



Bill T Jones and OpenEnded Group
Still from *Ghostcatching*, 1999
Image courtesy of Bill T. Jones, Shelley Eshkar, and Paul Kaiser

Index/Sarah Lewis

ANDREA DOUGLAS

BEAUTY SHOP, A SATURDAY AFTERNOON IN MAY. Waiting for my appointment, I flip open the current *Vogue* magazine. In the “People Are Talking” column, I’m surprised and delighted to see a photo of the woman I’d been assigned to write about for this column — Sarah Lewis. She’s sitting in the Yale University office of one of her mentors, Robert Farris Thompson. The note on her rapid rise in several realms confirms what I’d already sensed about this young curator, writer and art critic: she is going places — many places — with high velocity style and grace!

Considering her numerous activities, one wonders when she sleeps and during one of our conversations, she admitted that sleep is, at times, hard to come by. She serves on Harvard University’s Board of Directors; is director of Expressive Rights, a program of TruthAIDS; and is a member of President Obama’s art policy committee. This summer, she is on deadline to complete a number of major projects including a book on Kehinde Wiley for Rizzoli (we were emailing each other just prior to her meeting the artist for an interview), her dissertation for the Ph.D. in art history from Yale, and the installation of the exhibition *The Dissolve*, which she co-curates with Daniel Belasco, assistant curator at the Jewish Museum, for SITE Santa Fe’s Eighth International. Since its inception in 1995, SITE Santa Fe’s mission has been to bring the global contemporary dialogue to the Southwest. Curators of past exhibitions have included Francesco Bonami, Rita Martinez, Robert Storr and, most recently, Klaus Ottman, the Robert Lehman Curator at the Parrish Art Museum.

Lewis has held curatorial positions at the Tate Modern, London and the Museum of Modern Art, New York. She has published articles in *Art in America* and written essays for various exhibition catalogues, including the 2007 Venice Biennial. Her relationships with artists, curators and policy makers alike certainly establish her as a cultural arbiter with a broad reach. This aspect interested me, and my interview focused on her role as a shaper of ideas that impact both studio practice and the nature of exhibition.

Because of our schedules, our exchanges were primarily via email and text message and, in keeping with Sarah’s interest in the medium of the moment, I am presenting her answers to my questions in the form I received them:

Hi Andrea!

Yes, it’s such a hectic time over here between now unpacking and deadline. I hope you’re enjoying a great holiday weekend.



Sarah Lewis,
co-curator, *The Dissolve*

I’ve answered your questions below:

1. What class do you teach at Yale?

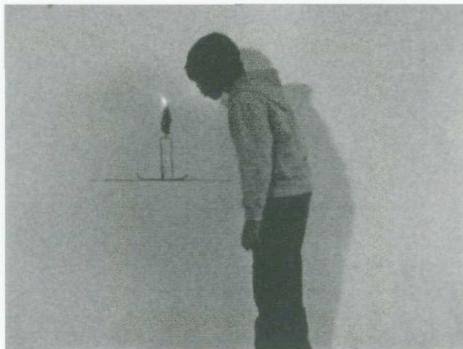
For two years I taught the graduate seminar, Critical Theory for Artistic Practice at Yale University School of Art. It intentionally had a broader than usual scope, focusing around seminal works by artists, theorists and writers from James Baldwin to Harold Bloom, Judith Butler to George Kubler, Wassily Kandinsky, and Richard Powell. But it also provided an opportunity for this discussion of artistic theory, gender, and transnational studies to happen in direct relationship to the conversation about the student’s visual practice. I wanted them to be able to study this world as a sphere from which they can chart their own tangent. It was meant for 12 MFA students; the first year’s enrollment had over 30.

2. How would you describe contemporary art practice? Whose work do you find interesting?

Thelonious Monk’s statement, “A genius is he [or she] who is most himself” applies to more than musicians. Everyone’s artwork is a piece of who they are, so it’s all of interest on a fundamental level. I’ve had the good fortune to write on a number of artists’ work — Mark Bradford, Lyle Ashton Harris, Leslie Hewitt, Whitfield Lovell (for both SCAD and for his upcoming Pomegranate book), Mickalene Thomas, Kehinde Wiley (for the *Art in America* article and now for his upcoming Rizzoli publication). Curating the 2010 SITE Santa Fe Biennial has given me the chance to work with many more, such as Kara Walker, Bill T. Jones, Robert Pruitt, Berni Searle, William Kentridge, Robin Rhode. It has been an honor to work with each one.



William Kentridge
History of the Main Complaint, 1996
35mm film transferred to DVD; sound; 5 minutes 50 seconds
Edition: No. 5 of 10
Courtesy of Ilene and Michael Salcman



Robin Rhode
Kid Candle from
"Memories of
Childhood," 2009
Super 8mm
transferred to DVD;
1 minute 3 seconds
Courtesy of the artist
and Perry Rubenstein
Gallery, New York.



Berni Searle
About to Forget, 2005
Three-channel video
projection on 35mm
cinemascope film, sound
3 minutes
Courtesy of Michael
Stevenson, Cape Town.

Lewis' answer to the first question suggests a hybrid approach to visual culture that recognizes the non-linear use of history in the daily practice of 21st-century artists. Her readings' seemingly antithetical nature — Bloom vs. Butler for instance — cause her students to consider the dichotomy between pure aesthetics and social politics. Ultimately, however, such polarities are only theoretic guideposts that artists should use to divine and cultivate new expressive nodes. After all, as Lewis points out, "one cannot push past the technology of the soul. Our humanity informs all of our activities."

The sensibility that informs her teaching appears to unify the ideas explored in *The Dissolve*, which includes three historical

videos and works by 26 contemporary artists. Together, these two elements describe what the curators call the bifocal lens of contemporary art. Although primarily interrogating the experimental nature of video, the exhibition also includes painting and photography to emphasize the "remixing and recombining of the familiar and the strange." The aim is to "revitalize old media, creating compelling new stories that probe social histories and personal narratives."

I asked Lewis to describe the quintessential moment in curating *The Dissolve* and she answered, "There isn't one moment that typifies the experience — and frankly, that's what makes it so wonderful!" Remaining open to experience seems to be the mantra that Lewis lives by. Faced with multiple options, she is enjoying every aspect of her journey. So what's next on her horizon? A book based on her Ph.D. dissertation on the 19th century, Circassian beauties of Russia who wore their hair in the style that has now become known as the big "Afro."

Andrea Davis, Ph.D., is curator of collections and exhibitions at the University of Virginia Art Museum.

Moving Pictures

2010 SITE Santa Fe Biennial

KISSETTE BUNDY

IF THERE IS ANY QUESTION about the trajectory of contemporary art, *The Dissolve*, SITE Santa Fe's Eighth International Biennial, has the answer. Even the soul bearers cannot escape the connective tissue and muscle of modern life: technology.

On view are 26 works that exemplify the role of technology in the creation and presentation of modern and contemporary art. Curated by Sarah Lewis (see profile) and art historian Daniel Belasco, the show explores visual arts and dance augmented by

the kinetic qualities and technology of film, music and mixed-media installation.

The 15,000-square-foot exhibition space, designed by U.K. architect David Adjaye, is a mélange of new work and antecedents of the moving image art form. Historical context is repeated in the varied venues, which range from the small-scale closeness of the storefront nickelodeon to the theater space of the Cinerama to the more personal intimacy of the digital screen.

Animation and the digital transfer of representational and conceptual new works by both established and emerging artists of global reputation is a recurring theme, advancing the presentation model for traditional genres. The power of



The Dissolve, installation view



The Dissolve, installation view

Kara Walker (below)
National Archives Microfilm Publications
M999 Roll 34: Bureau of Refugees,
Freedmen and Abandoned Lands:
 1) *Six Miles from Springfield on the*
Franklin Road, 2009
 2) *Lucy of Pulaski, 2009*
 Video; sound;
 25 minutes 30 seconds
 Original music composed by
 Jason and Alicia Moran.
 Courtesy of the artist and
 Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

movement, in turn, heightened the tightly knit threads of culture, politics and history conveyed in the showcased works.

Personal narratives of South African artists Robin Rhode and William Kentridge are revealed in *Kid Candle* from “Memories of Childhood,” (2009) in the Super 8mm format and the 35mm film noir *History of the Main Complaint, 1996*. Both works use in some form the stop-action of either live performance or hand drawn animation employed in the historical benchmark exhibit of the show. *The Enchanted Drawing* (1900) is a one minute, 26 second film by the Edison Manufacturing Company, America’s first commercial film studio. Originally created with stop-action animation, the short film was intended for viewing through the freestanding Edison-manufactured kinoscope. The Rhode, Kentridge and Edison films were all transferred to DVD for the exhibition.

Ancestry and the medium of paper silhouettes form the foundation for South African Berni Serle and American Kara Walker. Sound is a core element in advancing the narrative of *About to Forget, 2005*, as Serle family photographs traced in silhouette on red crepe paper morph into a pool of blood flooding sparse grasslands and then pour into the form of another generation. Walker, known for her work in black-silhouette confronting issues of race and gender, acquires a darker dimension in *Lucy of Pulaski, 2009* when the figures are transformed into a video vaudevillian puppet show.

A featured highlight of the exhibition is the 10th reworking of the virtual dance *Ghostcatching* by dancer Bill T. Jones as a 3-D display. In collaboration with the OpenEnded Group, *Ghostcatching, 2010* uses motion-capture technology to transform Jones’s movements and rhythmic breathing into digitally manipulated streams of light and accompanying sound. With computer-generated drawings on display, a live performance was presented during the opening week of the exhibition.

Virtual views of the work are excerpted at thedissolve.net. The real time, visceral experience runs until January 2, 2011.

A former professor of journalism and visual media at Hampton University, Kissette Bundy is a writer based in New Jersey.



Edison Manufacturing Company
The Enchanted Drawing, 1900
 35mm film transferred to DVD; 1 minute 26 seconds
 Producer: J. Stuart Blackton; Camera: Albert E. Smith
 The Library of Congress, Paper Print Collection, Washington, DC