you can try
  and stay awake
  oh girl i think about
  the ways
  oh i,
  oh i,

**Additional Sequences:**
- Breeze 2
- Guitar low
- TTTT 2 (vox)

**Additional Sounds:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bank A</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>voxند 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voxند 004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oxند 020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>voxند 027</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oxند 027</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Track Notes:**

- Mixed Down
- Re-record

**Adjustments:**

- Car alarm going off
  (down 2 on vox)
  Step 15

Art in America 232
Johannes Vogt

VVVV (Frank in the air) 0:56 WAV

Sequences Used:
A Frank (main)
Rich Susuguitar 2

Lyrics:

Let's get Frank
in the air
It's very clear
It's very clear
It's frank in the air
Let's get clear
Let's get clear yeah
It's frank in the air
It's clear
It's there
Yeah

Track Notes:
Guitar chop
Vocals

Additional Sounds:

Bank A

Additional Sequences:

Record new guitar part

MPC

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WWW.VOGTGALLERY.COM
there's a time
when
we know this
yeah
there's a time
when
we notice
yeah
there's a time
when
we know this
yeah
there's a time
when
we know this
yeah
there's a time
when
we notice
yeah
JOHANNES VO GT

**Title:**

RRR (Come and See Me) 1:04  
Akai Set

**Sequences Used:**

- CANDS 1 (Main)
- Guitar Set 2 (End)

**Lyrics:**

- ah what are we to do, my brothers
- you've got my back and i could never thank you more
- we found ourselves in such a little mess
- what are we to do?
- come and see me
- i'll see about you
- ahh
- i'm sorry for the ways that i don't always know
- yes i ignore the problems so

**Additional Sequences:**

- A. Gram
- CANDS 2
- Guitar 3
- CS3
- NV Face CANDS
- BCS
- G. Gram 2

**Track Notes:**

- VOC F  
- Guitar  
- POP VOC  
- STACKED

**Additional Sounds:**

- Bank A
- 1/ FAT  
- 2/ Woods

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WWW.VOGTGALLERY.COM
Title: dadd (don't you listen)  
Program: 11:40  
Listening: Popcorn + Mailorder  
Sequence Used: dadd lean guitar (end)  
  limp guitar (main)  

Lyrics:  

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Sequence</th>
<th>Lyric</th>
<th>Additional Sequences</th>
<th>Selects</th>
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<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>lean git 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>limp guitar x2</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>limp guitar vox</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>lean git 7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>git there by 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>lead git 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>dadd lean guitar 3</td>
<td></td>
<td>plus 20 more Variations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional Sounds:  

- Split over the Said Loop  
- Bank 2  
- Some other selects  
- Crank it Foot  
- MED. ROOM  

Track Notes: Vocal Basic Scratch  
  Keys  
  N/A  

Adjustments:  
  lean git 1  2x  
  add split  
  lean git 7  2x  
  add P.M.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRACK NOTES:</th>
<th>ADJUSTMENTS:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GUITAR</td>
<td>SLOW TEMPO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAIN V/ Scene</td>
<td>&quot;Female&quot; Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STACKED 3x5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KEYS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MPC</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

**TITLES:**
- aaaaa (oh there's money)

**LENGTH:** 0:41

**PROGRAM:** RECORDZ LP

**SEQUENCES USED:**
- guitar money (main)
- guitar break 1 (all)
- N/A

**ADDITIONAL SEQUENCES:**
- gitrm
- gitrmn
- guitar break 1 (half)

**ADDITIONAL SOUNDS:**
- BANK A
- Low
- Muted
- 1. Hi muted
- 3. Banjo
- 4. Custom

**TRACK NOTES:**
- holland
- 1. Hi muted
- 3. Banjo
- 4. Custom

**ADJUSTMENTS:**
- SLOW TEMPO

**XX7 MAY 2013**
**JOHANNES VOGT**

**SONG INFORMATION:**
- **Title:** BBBB (p.p.p)
- **Length:** 1:57
- **Program:** LIBRARY ELECTRO!

**SEQUENCES USED:**
- OBVIOUS P.P.P (main)
- Guitar Loop

**LYRIC INFORMATION:**
- Ohh you look so pretty and
  and perfect in polka dots and
  I like your pocketbook toooo
- My brother doesn’t have no
  alligator shoes
  but he has the finest in
  leather and other things that
  would make you feel real good
- You look so good in those
  polka dots
  I thought that thing was
  leather but it’s surely not
- Ohh my mistake is my mistake
  but still you look good in
  those polka dots
- Sometimes leather ain’t leather
  it’s surely not

**ADDITIONAL SOUNDS:**
- MONDO CAN
- HAWII
- DR. OH
- GREASY
- BONEY M D
- KMUNDUOOI
- SNARE
- GUITARFACE
- OXUNDUOO
- SNARE HIP

**TRACK NOTES:**
- VOCAL
- MPC
- STACKED VOCALS

**ADJUSTMENTS:**
- Switch out
  Sounds in
  BANK A

**PROGRAM AKAI SOUNDS**
New York Sadie Benning is best known for her videos, which she began making at age 15 with a toy Fisher-Price PixelVision camera. These early works, part diary and part performance, were shot in her bedroom and chronicled her coming of age and growing up queer in Milwaukee. From the beginning, the settings for Benning’s narratives have invariably been those interstitial zones—between truth and fiction, and what’s in the present moment and what comes next—in which one might die of boredom, or, like the protagonists in her art, reinvent oneself in the world. Over time, Benning has increasingly concerned herself with the potential of the generalized or reductive image to convey mood and character.

Films of herself quickly gave way to films starring puppets or actors wearing masks, then to animations, and eventually, in a 2007 show at New York City’s Orchard gallery, to storyboardlike drawings in which colorful geometric shapes performed lively pavanes, alternately conjuring the traffic-cam channel and porn films.

The seven minimalist paintings in Benning’s latest exhibition are her most abstract works yet. Nevertheless, as suggested by the show’s title, “Transitional Effects”—a term for the cuts, fades, dissolves or wipes used in film editing to join one scene or shot with the next—they also reflect Benning’s ongoing preoccupation with transitional states and constructed identities.

The intimately scaled works, all done between 2005 and 2011, were unevenly distributed around Participant’s cavernous main room. Made of pieces of MDF spread with joint compound, then sanded and spray-painted, each is composed of two differently colored, geometric forms pushed together to make a rectangle. With their hard-edged compositions and industrial colors, they conjure Minimal art, but a robustly noncompliant version of it-expressive, heterogeneous and a little sad-sack.

Wipe, Magna Gold Shock Blue Light and Ace Fluorescent Rocket Red (2011)—all the works are titled after the spray paint colors used to make them—a celestial blue rectangle with a rectangular bite out of its lower right-hand corner, is retrofitted with a corresponding
rectangle painted in hot rose.

The missing corner of the squarish, matte yellow Wipe, Montana Gold Citrus and Rust-oleum Gloss Hunter Green (2011) has been replaced with a small shape the color of spruce trees. And in Wipe, Rust-oleum Gloss Regal Red and Ace Fluorescent Sun Glow Orange (2010), a wavering sliver of shiny burgundy completes an irregular polyhedron painted in glowing vermilion.

Playing on headsets in a back room was a soundtrack of mantralike pop songs, written and performed by Benning (a former member of the musical group Le Tigre), whose lyrics, handwritten in marker, flashed across the screen of a video monitor. They ranged from the catchy “A Magical” and punkish “Glass Ceilings” to more complex instrumentals such as “What Am I Supposed To Do?” In conjunction with the soundtrack, Benning’s eccentrically beautiful paintings took on a double life as avatars of the lives-in-progress depicted in her past time-based and two-dimensional work.
Like a pop song that keeps taking off in surprising directions, Sadie Benning’s work suggests a constant slippage between abstraction and representation, sound and image, motion and stillness, colour and its absence. Benning will always be known for the intimate, richly textured Pixelvision videos she began making as a teenager, but she has long drawn and painted. She has also used objects in her videos to formal and expressive ends, such as the dolls in Jollies (1990) and the paper masks in Flat is Beautiful (1998). More recently, Benning has been creating installations that incorporate object-based art work along with video and sound. For the two-channel video installation Play Pause (2001–06), for example, she animated hundreds of black and white gouache drawings depicting figures, abstract patterns and urban scenes, occasionally using colour filters.

So it shouldn’t be surprising that the title of Benning’s show at Participant Inc., ‘Transitional Effects’, alluded to film editing techniques such as wipes, fades and cuts, and that the seven small-scale paintings that were on view, which at first glance seem to be modest abstractions, represent a moment of instability, suspension and potentially dramatic transformation. They especially evoke the wipe, a crude effect in which one scene seems to sweep the other away as the boundary between them moves across the screen. Each two-colour painting is a square or rectangle formed from a pair of adjoining monochrome panels made of dowels and sanded and spray-painted modelling compound or plaster. It’s unclear, however, which hue would obliterate the other, which identity would take over, if the transition hadn’t been paused, as if on a video screen.

Benning’s work is rife with such ambiguities. Her palette has a mass-produced look – a punchy comic-book matter-of-factness – that contrasts with the slightly lumpy, hand-modelled panels. In Wipe, Rust-oleum Flat Black and Rust-oleum Painters Touch Flat Sweet Pea (2005), a diagonal break separates a black panel from a smaller Silly Putty–pink triangular
one. And in Wipe, Magna Gold Shock Blue Light and Ace Fluorescent Rocket Red (2011), a misshapen zingy cherry-red rectangle and the larger sky-blue panel it juts into echo the colours of a superhero costume, though the mood is uncertain, mournful or deadpan – anything but heroic. In these works, abstraction is inseparable from performance, as if the ghost of Minimalism were being summoned on a video screen. And despite the sanding, a sculptural quality remains, as if they were cast in plaster or modelled in clay.

Just as Benning, with her thoughtful sleight-of-hand, can make paintings function like videos or sculpture, she can also coax songs into acting like paintings. Here, the paintings were accompanied by a single-channel video she shot with a vintage black and white tube camera, Old Waves Record One / Old Waves Record Two (2011). As a group of Benning’s own songs play on the soundtrack, most of the lyrics – recalling texts in her Pixelvision works but unaccompanied by images – appear on the screen as graffiti-like scrawled inter-titles. At times, they reinforce the beat; at other times they underline sound effects, as in ‘(THUNDER & RAIN)’, which flashes at the bottom of the screen, or ‘BANG BANG BANG BANG …’, which scatters all over it like gunfire. ‘OH HA HO OH,’ she sings, and words or phrases pop up in front of you, as if from the strokes of a brush. The songs are organized into two ‘records’, each with an ‘A side’ and a ‘B side’, evoking an imaginary materiality.

The lyrics tell of glass ceilings, love and desire, of a group art critique, even of colours. ‘CHARTREUSE IS OBTUSE / BEIGE IS NOT SAGE / BUT IT’S CLOSE TO CHAMPAGNE / IT’S SO GAY …’, part of one song goes. The mottled field on which the inter-titles appear, especially when the video screen remains blank during instrumental tracks, unsettlingly echo the spray-painted surfaces of the purportedly abstract paintings. While maintaining her low-key aesthetic, Benning constantly questions how art functions, interrupting the viewing experience as if to say, ‘Hey, look there — what should we make of that?’
JOHANNES VOGT

MOUSE: Sadie Benning

The story of Sadie Benning and the media she has used is the tale of her vision, approach or separation from reality. A tale of narratives developed to interpret genders and of many collaborations that brought new perspectives to her work. But it is also the story of solitary wandering with a Super8 camera, of prolific pauses in travels between one place and the next.

The plot unfolds in a wide-ranging interview conducted by Tina Kuklicki.

Tina Kuklicki: I am really hoping that in this interview we can connect your video work of the 1990s to your recent painting. It seems to me that the video work is about your personhood. It has this very confessional style. It relies on performance and drawing and music, and it's very representational, whereas your recent painting is rather abstract.

Sadie Benning: So you're asking, how did I get from there to here?

Tina: Exactly. But I'm not going to ask you that right away because I want to unfold over the course of the conversation.

Sadie: OK, you've put the seed in the back of my head. It's germinated.

Tina: So, starting at the beginning, I know that in 1988 when you were 15, your dad gave you a PixelVision camera for Christmas—it's become so important in the folklore surrounding your work. Did it at first seem like a toy?

Sadie: When the camera arrived in my life, I hadn't been thinking at all about making videos. I was really interested in music and painting and drawing. So yes, the PixelVision was a toy, but at the same time it wasn't something I knew what to do with initially. But then a number of weirdly traumatic experiences happened. A friend got hit by a drunk driver and almost died on New Year's Eve. I was taking the bus home from the hospital. I got off the bus at 2 a.m. and someone starting shooting a gun in the bar on the corner. I ran home, completely freaked out. The next day I started making videos.

Tina: And that first video was called A New Year.

Sadie: It was based on some of those stories, like fragments. There's a direct-address mode in it that feels confessional, and I was talking about things that were personal. But a lot of my subsequent videos were also dystopian, dreamlike, and disorienting. It felt like I was acting, making something up. They're about things that aren't true, or things that are missing, and the gaps in my ability to depict something. The PixelVision camera itself has this really particular quality, like a Xerox machine, very high-contrast and grainy. What you shoot ends up looking like a comic book or a cartoon. I realized I like this medium because it isn't like any other medium. It doesn't look like video or film. It has its own built-in language. Every machine I've used since then has had some sort of built-in parameters that give it its own language. Its inherent structure, and the limitations of that structure, make it attractive to me.

Tina: It seems to me like you were already thinking early on about how video could exist as a means to call out, directly address, your audience. Who at that time would have been your audience?

Sadie: The first five or six videos, I didn't show anyone. Now, every time I make something it creates a way to be in contact with people and talk to them about things. I realized that if I made something and shared it, it would become a vehicle for conversation. Being queer and a teenager then, I had absolutely nothing to lose in terms of making friends or finding a community, because I had none.

Tina: A lot of your early videos are related to your own rebellion and transgression.

Sadie: What kinds of rebellion and transgression do you see?

Tina: A certain attraction to violence, or maybe the subjects of violence.

Sadie: It is directly related to my gender identity, and also to socioeconomic class. I grew up in a visible place. In the early 1980s, in inner-city Milwaukee there was crack, shootings, gang activity. It was a safe place to be a kid. I grew up in a safe place to play outside. So I was interested in vulnerability, and empathizing with other marginalized people.

Tina: There is also a lot of humor and lightness in your work. One of the places where you really achieve that is in music.

Sadie: The way I looked at music in my early videos is different from how I look at it when I'm making my own music now. With the sampling in the videos, it's much more about how to place the music in relation to the narrative. Often I turn to music as a place to leave the narrative but also add some other layer so that there will be a kind of dissonance between what you're seeing and what you're hearing. So many love songs and the narratives within pop music, are very heteronormative. I was also dealing with performance and playing different gender roles in my early videos. Music helped me perform different genders, or it could imbue added layers of narrative that I couldn't do just by myself.

Tina: How did the development of narrative occur in your work? As I see it, it was a kind of splintering of subjectivity that culminated in Play Pause. It occurs in a linear fashion first you in the first person, and then a third person, and then a fragmenting of that person so that our perspectives on the narrative are coming from very different sides and angles.

Sadie: It also has to do with collaborating. In a collaboration, by definition there is no single subjectivity. I've had a number of different collaborations, one with Solberg Nelson to make Play Pause, and then with Johanna Fateman and Kathleen Hanna as the band Le Tigre. There's this thing that starts to happen, an amalgamation of multiples. Where as when I work alone I feel like I'm collaborating within myself. Today I can't make an idea happen just in video, or just in any one form. It happens in a painting, it happens in a drawing, it happens in a video, it happens in a record. That has come from having conversations with other people and building ideas outside of myself.

Tina: That's an interesting answer, it makes complete sense to me. With the albums you're working on now, you do everything. You play guitar, you do the beats, you do the singing. Why did you choose not to collaborate?

Sadie: When I left Le Tigre, I started painting and...
I was working on Play Pause for hour or five years. It was a really big process and I spend so much time on it that I also record it and make a lot of music by myself. I sometimes feel that in order to be clear about an idea, I have to be alone with it. But then other times, collaborating can allow for something to happen that I couldn't have made on my own at all.

E.K.: You spend a lot of time wandering with a camera or a recorder. How did that become part of your work? Is it about looking for subject matter, or making field recordings?

A.B.: There's a real relation between inside and outside in my work. I like to spend a lot of time alone working. And I really like to be sort of out in the world, in my early videos, the camera wasn't portable. There was no battery pack, so I could go out into the world, but only with an extension cord connecting me to the house. Whereas with this I could go out into the world and shoot.

E.K.: Wandering is essential for many artists, it's not necessarily unique to your practice, but it seems to me that your source material of late includes an exceptionally wide spectrum of people and things.

A.B.: I can answer that in a more specific way in relation to Play Pause. Most of the video takes place in these monitory states driving, taking the bus, being on the subway, moments in between places, going to or from somewhere. So it's very much about public space and being out in the world. That video, when I started making the drawings for it, was all about sex and these fantastical awkward moments when you don't know what's happening. That was very much an inside space. It shifted. I was making these very internal drawings and being inside a lot, and then September 11 happened, and the whole political climate changed. I sold my car and stopped buying gas, and decided I'd ride my bike everywhere. I started spending most of my time outside, doing things out in the world.

E.K.: You have described the sex drawings in Play Pause as being about the in-between moments, just after sex, or just before sex. Are simultaneously, when they appear, there are these various colored gels and shapes moving across the screen.

A.B.: I think I put the abstract images with the sex because I wanted people to have the option to look at something else. I do think sexuality has no hard and fast boundaries. Play Pause gets to the sex through dance, and a kind of nightish feeling. So it could just be that someone is making all his love up to his head while something else is happening. I didn't want it to feel real. It feels such and strange and awkward. I think sexuality is an embarrassing thing. I feel like I need to deal with that embarrassment somehow.

E.K.: The geometric relationships in the small colored drawings in Form of a Waterfall also seem to me to be about an abstract form of sexuality. Do you get frustrated when people constantly ask you about sexuality and gender in relation to your work?

A.B.: No, I think it's interesting to talk about. Although there's a lot of other things to talk about in terms of form, structure, materials, process—things that are more intellectual or conceptual and aren't just about my life story. I also understand how these narratives of identity get infused into people's readings of art and their work. In terms of my recent paintings, I am thinking and reading a lot about fabrication and the handmade, and these places in between where something looks like it's mass-produced but also like somebody tucked it. So I was thinking less about gender or power or more about tactility and what's possible.

E.K.: For me, believing, drawing is a place to escape. A real way to disconnect from a dominant, ever-present reality in order to open yourself up to a slightly more abstract, perhaps even unconscious, realm.

A.B.: In some of Agnes Martin's interviews and writings about her work, she sounds like she gets into almost a trance in order to look for a vision to come together and realize her work. That could be the unconscious. It could be a lot of things. Painting is meditative. Half the time I make drawings and give them away, and I see them later and think, wow, I honestly have no memory of making that, I was in a trance. It's the opposite when you're editing video. You can't be in a trance, because you're really conscious of all the decisions you're making. Whether you're walking around observing the world or in a speeded-up state, maybe it's about allowing an openness in your mind so that an idea can happen.

E.K.: You've also said you think painting is a lot about performance. Do you mean the way the audience interacts with the painting is performative, or do you mean that painting, for you, is performance?

A.B.: I think it's both. In video, performance takes place over time, and if you're editing, you're planning for the viewer to sit and watch over an expanded time frame, which the frame cuts next to each other build. Whereas in painting, the idea of timeliness is layered, on top of one another, hidden. There's a lot of mystery underneath a painting that you don't have access to. So the performativity in painting has a different kind of dimension where you don't get to see the beginning, you just see the end.

E.K.: I'm thinking about the Formal/Inform paintings, and how important the overpaint, the wig, is to these works. It seems like you're reusing that it's an image that's in a sense, that is integrated. For me as a viewer, it raises questions about how these two things come together. Were they once a single piece? Or were they two pieces that combined to a couple?

A.B.: In relation to time, the paintings are about being passed or frozen. A wig is usually just the Eden that goes from one scene to the next. You're not supposed to pause between the scenes, you're not supposed to look at that. So I'm just holding it where the cut happens. It's the in-between moment—the transition that I am focusing attention on. I was interested in this conceptually and as a personal space. To literally embody a transition to be either or. So the wigs are paintings about unfulfilled parts, about fractures and splits, about editing and rejoining.

E.K.: Now that you have an occasional teaching job in California, where your father lives, the two of you have been spending more time together. He's clearly a big influence on your artistic development. Do you want to say anything about the relationship between your work and your dad?

A.B.: There really isn't any way to put it into words, except that I feel fortunate to have a parent who understands what I do and from whom I learn so much. He's seen me grow from a small, really important figure in my life. He's been a direct influence on my work. He's seen how I've evolved and changed over time, and shared my triumphs and my failures. And he always knows how to make me laugh, even in the darkest moments. He's always been there for me, through thick and thin. And I'm forever grateful.

E.K.: It gives new meaning to the idea of the game.

A.B.: That's true.
La storia di Sadie Benning è quella della sua visione della realtà e del suo avvicinamento e del suo distanziamento da essa. È la storia di narrative che si sviluppano interpretando i generi sessuali, e delle molte collaborazioni che hanno regalato nuove suggestioni all'artista. Ma è anche la storia di un vagabondare solitario con una Super8 in mano, o delle prolifiche pause di viaggio fra un luogo e l'altro. Una storia che si dipana nell'ampia intervista con Tina Kukielski.

DI TINA KUKIELSKI

**Pina Kukielski:** Con quest'interrogativo, mi auguro di riuscire a collegare i tuoi video degli anni Novanta ai tuoi recenti dipinti. Mi sembra che il tuo video riguardi la tua individualità. Possiedi uno sguardo molto confessional. Si basa su performance, fingere, musica, ed è molto figurativo, mentre i tuoi recenti dipinti sono piuttosto astratti.

**Sadie Benning:** Quindi mi tieni chiedendo come sono arrivata a questo punto?

**Tina:** Esatto, ma non voglio chiederti subito perché vorrei che si rivelasse nel corso della conversazione.

**Sadie:** Viene bene, hai sperato in seme fino alla mia mente. L'hai piantato...

**Tina:** Dunque, partendo dall’inizio, so che nel 1998, quando avevi 15 anni, tu namaste i tuoi fori per Natalie una videocamera PInelVision che è diventata parte integrante delle leggende sul tuo lavoro. All’inizio ti sembrava un giocattolo?

**Sadie:** Quando quella videocamera entrò nella mia vita, non avevo mai pensato di realizzare dei video. Eravamo interessatissimi alla musica, alla pittura e al disegno. Poi, la PinelVision era un giocattolo, ma al tempo stesso era qualcosa con cui intradurre, non sapendo come farlo. Ero abituata a stare in appartamento e a guardare i film per la maggior parte del tempo. A quei tempi, era il tuo pubblico?

**Tina:** Mi pare che, agli inizi, ti sei già pensando a come far vivere il video come veicolo per sviavarti in modo diverso al pubblico. A quei tempi, chi era il tuo pubblico?

**Sadie:** I primi cinque o sei video non li mostravo a nessuno. Ora, ogni volta che faccio qualcosa, cerco di stare in contatto con la gente e parlarle di cose varie. Mi resi conto che se avessi fatto qualcosa e l’avessi condiviso, sarebbe diventato un’argomento di conversazione. Ai tempi, essendo gay e adolescenti, non avevamo nulla da perdere in rispetto al fare amicizia e trovare una comunità, perché non ne avevamo una...

**Tina:** Molto dei tuoi primi video sono legati alla tua ribellione e trasgressione.

**Sadie:** Che tipo di ribellione e trasgressione ci vedi?

**Tina:** Una certa attrazione per la violenza o, piantone, per i soggetti della violenza.

**Sadie:** È direttamente legato alla mia sessualità, che alla mia classe socio-economica. Sono cresciuta in un posso violento. Nel primo anni '90, nel centro di Milwaukee c'erano crac, sanneron, delinquente delle gang. Non ero un posto sicuro in cui crescere. Non potevo vivere al tempo, così mi interessavo alla violenza e alla semplicità con altre gesta marginalizzate.

**Tina:** Ci sono anche molti uniformi che leggerezza nel tuo lavoro. Uno degli ambiti che spiecano di più è la musica.

**Sadie:** Il modo in cui consideravo la musica nei miei primi video e i diversi rispetto a come lo considero ora, quando lo composso. Con la comprensione del video, è più una questione di come collocare la musica in rapporto alla narrazione. Sposo in avvicinamento alla musica come la guida dove abbandonare la narrazione, ma anche aggiungere qualcosa. Ad esempio, ho cominciato a musicare poi, non solo di essere musicale...

**Tina:** Ogni video che il mio pubblico sia il più possibile vario. Da giovane, ero concentrata su trovare una comunità gay attraverso il mio lavoro, e così accadeva. A quei tempi, il film gay è stato un modo per fare amicizia e faticarci a insegnare — erano una comunità di persone che collaboravano. Poi, lentamente, cominciam ci sentivamo in quel paradigma. Così, a quel punto, decisi di andare a scuola come modo di rivelare, facendo un passo indietro. L’improvviso mi stavi a pensare il video attraverso la pittura, la pittura attraverso la scultura, il suono attraverso il disegno. Avevo anche studiato dell'insegnamento, in particolare come e come video come medium. Ogni cosa si sviluppava sempre. La fine iniziò a girare molto in Super 8. Con la pellicola, rifiggere il mondo in modo più leggibile. Ornitorrino quelle che vediamo. Mentre con la PinelVision nonostante che vediamo, non qualcosa che assomigli a una po' a un disegno. Quando mi esibivo a girare in pellicola, mi veniva la voglia di tornare al disegno, perché volevo rappresentare qualcosa che non assomigliasse 'troppo' a ciò che vedevamo. Inoltre, il disegno è molto più diretto del video. Afferrare un pensiero in un momento e lo caos dei tempi dalla tua mão, sulla pagina. Il rendere di una linea traccia a mano, il movimento che fa mettere disegni, è come quello dei tuoi cervelli. E’ in gioco qualcosa di molto corporeo.
JOHANNES VOGT

MOUSE 3 | Susie Bensing


Previous page - A New Year, 1989. Courtesy: the artist and Video Data Bank.
Johannes Vogt

Sousse 31 ~ Sicilia Benning

La musica mi aiuta a interpretare genere sessuale, si, o per forza, nonostante le dimensioni narrative che non avrei potuto esprimere da sola.

È come se avessi lo sviluppo della narrazione nel mio lavoro? Per come la vedo io, è una sorta di funzionalità di soggettività culminata in Play Puse. Avviene in maniera lineare: prima tu in prima persona, poi in terza persona, poi una frammentazione di quella persona così che i nostri punti di vista sulla narrazione vengono da lato e互いに多く多い。

È centrale anche la collaborazione. In una collaborazione, per definizione non c'è una soggettività. Io ho avuto una serie di collaborazioni, una con Solveig Nelson per realizzare Play Puse, e poi con Johanna Frierman e Kathleen Hanna come band Le Tiger. C'era quella che si avvicina a un'attualità di molteplicità. Mentre quando lavoro da sola, mi sembra di collaborare con me stessa. Oggi non posso realizzare un'idea solo in video o in un'unica forma. Sono in un dipinto, in un disegno, in un video, in un disco. Quello che avviene perché ho avuto conversazioni con altre persone e costruito idee al di fuori di me stessa.

È una risposta interessante, con perfettamente messa. Negli album a cui sto lavorando, c'è un tocco della libertà, la riferibilità alla realtà e la voce. Perché hai scelto di lavorare da soli?

È come se avessi lo sviluppo della narrazione nel mio lavoro? Per come la vedo io, è una sorta di funzionalità di soggettività culminata in Play Puse. Avviene in maniera lineare: prima tu in prima persona, poi in terza persona, poi una frammentazione di quella persona così che i nostri punti di vista sulla narrazione vengono da lato e互いに多く多い。

È trascorsi un tempo andando in giro con una macchina da presa o con un registratore. Come è diverso durante il tuo lavoro opera pratica?

È un vero rapporto tra l'interno e l'esterno nel mio lavoro. Mi piace trascorrere molto tempo al lavoro, da sola. È molto importante stare lontani e nel mondo. Nei miei primi video, la videocamera non era portatile. Non c'era la batteria, quindi potevano stare fuori nel mondo, solo con una prolunga che mi teneva collegata a casa mia. Mentre con la pellicola avevo andare in giro per il mondo e filmare.

È giovane per essere una donna, e non è necessariamente un particolare del tuo lavoro, ma mi sembra che tu abbia utilizzato l'intensità e l'intensità comportando la qualità e la percezione di persone e di cose.

È possibile rispondere in modo più specifico alla tua rapporto a Play Puse. Gran parte del video ha luogo in questi anni transistivi: anzitutto, prendere la mano e stare in mezzopiano. Questo sleepe di tempo può essere molto spesso. È il tempo di un continuo spazio intero. È interrotto. Faro questi disegni molto "interno" e staro molto al centro, e poi c'è l'11 settembre e l'estero tutto politicamente. Venerdì mia macchina sta su per essere buttata, e deciso che sarà andata ovunque in bicicletta. Prendi a trasformare gran parte del tempo all'aperto, facendo cose nel mondo esterno.

È che se tu sei il disegno sessuale in Play Puse come dei momenti interni, capito dopo il lavoro o prima del lavoro? E, in generale, quando compiaci? E sono queste forme e gallerie iniziato che si muovono attraverso lo spazio.

È credo di aver messo le immagini astratte assiem al senso perché volerlo che sai avesse l'altra alternativa di guardare qualcos'altro. Trovo che la sessualità che sia difficile da rappresentare e Play Puse arriva al senso attraverso il ballo e una spettacolare aggiunta di videogame. Quindi potrebbe essere solo che qualcosa si sia immaginato tutto mentre si muove. Non volere che ti sembrasse crude.

È qualcosa di immutabile, senso e spazio. Trovo la sessualità una cosa imbarazzante. Sento il bisogno di venire a patti con quel imbarazzo in qualche modo.

È analogamente, anche i rapporti geometrici nei piccoli disegni co-locati in Form of a Woman mi sembrano l'istruzione di una forma di sessualità. Provo intuizione quando la gente ti fa domande su sesso come ti provi sessualità sessuale in rapporto al tuo lavoro?

È no, perché è interessante discutere. Anche se c'è molto altro come di
due cose. Prima erano un lavoro unico? O due lavori che si sono coniugati in una coppia?

dabb? In rapporto al tempo, beh... i dipinti sono come in pausa o congelati. Una tendenza in genere è solo quell'effetto che si condensa da una scena alla successiva. Non dovrebbe esserci una pausa tra le scene, non è una cosa da mostrare. Così io mi soffermo dove avviene lo stacco. In un momento intermedio, sulla transizione, che concentra l'attenzione. Questa cosa m'interessa concettualmente e come spazio personale. Rappresentare letteralmente una transizione nel suo non essere né questo né quello. Quindi i dipinti sono su parti diseguali, su frammenti e schegge, su montaggio e ricomposizione.

dar: Gli che insegni occasionalmente in California, dove vivi tuo padre, voi due stai trascorrendo più tempo insieme. Lui è chiaramente una forte influenza sul tuo sviluppo artistico. Vorresti dire qualcosa sul rapporto tra il tuo lavoro e tuo padre?

impero no di solito conversando con lui mentre siamo in giro in macchina. Semplicemente vivendo, digliamo in giorno. A proposito di girovagare... Tutta la mia serie di viaggio e di girovagare è direttamente legata al tempo che passo con lui, perché stiamo quasi sempre in un veicolo, in spuntoni, diretti da qualche parte, nel mezzo di qualcosa. Ed è sempre diverso, non è mai la stessa cosa.

ot: È un nuovo significato all'idea di pausa.

dar: È vero.
In “Transitional Effects,” at New York’s Participant, Inc., Sadie Benning resists the market-fueled craze for overhung exhibitions. She has culled just seven small abstract paintings from what she says is a trove of 48, mainly produced this past year, “outdoors,” in upstate New York. (She teaches in the summers at Bard.) These will surprise viewers who know Benning from her videos—though, as she tells A.i.A., “I drew and painted long before I had a camera.” In the back room, she premieres a new video, itself a departure of sorts.

Sparsely installed in Participant’s main gallery, Benning’s bicolor paintings are seemingly modest works that pack a punch. She makes them from jigsawed wood, layers of sanded plaster and joint compound, and commercial spray paint. Each consists of two parts of unequal size doweled together to form a square or rectangle. Blaring primarily fluorescent colors, they veritably glow together to form a square or rectangle. Blaring primarily fluorescent colors, they veritably glow on the walls, even as their slightly irregular contours and surface nicks invite more intimate scrutiny. Benning speaks of the paintings in videographic terms and considers all the mediums in which she works—painting, drawing, sculpture, video and sound—as interdependent. In the bipartite structure of the paintings, she says, “I was thinking a lot about editing, and wanting kind of a pause between two things—like you get through splitting, cutting and wipping.” As a teenager making diaristic videos in her bedroom, Benning was a pioneer in a brief craze for “Pixelvision,” the murky black-and-white medium achieved with a toy video camera manufactured by Fisher-Price.

She went on to create a series of works in both Pixelvision and conventional video, most between 5 and 12 minutes long, and, in 1993, at age 19, became the youngest participant up to that time in a Whitney Biennial. In 2006, she produced a 29-minute, critically acclaimed animation, Play Pause, using single-colored filters over black-and-white drawings.

She showed Play Pause in a solo show at the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, in 2007, along with a group of large-scale paintings of colorful, cartoonish figures—the first paintings she had ever exhibited.
These days her two-dimensional works—whether paintings or drawings—are purely abstract. “Somehow right now expressing myself in abstract ways feels more clear—especially with everything out there so disturbing politically,” she tells A.i.A. She describes her paintings as “off and awkward and uneven”—a quality that links them inexorably to her early video style. These days her two-dimensional works—whether paintings or drawings—are purely abstract. “Somehow right now expressing myself in abstract ways feels more clear—especially with everything out there so disturbing politically,” she tells A.i.A. She describes her paintings as “off and awkward and uneven”—a quality that links them inexorably to her early video style.

Screening on a monitor in the back room is Benning’s new black-and-white, single-channel video, Old Waves Record One/Old Waves Record Two (2011). Put on the headphones, and you’ll hear a series of songs composed and performed by the artist, as selected lyrics, scrawled in uppercase letters, appear and disappear in a cloudy-looking ether on the screen. Benning is also a musician, and was one of the founding members, in 1998, of the indie girls’ band Le Tigre. Her musical style is reminiscent of the deliberately amateurish riffs of late ‘70s and early ‘80s post-punk all-female bands like Delta 5, but even more stripped down. The instrumentals are a pastiche of tiny pieces of sound that Benning programs and plays on an Akai MPC-2000 sequencer. Among them are her own beats and guitar riffs, and music made by friends and relatives.

“I probably have hundreds of songs,” she says, although just 26 have been selected for the piece. “Each ‘record’ has an A-side and a B-side. People don’t think about that form anymore.” In order to listen, you have to watch; Benning has no immediate plans to release the music as a CD or MP3. She calls them “records,” although “what you’re seeing is physically not there—like when people say, ‘I love your painting’ when it’s a drawing, or ‘I love your video’ when it’s a film. I’m calling it a record when it’s a video.” The written texts, in awkward uppercase letters, were videotaped on a copy stand at Cal Arts, where she was teaching; “They have this old analog studio, with a tube camera and four lights.” Lyrics are simple, repetitive rhymes that convey quirky narratives, desires, quotidian challenges (“accidents happen but some are fake/they did it on purpose and called it a lake;” “she’s got a wig in her bag/Running to work is such a drag”).

The off-kilter tone is pure Benning—sometimes angry or oddly moving, and almost always funny. Followers of her video work will instantly recognize her longstanding tendency of writing texts for the camera. In Old Waves, stripped of ambient images, they take on new life, in song. “Pop songs are always about identity and love and frustration, longing—things that can be embarrassing, even cheesy,” she says. “Singing in and of itself is always very vulnerable and human.”

“Transitional Effects” is on view at Participant Inc. through Oct. 23.
To tell the stories of the city, Michel de Certeau reminds us, you cannot approach urban space from on high. You have to begin with the footpath. For De Certeau, the city comes to life at the ground level where, clasped by the bustle of the streets, bodies will encounter one another in varying modes of connectivity (as lovers, friends, work colleagues, oblivious passers-by). In the city as lived-space, pedestrians tread their own expressive paths of circulation and connection and physically ‘write’ urban space in walking it. On the street, according to De Certeau, the stories of the city are spoken by a chorus of footsteps.

On view earlier this year in the lobby gallery of the Whitney Museum of American Art, Sadie Benning’s latest video installation, Play Pause (2006), captures the chorus of footsteps that make up a day-in-the-life of an anonymous, post 9/11 city. The installation begins, fittingly enough, with hand-drawn scenes of the street, accompanied by an audio-track of echoing footsteps, traffic noises and chirping birds. Play Pause then proceeds to move through hundreds of Benning’s gouache on paper illustrations (created by the artist between 2001 and 2006) which are projected onto two adjoining screens. Arranged in a loose narrative structure and scanned for two-channel projection, the gouaches of Play Pause detail the movements, gestures and everyday practices of a multitude of nameless urban inhabitants.

Benning’s characters walk the city, they idle about on the footpath and loiter in doorways;
they wait for the bus, travel the subway, watch television, drink, flirt and dance in bars.
Largely black and white, with occasional chromatic flashes of red, green and blue filters, the
gouaches of Play Pause favour schematic outlines, bold blacks and grey washes rather than
the rendering of intricate detail. They seem child-like and noticeably hand-crafted, reminis-
cent of the low-fi aesthetic that made Benning’s name as a video artist during the 90s with
shorts such as Jollies (1990) and If Every Girl Had a Diary (1992). Shot on a Fisher-Price
Pixelvision ‘toy’ camera—that was actually given to Benning by her father, experimental
filmmaker James Benning—her early videos are infused with a playful sensibility. They take
place in the artist's bedroom and are often narrated in the first-person (by Benning herself,
who appears as a series of close-ups of eyes and lips). Abetted by scrawled notes held up to
the camera, puppets drawn and painted on cardboard or objects such as Matchbox cars and
dolls, Benning re-enacted the dysfunction and loneliness of adolescence with do-it-yourself
costume in these early videos, well before the age of amateur confessionals on YouTube. For
all their apparent simplicity, Benning’s shorts are lyrical mixtures of images, music and text.
The surface effects of Pixelvision are fleshed out with diaristic confessionals that spoke to
Benning’s own lesbian identity, her crushes and confusions and the process of coming out.

Play Pause is a definite departure from Benning’s earlier work. Certainly, there are queer
bodies to be found throughout Play Pause—her characters visit leather bars, have gay sex
and watch lesbian reality shows on television. That said, the stark minimalism of the drawn
line in Play Pause cues us into what this portrait of urban life is really all about—the phe-
nomenological properties of movement, energy and stasis in their own right, as they belong
to bodies inhabiting the city from all walks of life. What fascinates about Play Pause is Ben-
ning’s continued ability to endow the flat, the drawn and the two-dimensional with a strong
physicality. While her earlier videos were often enraptured with material surfaces and an
up-close attention to objects, faces and details, they were mainly concerned with the expres-
sion of Benning’s own adolescent subjectivity; they matched the effects of Pixelvision (for
instance, the heightened textural grain, flattening of space and dull sound that it lends to its
images) with the rendering of internal psychic space.

Drawings for Play Pause 2001-06, Gouache on Paper, collection of the artist © Sadie
In Play Pause, Benning’s preoccupation with the surface continues through the evocative integration of still drawing and video. Play Pause, however, is not concerned with interiority, much less with the personal autobiography of Benning-the-artist. Directed in collaboration with Solveig Nelson (who also provided ambient field recordings of city sounds for the installation, which are intermixed throughout with Benning’s original score), Play Pause speaks to the city’s chorus of footsteps through highly rhythmic transitions between immobility and movement. Through the gouache drawings and their subtle animation, coupled with the energetic pulse of the installation’s soundtrack, pacing and editing, the work strikingly evokes the very action of walking the city through its stop-start beat and physicality. Benning affectively conveys not just what we might see upon walking this cityscape (sports games, store-front advertisements, dog-filled parks, missed opportunities with another) but, more importantly, what walking the city feels like.

As the title of Benning’s installation indicates, the piece deliberately oscillates between movement and stasis. Benning’s gouaches will change over every few seconds on the split screen only to cede to durational takes, long shots or close-ups of the still drawings. The sensation of walking is evoked on a number of levels: by the meandering structure and organisation of the drawings, which follow no fixed trajectory and conclude with scenes of an airport and planes taking off (although it remains unclear whether characters are arriving or leaving); and by the juxtaposition of still images against a densely layered sonic atmosphere (the rumble of an underground subway, for example, set alongside drumbeats and electronic percussion). Indeed, it is Benning’s rising and falling score that endows the installation with vibrancy and movement, even when the images on-screen are suddenly arrested.

The stop-start sensibility of Play Pause offers a decidedly physical invitation to its viewer, along the lines of what film theorist and curator Laura Marks would designate its haptic visuality. In these terms, the eye of the viewer becomes restless; our vision is strongly encouraged to move. Instead of being drawn into a perspectival space and the depths of the image, our eyes scan along and across a horizontal surface. Given its interest in the drawn surface, such is the haptic invitation that Play Pause extends to the visitor. Here, the eye can discern the material textures of the ink that has seeped into Benning’s paper or flits between the often speedy alternations of the gouache drawings, moments of unexpected colour on screen and images that seem perpetually on the point of unrest and transition. The haptic actions of the viewer’s eye elicited by Play Pause likewise contribute to the work’s transitions between stasis and movement. We might not walk the city alongside Benning’s protagonists but we emulate the stop-start physicality of the installation itself, through the actions of a roving and embodied eye. At barely 20, Sadie Benning became the Whitney’s video art darling; included in its 1993 Biennial and once again in the 2000 Biennial. It seems only appropriate that Benning’s latest video installation return to the Whitney as part of its Contemporary Series. This time around, however, Benning is no longer a girl with a video diary. Play Pause suggests the beginnings of a different affective beat from the artist.
Born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1973, video artist and musician Sadie Benning came of age in the art world in the 1990s with well-known journalesque-video tapes, experimental exposés made on the Fisher Price Pixelvision camera that her father, experimental filmmaker James Benning, had given her. Also a former member of the band Le Tigre, Benning is known for her bold and brazen style. Her works have previously shown in the Whitney Biennial in 1993 and in 2000. Her current installation Play Pause (2006), is also now on display at the Whitney.

Play Pause is a two channel video installation that projects images of thousands of hand drawn, gouache on paper, illustrations that Benning made between 2001-2006. Most of them are drawn in black and white with a light gray wash underneath, but a few of the images are also treated with a monochrome tint of red, blue, or green. The piece runs for 29 minutes on a loop. The illustrations were all scanned and arranged in this sequence for the piece. Coupled with surround sound, they tell a story of a “day in the life,” of an anonymous protagonist. Each image appears for only a few seconds, and then another similar image appears: from the first steps on the street, the stores, advertisements, shop fronts, anonymous people, night life, dance clubs, after hours sex, television, and scenes of departure from the train station and airport.

The title Play Pause alludes to the installation’s strange sense of detachment coupled with vulnerability. This tension arises in several ways: the rhythm and pace of the installation, the space itself, and the particular images displayed. The first juxtaposition occurs between
the surround sound pulsing around slow and still images. The images are slowly animated, sports (baseball) or music, adds a vibrancy of movement, a “play.” There is one exception in the dance club, when the images are animated to match the music—changing red to blue to green and yellow, they pulsate at the same beat of the music. Beyond this exceptional scene, the pace of the piece normally levels on this strange pull between two worlds of moving and stopping.

The lines of the drawings are also demonstrative of this contradiction of play and pause. They are at once empty and vacant outlines, but by virtue of their hand-drawn quality, they are also personalized, unique and life-like. This play-pause tension resembles a kind of existentialism of the line—the anonymity of the public scenes treated with aloof lines, are transformed when they are treated with the lightness and carefree movement she uses to depict planes flying, people talking, or dancing. Together, these intimate moments, like the early journal entries in the Pixelvision pieces, receive the same reserved and careful treatment. Play Pause is on view at the Whitney until September 20, 2009.
“Play Pause,” Sadie Benning’s new stop-action animation, is a small, multifaceted gem. On view in the lobby gallery of the Whitney Museum of American Art, it uses an avalanche of simple, almost naive gouache drawings to prowl the margins of urban society. It also returns her talent to the museum where she first became famous.

Ms. Benning’s work was first seen at the Whitney in 1993, when, barely 20, she became the standout discovery of that year’s biennial. Success, however, was not entirely new. Ms. Benning had started to make films several years earlier and had already received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. Her contributions to the ’93 biennial were short black-and-white films that had been shot in her bedroom using what was, more or less, a toy camera. Spare and diaristic, with an irresistible hands-on charm, they were in essence stop-action puppet shows made with an array of drawings, handwritten notes, cut-out silhouettes and in-camera editing. They gave voice to the age-old adolescent longing for knowledge — of self, of love, of the world. While evoking the spirit of Joseph Cornell, they also extended the implicitly tender set-up photography of artists like James Casebere and Laurie Simmons into film.

In “Play Pause,” Ms. Benning’s work continues to wear its heart on its sleeve, if more covertly, along with a sewn-on patch reading “Do it Yourself.” It is the film of an artist who has become sadder and wiser about life, while greatly expanding her capacity for intimacy and understanding. “Play Pause” is a low-key picture of what might be called the everyday sublime. Solveig Nelson has provided its beautifully accurate (yet largely electronic) soundtrack of city sounds, whether a subway singer or traffic noises, a jackhammer or squirrels rifling through a garbage can, people talking in a bar or gates being called in an airport.

Ms. Benning’s gouaches have a direct, folk-art awkwardness reminiscent of James Castle or Jacob Lawrence. They are impressively rich in their use of darks and lights, lines and washes, and occasionally colored by screens of red, blue or green. Their time on the split screen often feels too brief, and while they use a full range of cinematic long shots and close-ups, they also bring to mind Helen Levitt’s street photographs and Doug Aitken’s “Electric Earth” (1999), a majestic four-screen video mediation on a lonely urban teenager.

Their childlike artifice contrasts with a surprisingly full and poignant account of what a walker in any city might see: people ambling along sidewalks, old stores flanked by empty lots, new buildings, men sitting in parks reading newspapers, other people observing the street from
apartment windows. It is a picture of life in progress, in all its wondrous banality. Its leisurely pace speeds up only for boys playing soccer in a playground and people mingling and dancing under a disco ball. Occasionally there’s a sense of foreboding; at one point we seem to be viewing the street from inside a security booth. And the lives of gay people, men and women, closeted and out, conventional and flamboyant, are a continuing theme. Leather bars are visited, sometimes by accident; a television show titled “Lesbian Makeovers” is glimpsed.

“Play Pause” ends ambiguously. While the longing that is one of Ms. Benning’s major themes compels someone to an airport, it is not clear if a plane is boarded or not. What matters is the sense that Ms. Benning’s story and her telling of it can sustain repeated viewings; its mysteries reward exploration.

“Play Pause” continues through Sept. 20 at the Whitney Museum of American Art; (212)
Starting in the eighth grade, Le Tigre co-founder Sadie Benning crafted audiocassettes of spliced sound using a boom box and turntable. Referred to as "play/pause" cassette tapes, they fluctuate wildly in tone, sampling from disco anthems, rhythm-and-soul instrumentation, and other genres in repetitious fits of starts and stops. According to the artist, they were initially created to irritate family members, but subsequently the tapes’ sonic amalgam of diverse pop influences became audio diaries of an adolescent grappling with self-awareness.

Transferred to records that play from a turn-table in the center of Orchard's front gallery, these “play/pause” cassette tapes offer a soundtrack to Benning's evocatively unwieldy solo exhibition, “Form of a Waterfall.” The sole video work, One Liner, shot on a Pixelvision camera, is deceptively titled. Hardly a one-liner at all, it's a grainy black-and-white video of a mark being drawn on paper, set to disjointed musical selections. The line bulges where the pen rests—not perfectly straight, but a bit askew.

A series of untitled drawings, aesthetically inspired by ‘80s arcade games, is similarly complex and unsettling—the playfully adolescent, candied coloration chafes against their geometric rigidity. The imminent collision between rectangular shafts and rounded, supple forms conveys a stuttering sexuality.

According to the press release, the exhibition takes its title from the animated TV series The Wonder Twins, in which the characters transform into different objects using the command “Form of a _____!” The exhibition tries awkwardly to give shape to the shapelessness of sexual fumbling, but the clumsiness is not a bad thing: Sexuality is often awkward. Though the drawings are just as complex without a soundtrack, the eclectic musical offerings provide compelling contexts. There’s a visceral pleasure in changing the records in the gallery and listening to them for the first time; they play with the malleability of experience, the fickleness of mood. Benning said that creating the drawings left her in a trance—a trance that will leave the viewer with much to untangle.
Sadie Benning has garnered widespread acclaim since she was a teenager for her do-it-yourself approach to artmaking, especially among those of her postpunk peers who favor collaboration over individuality. Her career arc, though fairly well known, bears repeating: In 1989, as a teenager, Benning began to make candid, diaristic videos in her bedroom with a Fisher-Price PixelVision toy camera. Ten years later, she co-founded the feminist indie band Le Tigre. After years of incorporating politics, queer sexuality, and personal history into her work, that Benning has taken an increasing interest in abstraction should come as no surprise. Like a fun-house mirror, however, her new work contracts and contorts her established preoccupation with eroticism, sex, and desire without once concealing it. Though no longer trading in representation rife with emotion or pathos, Benning’s recent output sees her at her most inspiring.

Scheduled to coincide with a weekend screening of Benning’s two-channel video installation Play Pause, 2006, at the Dia Art Foundation space in Chelsea, this exhibition presented viewers with the full range of Benning’s multifaceted practice, including work in drawing, video, installation, and music. The sole PixelVision video in the show, One Liner, 2003, which follows a pen as it draws a series of dots (and seems to try but fail to make a straight line), here provided a visible link between Benning’s past and present forays into abstraction, while referencing her ongoing interest in the intimate and the handmade, the bodily and the tender.

On display throughout the gallery were nine small geometric colored pencil drawings (all 2007) depicting shafted and rounded shapes colliding and merging with one another, as if engaged in various stages of sexual activity. Inspired by Gordon Matta-Clark’s use of heavy boards to mount his photographs, Benning has attached these delicate renderings to rectangular pieces of bookbinding board with softly rounded corners. The drawings’ candy-colored palette distinguishes these works from the monumental and vivid “Head” paintings (1999-2006) that debuted at the Wexner Center for the Arts earlier this year. Instead of that series’ strong graphic line or the dense pixilation of her videos, Benning here makes pencil marks that are cautious and mutable. (The icon depicting poop going “back and forth forever” devised by Miranda July for her film Me and You and Everyone We Know [2005] comes to mind).

In the center of the room, a record player with a series of six LPs, titled Play Pause Tapes: Soundtracks for Looking and Listening, 2007, provided a sound track of jarring rhythms and repetitive beats that energized these otherwise placid drawings and further riffed on the ab
Johannes Vogt

strict tenor of the show. The LPs, reformatted from cassettes of the kind that Benning made in her youth with a boom box and turntable, feature spliced-up funk, disco, soul, and R&B, juxtaposed with isolated instrumental sounds. Visitors were encouraged to change the records and experiment with Benning’s eclectic mixes, an enticing offer that yielded some pleasurable results.

The title of the show, “Form of a Waterfall,” was a reference to the DC Comics animated teenage superheroes “The Wonder Twins,” who change shape by commanding “Form of a___!” Certainly the eroticized shapes intermingling in Benning’s new drawings engage in transformative actions as well, offering a porous reading of sexuality and gendered identity. Perhaps these works should be considered alongside other contemporary art incorporating sexual themes, such the collectively produced journal LTTR, whose fifth issue, “Positively Nasty,” provocatively surveys queer desire. However, taking into consideration Benning’s figurative work, for which she is better known, this show of exclusively abstract works proved that she is able to comfortably navigate through abstraction and figuration while retaining the rare ability to create an effective metaphoric mash-up.

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Accompanying ‘Play Pause’, Sadie Benning’s two-channel video installation project recently screened at the Dia Art Foundation in New York, a show of her drawings, video and sound works now showing at Orchard shows the artist’s rather minimalist, spiritually intimate side. Stop by the gallery tonight and catch a special, bonus screening of film/video works by Jennifer Reeves.

Orchard is one of those galleries without an external sign. It’s next to a trendy trainer shop, and Benning’s show is full of further clues of confirmation for the visitor: look for two walls full of palm-sized drawn construction paper panels bearing graphic designs made with coloured pencils, slightly, crudely anthropomorphic geometric patterns permutating in and out of the storyboardish grids. In the middle of the room there is a turntable on which records of found sound material are being played – someone (I’m not sure whether she was a gallery assistant or visitor) switched the vinyl whenever it ran out, which gave the sonic experience of the show an entirely unrepeateable, live club atmosphere. It’s possibly the most enticing aspect of the show – if the sounds had been coming from the trendy trainer shop, we would have no doubt gone in there instead. The records represent a selection of Benning’s ‘play/pause’ audio cassettes – layered analog cut-ups made of sounds extracted from both tape and vinyl recordings. There’s also a strange (gessoed board?) cut-out of two silhouetted figures bound by an ellipsis-like dotted thought line, and a very grainy black and white single-channel Pixelvision video of what looks like an ink line being drawn, suitably titled ‘One Liner’, at the back of the gallery.

The installation as a whole feels rather airy, ample, visually spacious, but memorable nonetheless for the ease with which the works, so different in form, bear the artist’s interest in contemporary forms of abstraction fluidly (the title of the show, ‘Form of a waterfall’, makes direct reference to the TV animation series ‘Wonder Twins’ manner of beckoning transformation via spoken-command-logic, ie, preceding any wish of becoming by the prefix ‘form of a.’). These drawings, simple sound collages and minimalist film, are a fascinating, more interioristic and sedate counterpoint to the work for which artistically precocious Benning has long been celebrated – her experimental performance-based diaristic video art that developed a pioneering engagement with queer gender identity, made when she was fifteen (and her inclusion in the 1993 Whitney Biennial when she was twenty), and of course her subsequent influential genre-mashing work with feminist electropop group Le Tigre. All that work, now having spread like wildfire and incorporated into the mainstream, was at the time of its creation infused by a sense of wanting to let the outsider into the artist’s private world; the stuff in this show, long-standing projects still bearing the artist’s trademarks (Pixelvision, mixing sound with performance, and her familiar drawn graphic style), invites the viewer to see a different, more meditative (definitely more subtle) and associative expanded practice.

A solo exhibition of Benning’s large scale portrait paintings along with the premier of “PLAY PAUSE,” a video made in collaboration with Solveig Nelson, was held at the Wexner Center in 2006.
Tonight’s screening of film/video works by Jennifer Reeves is just part of the gallery’s running schedule of special events organised in conjunction with Benning’s exhibit; additional previews will follow on 28 Sept and 5 Oct, of short films by Alexander Kluge (newly translated by Lili Chin and Leslie Thornton) and of ‘Unidentified Vietnam No. 18’ by Lana Lin and Lan-Thao Lam, respectively.

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SADIE BENNING, ‘FORM OF A WATERFALL’
To 7 Oct 2007.
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‘PLAY PAUSE’ was screened from 13-15 Sept at Dia Art Foundation www.diaart.org, 548 West 22nd Street, New York.