

FIA BACKSTRÖM AND KELLEY WALKER

FIA: Do you remember when Wade said that we should go to AA as in Artists Anonymous because we talk too much about art?

KELLEY: Oh, right.

FIA: And then I thought lately about this movie, you know, *Being There*?

KELLEY: I haven't seen that movie.

FIA: Have you heard of it? Peter Sellers plays a gardener, Chance? He is a bit retarded or autistic and his only contact with life is the television. All he has is his work in this garden and his television. Then his employer dies and he is ejected from his apartment and garden into reality. The only way he can understand the outside reality is by mimicking his television experience. People get taken with him, and...I don't know, he becomes the president of America or something...

KELLEY: He becomes the president?

FIA: Or maybe he becomes an advisor to the president or something like this. The only way he can communicate is through his experiences with the garden and television, what for him is information about the weather, the crops, the seasons is understood allegorically by the outside. He comes off as incredibly gifted with the media and politics. The film *The Eyes of Laura Mars* is another version of this, in a sense. In this film Faye Dunaway plays Laura Mars, a photographer who begins seeing murders through the eyes of the murderer. Do you know it?

KELLEY: Yes. This is the film where there is a pile of cars burning at Columbus Circle. The burning cars and a public fountain were a backdrop for a model shoot, so there are models in high heels and furs being photographed as well.

FIA: A sort of sexualized violence. And in the film Helmut Newton's photographs are used as stand-ins for Laura Mars's photographs.

KELLEY: I didn't remember that.

FIA: Well, the film was made around the time when the handheld camcorders came out. Laura Mars views the world through the viewfinder, just the way Chance mediates life via his experience with his garden and television. In the movie her vision gets supplanted by the vision or gaze of the murderer in real-time, which is shown in the film so that the scenes when she views the murderer's activity are being shot and aestheticized as if she was looking through a camcorder viewfinder.

KELLEY: How does it end?

FIA: Well, her protector, Tommy Lee Jones, is actually the murderer and tries to kill her in the end, and it turns out that her experience of seeing through the eyes of the murderer—sort of like being inside of a lens, and trying to understand that experience—gives her empowerment with the police, since she can give information on the incidents in detail. I thought of these two films, about living in the medium, in relation to Wade's comment or complaint.

KELLEY: So why do you think he would refer us to AA?

FIA: Maybe there is no difference between talking and not talking about art. What is talking about art?

KELLEY: I like both of these film choices, or examples. I think I know what you are going toward, which is sort of this... which is the idea that the difference between art and something separate instead of art with a capital A, you have a type of language or lens to navigate with.

FIA: The other thing I was thinking about was the political; for example, criticality or institutional critique both assume a politics as an add-on. The idea of the outside... The AA-artist, or the addict-artist, can only be if you say there is a state where you are NOT an addict. I don't know if that exists. Same goes for criticality—any situation may always be political of itself. For example, in your chocolate paintings it's not possible to separate out a political dimension, the chocolate is part of it.

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FIA: I saw an artist's documentary on Salvador Dalí, and it showed a commercial he did for Alka-Seltzer. In the commercial he is presented with his signature melted watches melting in this black space. The commercial is in black-and-white and there is this naked woman next to him, and

a shaving cream—foam—which he sprays on top of her breasts and front, but not on the butt.

KELLEY: [Laughs] ...and did he shave her?

FIA: No, he didn't shave her. Then he goes to shave something, and then his moustache goes limp.

KELLEY: That's interesting. Warhol was deflated as a Pop icon by George Lois. Warhol is photographed being sucked into a giant Campbell's tomato soup can. It is interesting to think that an artist could possibly take on an attribute like a mustache in order to get a commercial. Maybe because Surrealism was more of a group activity, more of a holdover of older avant-garde activity, in which case Dalí depended on this historical group activity to separate himself from, becoming a celebrity. I think Pop and Warhol functioned differently. I think with Pop, an artist like Warhol could build a type of autonomy (the Factory) using commercial strategies to produce a figure or persona.

FIA: But Dalí inserted himself within the larger world by being flamboyant, acting this celebrity; whereas Warhol constructed a self-fabricated situation, an actor bringing a dysfunctional collective together for business-art.

KELLEY: I think we are saying something similar. Warhol draws from the very process of commercialism, making it into a personal production, producing a mimicry of the commercial industry. Just the quality, the speed, the variation, all based on mechanical production, whereas with Dalí the paintings operate as paintings. With Warhol there seems to be a process of negation, which is also a process of energy. I think this brings him closer to the objects he is producing. There's no difference at times when you have a representation of a Warhol, or a representation of Warhol doing ---? I think that's how it is achieved. When I see Salvador Dalí, when I see him being mediated, I think it is him as an artist doing a commercial. Warhol is horrible to watch in a commercial—for me Warhol *is* a commercial.

FIA: Dalí wrote several auto-biographies, like *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*. He recounts his life from different glamorous angles, step by step, month by month, day by day, this overly grotesque focusing on his life, in a way you don't hear from someone like Warhol. Dalí takes this classical trope of being the artist to such an extreme.

KELLEY: I don't know a huge amount about Dalí; I haven't read that much.

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FIA: OK, so another example is Sturtevant—her public persona, well, it's not really comparable to the Warhol discussion.

KELLEY: She, yeah, um it's very different. I think of Warhol's objects as sort of submissive, so they become social. She was much more aggressive with her objects. For me, they are definitely social objects, but there is a quality of attraction/repulsion, then attraction again. Does that make sense?

FIA: Yeah, totally. Sort of like "autistic" objects.

KELLEY: Autistic?

FIA: In the book *Thinking in the Pictures* by a woman who is autistic who designs slaughterhouses for cattle. The book describes being autistic, how she had to learn regular social gestures, interactions, and facial expressions which she didn't know automatically. How to appear normal.

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FIA: Can I say now, I have another thing... How about the concept of form and content? It seems like in your work form and content keep sliding places. It seems you're purposefully shifting one's expectation of them, so the form is actually doing the job and the content is the use or backdrop...

KELLEY: I really didn't learn modes of forms or content and stuff.

FIA: Like in the chocolate painting? Content would be a strike in the '60s, the form would have something to do with chocolate? I guess the form would be about medium and content would be about something that you read in.

KELLEY: I was never able to distinguish the two.

FIA: In the end the idea was like, oh, this is political art! This is a civil rights strike. Once I become invested in the work I see that the riot image itself is the least political part of the work, if one now can divide an image up in more or less political parts.

KELLEY: There are a lot of things going on in the *Black Star Press* image. For instance, in selecting the image I

noticed three typical gay icons: the cop, the black guy, and, if you look closely, a sailor.

FIA: Playing off the village people...

KELLEY: I bring this up because it's how I think an image represents itself. Most people seem to focus only on the black/white binary of the cop and the protestor in the *Black Star* image. I think this is how an art object represents itself as well. It is like it becomes a stereotype of itself in order to represent.

FIA: If one asks how efficient this is, again it precludes politics. I don't want to use the word politics. If you're gonna talk about efficiency, then you have to talk about operational artworks. One ought to pull back that whole productive mode.... once you ask these questions, you are in this mode of inserting something from the outside, that one thinks can be measured back onto the outside, if it is political or not, parameters of criticality. It's not about measuring efficiency, it is somewhere else.

KELLEY: What do you think it is?

FIA: Well, I am not going to say!

KELLEY: I am not sure if I follow you; I might be a little lost.

FIA: Talking in terms of efficiency, a measure of HOW political it is, these questions are not relevant to ask. You can't separate these questions out.

KELLEY: There are certain artworks that purport to function politically within a context, and I'm not sure how one would evaluate its success. Maybe the gesture of political activity goes a long way.

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FIA: What would a rehab for artists look like?

KELLEY: What are they rehabbing toward? !!!

