

# CHLOË BASS CRUISING THE DYNAMICS OF RELATION

Formally, the only thing interesting about cruising for sex (in a perhaps by-gone sense) was its indetermining intervention (in the Cage sense) into the sorting of human interactions. By allowing one syntax (sex) to override other normative syntaxes (codes of hierarchies, transactional politeness, domesticated courtship, etc.) and thereby drive a given semantic field (types and classes of person), otherwise unthinkable interactions could come about. A banker in the bushes with a dock worker. A professor in a porno theater with a vagrant. These are the kind of interclass interactions Samuel Delany categorizes in his book *Times Square Red Times Square Blue* (1999) as “contact” sociality. This he opposes to “networking” sociality, those forms of interaction which would operate within and according to the rules of particular syntaxes of given social groupings.

As easy as it might be to position Chloë Bass’ work in alignment with the task of imagining the kind of “contact” valorizing institutions Delany envisions at the end of his book, Bass’ project lies elsewhere. She presents us instead with a much murkier situation in which “contact” and “networking” are all but indistinguishable. Crucially, sex is the only thing explicitly off-limits in the open call for participation in this first chapter of *The Book of Everyday Instruction*. For Bass, the problem of this confusion of ways of being together precedes sex. For Bass, as worked through in *The Bureau of Self-Recognition* (2011-2013), the first question is the relation to the first other: one’s self.

Let's turn our attention to the culmination of the *Bureau* for a moment. What became squirmingly apparent as the subject matter of the show and book were the complex narcissistic dynamics at play in social practice and recent participatory arts at large. Videos depicting individuals variously describing their fields of expertise, visitors gazing into a vanity mirror while performing one of Bass' self-recognition exercises, indeed the entire quasi-therapeutic conceit of the project, seemed to work as a kind of narcissism-provoking ruse not unlike so many instances of self-help or social media, but in this case, with no form of output but the cold light of the gallery. But beyond such an exterior oriented self-reflexivity, and leading us back to the current body of work, the *Bureau* also included the series of photos entitled "Practice of the Daily." Here, the question of narcissism appears in its illegibility to a viewer. That is, a series documenting everyday scenes and objects that contain some form of investment for their photographer, but for a viewer remain empty. Narcissism laid bare in its incommunicability, legible as such by their place in the overall discourse of the exhibition.

If the *Bureau* invited us to occupy the coolly reflexive position of the analyst, *you + me together* offers something significantly more complex – inviting even, let's say, counter-transference. The constellation of works that make up the show offer a constant push and pull of intimacy and distance. Lost in the digital visual plentitude of a languidly outstretched arm (here we require the distinction between an experience invoking primary as opposed to egotistical narcissism) we stutter upon the photo within the photo in the subject's hand (the gap of marking an unsharable personal investment now legible in the image itself). Lost in that recursive vertigo of the images within images (a quotation suggested by the artist: "Vertigo as a symptom of profound attraction. An excess of desire.") we stutter against each print's descriptive photo mate. And lost in the meta-poetics of the gap between image and description, we stutter onto the various quasi-sociological presentations of data punctuating the diptychs.

Though constructed from traces of Bass' casual encounters throughout Cleveland, the setup of the space, the primacy of the photo-diptychs, the sensual weight of the images' materiality, reveal that ultimately we, her viewers, are now the primary object, the ones being cruised. Roland Barthes states in *The Pleasure of the Text*:

Does writing in pleasure guarantee – guarantee me, the writer – my reader's pleasure? Not at all. I must seek out the reader (must "cruise" him [sic]) without knowing where he [sic] is. A site of bliss is then created. It is not the reader's person that is necessary to me, it is this site: the possibility of a dialectics of desire, of an unpredictability of bliss: the bets are not placed, there can still be a game.

If the utopia of cruising was always already also the utopia of narcissism, personal or impersonal, Bass suggests something else altogether: a dynamics of relation, a dancing of position, an erotics of unending sequence.

— Bill Dietz

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Bill Dietz was born in 1983 in Bisbee, Arizona and has been based in Berlin since 2003. He is a composer, writer, the artistic director of Ensemble Zwischenöne, and co-chair of Music/Sound in Bard College's MFA program. With Woody Sullender he co-founded and edits *Ear / Wave / Event*.