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Colin Perry, *Conversations Pieces – Éric Baudelaire interviewed by Colin Perry*, Art Monthly, No. 456, May, 2022

Conversation Pieces

The Franco-American artist and filmmaker discusses his use of the interview format in his films as a means both of starting a conversation and of reflecting on past events in order to shed light on the present.

Eric Baudelaire interviewed by Colin Perry

When There Is No More Music to Write, 2022, film

Colin Perry: Your films are often built around interviews, albeit presented in oblique or aleatory ways, with artists, filmmakers, musicians and other individuals. While collaboration is arguably evident in all film and cinema by necessity, you take this to a further level in your work. The conversations you have had with Japanese filmmaker Masao Adachi, in your first major film work, *The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi, and 27 Years without Images*, 2011, influenced your own filmmaking at a deep level. That film centres on both Adachi's extraordinary filmmaking and his activities as a central part of the Japanese Red Army operating out of Lebanon. In your current work, *When There Is No More Music to Write*, 2022, you interleave the stories of the avant-garde composer Alvin Curran and an incident related to a political kidnapping by the Italian Red Brigades in 1978. Even this interview that we are having right now is also, of course, another extension of film as conversation.

Eric Baudelaire: Yes, this is officially the first interview I have had with somebody about this new film. It is always an interesting moment because people tend to think my films are highly thought-out prior to being made, partly because of the way I talk about them afterwards. But in reality, I figure out what the film is once it is finished and I begin talking about it in public after screenings. It is a big mess when I am making it. While editing, the film is struggling to find a way of expressing itself in ways that I don't have words for.

Your films are encounters with subjects – including Curran or Adachi – that lead you in unexpected directions. This is quite different to films or artworks where the end point is largely resolved before the work begins.

For me, these people are like a lighthouse on the horizon. They are the direction I'm going in. The film itself is the result of figuring out a way to get there. My films are responses to problems that I am trying to figure out, including problems of how to make a film. Each film tries to solve the problem that I have, or something I don't know how to do. A lot of the conceptual work in the filmmaking simply has to do with preparing for the discussions I will have with these individuals, including a great deal of research. Perhaps the most important part of the work is this preparation, so that the conversation goes in interesting directions. Obviously, it helps tremendously that the people who become the subjects of my films are gifted storytellers.

When There Is No More Music to Write, 2022, film

How did you settle on Curran as the main subject of your current film? How does his work and life relate with your previous interests? Clearly, he is a committed member of the musical Avant Garde – like Adachi in a film context. And then there's this parallel story that you tell of the Red Brigades and acts of political violence, which relates to Adachi's story, as well as to your film *Also Known as Jihadi*, 2017, which tells the true story of a young man who travelled from France to Syria allegedly to join IS or Daesh.

My initial interest was the Red Brigades in Italy. I went on a residency in Rome in order to develop a project about a florist whose car tyres had been punctured the night before the kidnapping and subsequent murder of the former prime minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades. This florist would normally park his truck on an intersection where Moro was going to be kidnapped the following day. But he wasn't able to go there that day because all four tyres of his van had been punctured the night before. The organiser of the kidnapping, Mario Moretti, later revealed that he had asked one of the members of the Red Brigades to follow the florist home and puncture his tyres. They didn't want him to be killed in the crossfire. The Red Brigades went through this elaborate effort of sparing the life of the flower vendor on the very same day when they were to kill four members of Moro's escort and later coldly assassinate Moro himself. And of course, the murder of Moro precipitated the end of the Red Brigades, accelerating the demise of armed anti-capitalist struggle in Europe. This is the sort of historical anecdote that I find interesting, a poetic twist in the historical narrative: the convergence of great care taken to spare a florist, while committing a historical political blunder that led to the collapse of a revolutionary movement.

When I arrived in Rome in 2018 to work on this project, it was a dead end: it was the 40th anniversary of the kidnapping of Moro, and nobody wanted to talk about it. Or rather, everybody was talking about it, and the protagonists I wanted to talk to had been solicited by so many journalists that they were tired of talking. I hired a private detective to help locate the descendants of the flower vendor, who had died in the early 2000s. But things just didn't go the way I planned. Simultaneously I met an old acquaintance on the residency, Maxime Guitton, a music historian who was doing research in Curran's archive in Rome. Through conversations with Maxime, I developed an interest

'Faire avec (To do With)', installation view, CRAC Occitanie, Sète

in Alvin's trajectory as concomitant with this period of history. I was seeing parallels between the radicalism of the musical Avant Garde and the political Avant Garde. I have always been interested in the possibility that there is some kind of movement or connection between these avant gardes in the doxa of an era.

The format of this new film, which consists of three discrete episodic units of varied lengths, presents these lines of avant-garde political and artistic activity as running in parallel to one another, but never apparently converging. This does raise the question of how the political agency of the arts might relate to the more explicit agency of political violence, which is the ultimate tool of revolutionary groups. This idea of political violence is always there in your works, but it contrasts greatly with the gentle aspect of Curran's persona and work, his quiet and almost meditative radicalism. How do these relate?

Absolutely – there is nothing violent about Curran. In a way, of course, making this association between Curran and the Red Brigades is a bit of a stretch. Adachi had directly participated in both the cinematic revolution and the political revolution happening at the time. Curran was one degree separated from the political revolution, in the sense that he knew people who knew people who were probably involved. But I am not making associations in relation to the question of violence. I think about it as a question of radicalism. That is what interests me about the 1960s and 1970s. We had arrived at a point in the evolution of ideas that suggested that capitalist social democracy had reached a kind of limit. This led to revolutionary demands on the part of students and workers in many countries around the world and, in parallel, a similar radicalism characterised the quest of artists in numerous fields.

There was a feeling that we had arrived at the limit of something. This was true in music, the performative arts and in filmmaking.

When 'there's no more music to write', the Avant Garde makes itself redundant. And when radical political action fails, as with the Red Brigades, a sort of nihilism takes hold. Do you think this radicalism leads to a kind of nihilism?

I wouldn't use the word 'nihilism' for the art of the 1960s and 1970s. The experimentation reaches an end point, which leads to a tremendous amount of creativity and radical new forms. In the case of the music scene in Rome in the 1960s, the Musica Elettronica Viva collective emerged, founded by Curran, Frederic Rzewski and Richard Teitelbaum. They decided to push the limits beyond composition, beyond the traditional separation between performer and audience, beyond the conventional understanding of what an instrument is. And this led to a period of tremendous creativity. But at the same time, it was a dangerous period, because when you mess with the axiomatic limits of a form, you take risks. The very nature of artistic creation was put in danger, and the artists who went down this path risked their own identity as artists.

In the political world, activists are similarly pushing boundaries into zones of tremendous danger. And I don't just mean danger for themselves and for civilians who are caught up in this violence. I think there is a political danger on a theoretical level. Revolutionary movements accept an unpredictable level of violence as a necessity to move to the next phase. This next phase is theorised. When theory meets the reality of political space, it often turns out to be catastrophic. These are the moments that I'm interested in. Historically, this has led to disastrous political events, high levels of collateral damage, a backlash from the state, and a loss of support from the public and from the working class itself. Ultra-radicalised militants spin off into a zone that resembles nihilism in the sense that it is no longer attached to a true working-class or student movement. It moves with a certain velocity which is the velocity of a struggle in a vacuum. In the cases of the Japanese Red Army and the Red Brigades, it has led to very little, politically speaking.

I am interested in this history because I am the child of the generation that took these struggles into these dead ends. We are still living with the after-effects. I think we still are stuck in this post-1968 period to some extent, trying to find another solution to the lack of imagination and the tremendous violence of the system we live inside. We are confronted with the same theoretical problems as previous generations, because the system itself breeds a violence we wish to live without.

One reason your work resonates is that it tackles the conditions of our current socio-political reality. It has an urgency to it that isn't locked into a nostalgic or mournful recycling of the post-1968 moment. In art and theory, we have recycled revolutionary mourning for decades now. For me, the importance of your work comes from the way you approach these problems without this sense of entrapment. This might sound slightly grandiose, but your work helps to unpick parallels between historical and contemporary crises. A few years ago I saw your work *Also Known as Jihadi* in an exhibition in Belgium. Encountering that work then was to experience a direct address to our political present, especially after the 2015 attacks in Paris. At that time, Erika Balsom also wrote an essay on what she called the 'reality-based community' centred on new forms of observational documentary film that engaged with this new social and political reality. This observational element of your work is never at the expense of an understanding of the contingencies of how film is also a mediation of the real, or of the power relations inherent in representing individuals within the documentary heritage.

To respond to your first point first, I don't feel nostalgia when looking at the late 1960s. I think it is a logical historical period to look back to in the current moment, because we are yet again in a climax point requiring us to invent something new. It feels necessary to look back at previous revolutionary moments in the hope that we don't reproduce previous errors but also to find inspiration to invent new forms of struggle, a new way to exist together on this planet. It would be irresponsible to not look back.

When There Is No More Music to Write was also a way for me to close a cycle of films, starting with *The Anabasis* and following with *The Ugly One* and *Also Known as Jihadi*. While *The Anabasis* is very much about 1968, this film on Curran is about 1978 and the closing of a decade that culminates, symbolically, with Moro's kidnapping. It was important for me to conclude this cycle of 'revolutionary' films with Alvin's perspective on the possibilities of the present.

To go back to the question about your path to Curran, how did you approach the central position of music in *When There Is No More Music to Write*?

This was the first direct exploration of music in my films. Because I came to filmmaking as a photographer, my initial focus was visual. Language also became very important. My early films have very little diegetic sound and very little music. For a long time, I was somewhat suspicious of the use of music because I felt that you could make almost anything work in film with the right music. Music is overused in industrial cinema to create emotion. As a reaction to this, I was reluctant to use a lot of music in my films. Lately, I let go of this fear and became interested in how beautiful music can be. When Alvin appeared on the horizon I liked the idea of making a film about a musician as a way of placing music front and centre in the film. The film's editor, Claire Atherton, also took an enormous amount of pleasure in working with Alvin's music and his field recordings, which had been excavated from the depth of Alvin's messy archive by Maxime. The pleasure of

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The Ugly One, 2013, film

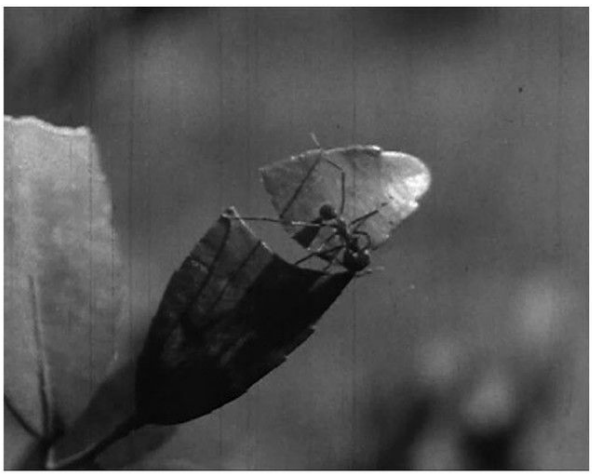
listening to this material was a huge part of the desire to make a film where music is the central subject. This film is a conversation between images, language, sounds and music.

You shot some of this film yourself in Rome with Super-8 film, while other parts consist of film and television archive footage. You have used Super-8 in earlier works, such as *The Anabasis*, while *Also Known as Jihadi* was a widescreen digital work. Can you talk a little bit about how you go about your choice of media and what sort of meanings you expect these to develop?

I wanted to create a material connection between *The Anabasis*, which was shot in Super-8, and this new film. So, I went around Rome filming places that were related to the story with a Super-8 camera, as I had also done in previous films made in Tokyo and Beirut. I use Super-8 partly because it gives visual information about a place, but leaves something a bit fuzzy or uncertain about the temporality of the image.

Your subjects often have a strong idea of what an artistic form should be. Adachi had developed a theory of radical landscape film called *fukeiron*, and Curran developed a complex understanding of compositional performance. There is, then, a renegotiation of their concerns in your work: for example, in *Also Known as Jihadi*, you take on *fukeiron* as a formal device; and in *When There Is No More Music to Write*, your film tackles the improvisational composition of Curran's work. How do you negotiate a position in relation to these potentially overbearing individuals?

I wanted this new film to be close to the spirit of Curran's music, and therefore it had to be less linear and more experimental. Curran is always experimenting with different kinds of material, finding things in the streets and using them as instruments. Working with Claire, with whom I had already edited several previous films, it became clear early on that just using my Super-8 footage wasn't going to work. So, I started to wander around archival television material in the same way you might wander around a city like a Situationist. There was a performative process to it. Often it was about finding archive material and seeing



When There Is No More Music to Write, 2022, film

The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi, and 27 Years without Images, 2011, film

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how Claire responded in a very intuitive way. It was joyful. A lot was left to chance, often using content unrelated to the subject, or perhaps intuitively related.

Also Known as Jihadi is very different. There is a certain seriousness that comes with the biographical nature of film. There was a responsibility to the individuals involved. There is also a gravity that comes with the endeavour of testing the viability of the so-called landscape theory in a serious way, as opposed to the referential or tongue-in-cheek manner in which I referred to it in previous films. And finally, there is the seriousness of the backdrop to the film: the November 2015 terrorist attacks in France and the backlash that followed.

With Alvin, even though the historical circumstances were very serious, there was a sense of freedom in the air, an almost childlike enthusiasm in the way he and his crew threw everything they knew out of the window and experimented. This inspired us to be playful and joyful, even though the film deals with some pretty heavy questions, including that of the Red Brigades. The freedom with which Alvin and his acolytes confronted 'the end of music' was very liberating. The word 'liberating' is key to understanding the film. To say 'there is no more music to write' is to set a limitation that will in turn generate new ideas. Alvin says that composing today is a nightmare because all the music ever made is available to a composer through sampling. But he also relishes the possibilities this opens up.

What are you working on at the moment?

I'm finishing up a film adapted from a 1922 play by Luigi Pirandello, *The Man with the Flower in his Mouth*. The play is about disease and living through the time that remains when you know that you are going to die. It is about a character who wanders around the streets, watching people at work, their daily occupations. He holds on to life by observing the reality that surrounds him. In the evening, because he's an insomniac, he goes to an all-night cafe next to a train station and he talks to strangers. I find this to be a very beautiful metaphor for art or for cinema: a desperate attempt to hold on to our life on this planet through the careful observation of the real.

The man has a disease, a form of cancer that used to kill you in a matter of weeks after appearing on your face, like a flower emerging from the mouth. The flower becomes a symbol for something that is at once beautiful and deadly. The film is built as a diptych, with a first part based on documentary images that I shot in a huge flower market in the Netherlands. We observe the working process inside an enormous, hyper-modern flower market. The flowers are grown in Africa, flown in refrigerated containers to be sold at auction, and then put back into aeroplanes to be sent halfway across the world again to be sold in shops. The second half of the film is an extended metaphysical conversation between the man with the flower in his mouth and a customer in a cafe late at night, adapted from the Pirandello play. This will be a single-screen work in the context of film festivals and so on, but it will also exist as a multi-screen installation for exhibition spaces. The flower scenes create a very immersive environment. But the film comes back down to a very intimate, linear conversation between these two men, and the scale of the installation reduces itself from five to three screens and then a single screen in the centre. It becomes a very intimate cinematic moment.

Eric Baudelaire and Alvin Curran's *When There Is No More Music to Write* is at Spike Island, Bristol from 28 May to 18 September.

Colin Perry is a senior lecturer in fine art at Arts University Bournemouth.

Also Known as Jihadi, 2017, film