

Galerie Buchholz
17 East 82nd Street
New York, NY 10028

Lutz Bacher

The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview

9 December 2021

– 5 February 2022

Press Release

I could have a thousand pictures and I would still be going nowhere. It should be that more pictures would tell you more but what happens is they all tell you less and less. I mean... here's one, and here's another one and here's another one and who the hell is this guy? Are these all the same person?¹

In 1976 Lutz Bacher was approached to be interviewed for a volume of artist interviews. At that time she was a young artist, who had started working under this masculine-sounding, German-sounding pseudonym a few years prior. An artist interview presented a problem for her, if traditionally conceived – it would entail a dissection of the artist's interiority and motives, the interviewer using her words to “clarify” her work. Lutz rejected that premise. Instead, she opted to conduct an interview with herself, not about her practice or her sensibility, but about an interest of hers: Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged lone assassin of President John F. Kennedy, whose shadowy associations, contradictory motives, spurious paper trails, and all-too-convenient death haunt the collective memory of this formative national trauma, and whose story continues to vex skeptics of the official narrative to this day.

The resulting work, “The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview,” is an 18-page photcollaged interview, initially made as paste-ups mixing snippets of questions and answers written by Lutz with myriad photocopies of Oswald's face. From these, Lutz derived photostatic prints – a technique favored in legal contexts at the time for its direct relation to original documents, a reproduction with the truth-claim of its referent. A direct photostat appears as a “negative,” white on black, from which a “positive” can then be derived. Lutz produced both, and considered them new, unique iterations of the work, either equal to or even superseding the paste-ups in their primacy. The choice of Oswald as the work's ostensible subject, however, pits photostatic truth against one of the great examples of uncertainty in images: debates persist as to whether this or that picture of Oswald has been doctored, with independent researchers spending years analyzing the grainy shadows of Oswald's face – in search of what, exactly?

The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview outlasted the invitation that prompted it (the volume of interviews was never published), and looking at the work today, it seems to me an overture to Lutz's lifelong project. In Oswald, Lutz would find something like a cypher for her own conspicuously displaced subjecthood, and an example of how unknowability can provoke desire, intrigue, and speculation. In the Interview, she focuses on theories of Oswald having body doubles, maybe even getting fully swapped out during his two-year defection to the Soviet Union – an eccentric theory even among JFK truthers, but one which might bear relevance to Lutz's own persona. How many Lutzes were there, really? What can an image tell you about a person, if anything? How are myths made?

In the following decades, Lutz would reiterate The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview in different formats, including not only the photostats, but also as live multimedia performances in the '80s (the recorded version

¹ Lutz Bacher, “The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview,” 1976-78

took place at Art Demos / Q Novelties, San Francisco, on 18 July 1984) and digital screencapture video in the '90s. In the performances, Lutz recreates the interview by playing the Questions and Answers off dueling tape players, each read in her own voice, while transparencies of Oswald's many faces project on a screen behind her. In 1998, she recorded her computer screen as she zoomed and scrolled through hi-res scans of the Interview, an early Mac cursor hand dragging through ever more delirious snippets of information. The Interview appeared in many of Lutz's later shows, such as her PS1 survey in 2009, where the positives had their own room, and at Kunsthalle Zürich in 2013-14, where the negatives appeared on a wall intermixing various works, superimposing this experiment of image and text upon others. Reflecting on the piece in her notes from 2001, she sees this reiterative chain as constituting the work itself:

What I think now is this – the LHO represents the chain from collage to pasteup to repro to performance to hypertexte...²

Later, in notes from 2010, she elaborated on the stakes of this chain, for its erosion of the idea of authentic originals:

Another note on diff versions of LHO – [...] how LHO was also done as a performance etc — so there is an aspect of this copying threads etc that “collectors” + etc don't wish to deal with — as it for them clouds the certain “object” — which of course is what interests me —³

This exhibition gathers all versions of the Interview together for the first time, including the positive and negative photostats, the performance and video versions, materials from the 1984 performance, its appearances in her publications, and the pasteups, which are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art nearby, and can be viewed by appointment at the Museum's Study Room for Photographs. It is the first solo exhibition of Lutz Bacher fully conceived in her absence.

This show was made to accompany the public opening of The Betty Center, the archive of Lutz Bacher. It takes its shape in response to what the archive holds. Lutz designated her archive an artwork in its own right in 2010, and she envisioned it as a publicly accessible resource. It can now be visited by appointment at 57 E 82nd Street.

The Betty Center hinges on 284 3-ring binders, corresponding to works and exhibitions made by Lutz between 1975 and 2019, containing handwritten notes, correspondence, reference materials, working documents, and other ephemera. Lutz constantly revised the binders, returning to the binders of earlier works to add new reflections (such as those quoted above), as well as to dig up old, unrealized ideas anew. The binders are an essential resource for future scholarship on Lutz Bacher, and a striking gesture of posthumous disclosure from an artist who was so often elusive in her lifetime.

– Nick Irvin

² Lutz Bacher, The Betty Center, “The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview” project binder: notes from 14 August 2001

³ Lutz Bacher, The Betty Center, “The Lee Harvey Oswald Interview” project binder: notes from 10 January 2010