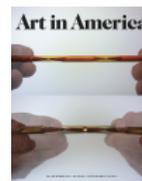


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IN THE STUDIO: KRISTIN LUCAS

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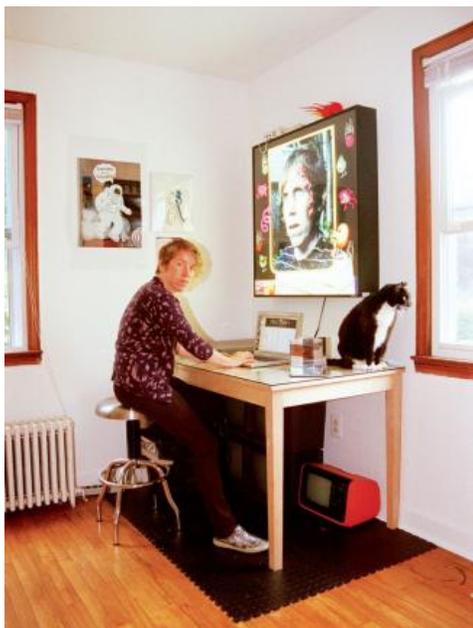


by Courtney Fiske

On Oct. 5, 2007, in an Alameda County, Calif., courthouse, Kristin Sue Lucas became Kristin Sue Lucas. The redundancy of this "name change" was precisely the point, reflecting the artist's desire to reload her identity as one would a webpage, filling the screen with information at once the same and somehow changed. Later that month at Postmasters Gallery, New York, Lucas debuted "Refresh," an installation of legal documents, newspaper clippings and sundry portraits—screen shots, inkjet prints, video images on monitors and more—depicting the artist before and after the judge's decree. Such slippages between human and digital selves pervade the artist's nearly two decades of work. Imposing the Web's parameters on the everyday, Lucas plumbs the precariousness of identity, both bodily and psychic, in the Internet age.

A transplant to New York from Davenport, Iowa, Lucas earned her BFA from Cooper Union in 1994. After graduation, she stayed in the city while working as an assistant to multimedia artist Tony Oursler and undertook several short residencies at the Experimental Television Center in Owego, N.Y. Availing herself of the Center's trove of analog video equipment, Lucas developed a low-key, catholic approach to media, never hewing to a signature style. In early videos like *Host* (1997), the artist stars as a distraught persona adrift in a vague, panoptic digital network. A 2007 series of backlit Duratrans photographs—*Travel Advisory*, *Slowerfaster* and *Seasonal Fruit*—finds Lucas centered in the frame, her face blank and beset by a cankerous rash. Graphics from video games, piled up like so much electronic junk, surround the portraits. If Western culture has long perceived the body as a necessary, if inconvenient, receptacle for the mind, Lucas shows how digital tools put the very nature of that body in question. In the often hermetic techno-landscapes she constructs, the sense of disembodiment fostered by digital media threatens the artist's

Kristin Lucas in her Beacon, N.Y. studio. Her Duratrans photograph *Travel Advisory*, 2007, is installed in a lightbox above the desk.



physical integrity in turn.

While Lucas is no Luddite, neither does she indulge in a naive technophilia. The cutting-edge, she recognizes, is always in the process of becoming dated, and her work melds the familiar with the faddish. Here, conventional mediums like video, sculpture and performance meet QR codes, iPhone apps and augmented reality software. Currently a resident at the Eyebeam Art + Technology Center in New York, Lucas has turned to Android tablets, seeking ways to break from their given vocabulary of swipes, pinches and taps. *Tablet Tumbler*, her latest project with Joe McKay, her frequent collaborator since 2012, is a human-scaled wooden cable spool with six such devices affixed. As the viewer rolls the structure along, the tablets—sensitive to changes in speed, direction and tilt—record simultaneous views of the room. As is typical in Lucas's work, references are eclectic and include pre-cinematic experiments, filmstrips, Google street views and programming loops. The finished piece, to be shown next year at Postmasters, will yield videos that both order and destabilize our perception of space.

Lucas and I spoke on a humid June afternoon at her home and studio in Beacon, N.Y. Fresh off a semester of teaching studio art at Bard College in nearby Annandale-on-Hudson, she mused on immateriality, error and the critical space that digital media afford.

COURTNEY FISKE How did you arrive at an interest in video and digital media?

KRISTIN LUCAS Back in Iowa, my access to art was limited. At Cooper Union, I had Hans Haacke as my first teacher. His influence was crucial: he made me consider every detail of what I was doing and how important it could potentially be. Another of my teachers, media artist Perry Hoberman, showed me how the computer could function as both a programmable interface and a performative tool. He was a creative producer of sorts for Laurie Anderson, and through her work I saw that you could put together a story. My interest in narrative developed further in response to the work of Michael Smith and Joe Gibbons, whose videos Tony Oursler screened in class.

FISKE Did you find yourself drawn to one medium in particular?

LUCAS No, not really. I always chose the form that could best communicate my ideas. In general, I gravitate away from the monotony and stillness of so much work that exists strictly on a

computer screen. There the rectangular frame is so persistent that I am compelled to destabilize it. Video can make me restless for much the same reason. As images and data become increasingly mobile, it seems anachronistic to be tethered to a contained rectangle. So I engage a diversity of media, taking my work off the screen and making art that comments on screen space without necessarily being bound by it.

That said, one of my early works was *Between a Rock and a Hard Drive* [1998], a Web project for the Dia Center for the Arts. This was back in the late '90s, when the Internet still seemed a formless, anarchic space. My computer at the time was painfully slow, so much so that I almost couldn't experience the Web. I spent more time waiting for things to load than performing actual tasks, and I sensed that this was the case for other users too. So I created a series of generic waiting areas for the Web, using pictures of a laundromat, a hospitality suite, a parking lot, places like that. Shown onscreen around each picture was the interface for navigation—a skewed, quasi-functional keyboard that produced sounds instead of text. I set up a FAQ page that, to my surprise, hundreds of people wrote in to. In the answers, I played with the language of the computer and the fluidity between virtual and physical space. The piece was very much about my experience of the Web as an echo chamber of just "Hello? Hello?" You know, sounds bouncing and resonating, but never sticking to anything.

FISKE Many of your videos feature bodies that are diseased, decaying or otherwise compromised. The flesh always seems to be in jeopardy, as if its materiality can't square with the virtual experiences offered by digital media.

LUCAS Shifts in the mediascape change our perception and sense of being in the world. I remember calling EAI [Electronic Arts Intermix] in the late '90s, after they switched to an automated voice-menu system, and feeling very unsettled. As automated interfaces became more and more common, something of the personal fell away. The physical, embodied self seemed to be in danger of disappearing, as a fragmentary, distributed sense of self took hold. At the time, I was reading a lot of science fiction. Traveling internationally, I saw newsstands with magazine covers featuring images of female cyborgs. The language that was being used to describe computers seemed eerily similar to the language applied to women's bodies. On the one hand was the idea of constantly improving our technologies: packing more RAM into our computers or installing the latest software updates. On the other hand was the idea that the female body could be perfected or,

better yet, "upgraded" through cosmetic surgery. These two types of bodies—computer bodies and women's bodies—were becoming synchronous. That convergence was troubling.

Involuntary Reception [2000] condensed a lot of my thinking around these questions of the digital and its relation to the human body. The work existed as both a two-channel video installation and an online streaming video. When installed, the video appeared as both a moving image cast on the wall and a beam of light emanating from the projector. Standing in the room, you became attuned to the space between the projector and the wall-bound image. The seemingly immaterial process of transmission became a felt experience. Later, embedding the video online completely changed the work. At current Internet speeds, the effect would be imperceptible, but, at the time, the character's voice stuttered and froze as she attempted to deliver her monologue. As McLuhan quipped, the medium became the message.

FISKE Let's talk about the role of chance and error in your work. *Pyrotechnic Ghost* [2007], for example, is a video that came about by accident.

LUCAS As much as you make decisions about materials and form, it's the unanticipated results that are often most interesting. My process centers on being open to the unexpected and recognizing its value. For *Pyrotechnic Ghost*, I methodically went through all of the available effects in the graphics program Motion by Apple. One night, by accident, I added all of the effects at once, and they automatically center justified. On a whim I rendered them, and this breathing, spiritual figure emerged. It was a happy accident, this chance apparition on the screen.

When it comes to code and software, I'm really just an amateur. I presume that anyone who's involved in the back end of such things is an expert who aims to avoid mistakes, but I've always been interested in error and the critical space it creates. There's beauty in the glitch. It's a clink, a dissonance in the system. It reinserts traces of labor and production into something that would otherwise be seamless. It slows us down and gives us access by revealing virtual objects and images as humanly made or algorithmically generated, rather than magical or mystical. We understand error because, as humans, we're messed up too.

FISKE Digital tools are sort of like black boxes, aren't they? There's a large element that's opaque to the user. You provide an input, the technology performs a nebulous operation, and an output emerges.

LUCAS Certainly. When you use digital tools, your choices are written by other people. You have to work with what you're given, and entry-level programs tend to constrain the user to limited presets. In 2001, as a resident artist at the World Trade Center, I made a video called *5 Minute Break*. It's in part a critique of the software that I used to make it. The program allowed you to select an avatar of a young woman or a young man. You know, very fit people with skin-tight clothing, very sexualized. You could adjust certain features in order to give a template identity to your character, though other aspects were fixed, like breast size. These assumptions about gender and ideal bodies were embedded in the program.

I'm working a lot right now with Android tablets, trying to find ways to use them outside the conventions established through various corporate media. Apple, Sprint and Google, for example, are constantly patenting swipes and other gestures that we use to navigate screens. The more we rely on technology to interface with the world, the more we adopt behaviors tied to codes that are written for us and that we conform to. These codes may make our lives easier, but they also have troubling implications, as if someone were "writing" the body. It's a question that concerns me: at what point is my body mine and my actions my own? Of course, gestures have always been social—as humans, we mirror each other to understand each other—but it's interesting when technology gets involved. There's a lot of space there for control. I want to abandon some of that structure, to operate these tools in ways that aren't so preordained. So I'll do things like push the image way off the screen or set up the tablet to run programs at random.

FISKE Another thing that's worrisome about digital media is how perfect and seductive they can be. While analog photographs may have traces of process or grain, digital photographs are often presented as blown-up, seamless expanses. Digital prints are commonly 300 dpi or more, with no pixels apparent to the unaided eye, even at great enlargement.

LUCAS Grain and pixels are alike, actually, and impose similar constraints. Though, as you suggest, we are seeing for the first time the disappearance of the pixel's edge in photographs of hyperreal resolution, where facture and the labor of making are effaced. Such images feel like blockages in your visual field. Even so, they are not entirely impermeable. For instance, digital photographs contain metadata that can be manipulated with tools and code. The image is no longer simply a surface: it's layered with

information. There's a space there for criticality, albeit of a different sort than analog media provides.

FISKE Obsolescence is a theme that frequently comes up in discussions about new media. Generally, it denotes the loss of certain analog tools: discontinued film stocks, photo papers and the like. But digital media, too, are constantly in the process of becoming obsolete.

LUCAS Absolutely. I came of age in the 1990s, when VHS was still a standard recording and storage format. It took a while, but gradually other formats replaced it; first the storage diskette and the DVD, and then just little chip cards and thumb drives and sending everything to a cloud. In the rush to find the best storage possibility, there's the legacy of all the stuff that's left in the wake: an ever-expanding body of relics and lost data. Browser and operating system changes mean that digital files quickly become incompatible. Programs fall out of use, links are broken and servers go down. Sustaining so many conflicting systems becomes impossible.

My studio is full of old machines that still work. The clutter is a by-product of the fact that I've made art for so many years. In my work, I try to put these technologies in conversation. I'll process animated GIFs with an analog video synthesizer, or apply colorizers and keyers from the 1970s to downloaded stock footage. I'm interested in the movement between these different generations of tools, in bringing them together in a space of play.

FISKE *More Melting* [2008], a collection of VHS tapes cast in wax to form candles, seems to distill many of these concerns.

LUCAS With *More Melting* I wanted to blur medium boundaries and pose a question about what video could be. I cast old computer monitors too, like the Mac Classic I have in my studio. I did experiments with wax to try to make the candles melt over a specific length of time. I wanted the work to reflect the fact that VHS tapes came with preset recording times: T-10s, T-30s, T-60s and so on. The candles were accepted into a few film festivals, where they were lit and melted over time. In effect they became fluid, sculptural videos, turned on with a match. It was a piece as much about the moving image as it was about the vanishing of VHS and the legacy of discarded formats.

FISKE Let's talk a bit about *The Sole Ripper*, your 2012 project for Rhizome.

LUCAS For that piece, I used a simple tool, SketchUp, to create a fictional roller-coaster-shaped walkway for an empty lot that I found on Google Maps. I scaled the design at 1:132 and tiled across 352 pages. File conversions and software limitations produced a lot of errors, but I was interested in how those mistakes embedded themselves in the work. It's in those breakages and ruptures that a conversation with the viewer can start. I often use low-tech tools and basic processes in order to include the viewer in a discussion about the work's making: to leave open the possibility that he or she might, in a very basic way, understand how each piece comes to be.

Sole Ripper is clearly one instance where I tried to translate something about the making of the work into its form. It was strenuous and tedious to make, it's strenuous and tedious to look through, and it would be strenuous and tedious to navigate as a realized structure. The task of viewing it is inconvenient and thankless, as the image is broken up page by page. Viewers are denied a total view, unless they take the time to print out all 352 pages and tape them together, which, in itself, would produce a composite too large to see in an average room. They're forced to scroll through the work vertically from top to bottom, similar to the way a filmstrip runs through a projector or a roller coaster drops. I wanted the experience of the work to be expansive, to make you feel small in the midst of something large. Although it exists primarily in a compressed, digital form, I aimed to invoke a broader space.

FISKE Your work orbits around digital media, yet it never seems to settle on any one kind of technology or set of issues. What appeals to you about occupying an in-between space?

LUCAS I like the viewer to meet me at the interstice, where expectations are not quite clear. Often, my work involves more than one medium or a mode of performing the digital. Last year, for instance, I did a piece at MoMA called *Durational Aesthetics*. On a large screen, I projected an image of a headless colonial statue that I found online. I used Open Graphics Library to overlay the image with 3-D geometric forms that slowly rotated and faded in and out. Next to the projection, I performed with a microphone, blowing on it to produce a steady howl. It's a meditative piece, but it's also exhausting to perform. It wears my body out as I do it, and the awareness of my breath slows down the audience. The work doesn't just rest on the screen: it's activated further.

The first piece that I made after leaving Cooper Union was a modified Mr. Potato Head. I covered its body with blinking LEDs

and placed it on the floor, overlapping a cast resin shape that resembled both a pool of vomit and a superhero's cape. The LEDs would glow like some strange electronic rash. A subject on the verge of vomiting and complete empowerment: that's the kind of character I always made.

Works by Kristin Lucas will appear in the group exhibitions "Signals Now," Rochester Contemporary Art Center, N.Y., Oct. 3-Nov. 10, and "2014 Eyebeam Annual Showcase," Eyebeam Art + Technology Center, New York, Jan. 16-Feb. 1, 2014.

Courtney Fiske is a writer based in New York.

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