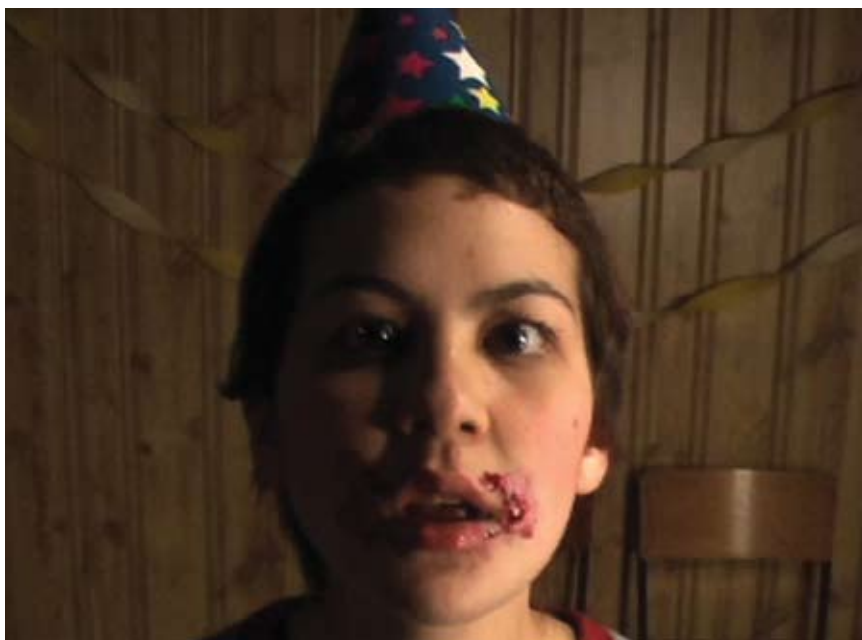




ALISON S.M. KOBAYASHI • VIDEOS

HALLWALLS 9.11.09 — 10.23.09





Given our collective fears concerning identity theft, it's amazing the things that we willingly give away. Go to any second hand store and you'll find PCs not quite wiped clean of data, photo albums still housing pictures, and yearbooks with scribbled intimacies. Thrift stores are a rich resource for artists working with found objects, and the shops in and around Buffalo are as inspiring as our legendary Grain Elevators. From sculptures made of bric-a-brac, to video remixes of old VHS tapes, appropriating and (re)presenting the found object is no longer novel, but has long since been accepted as a strategy in contemporary art.

It's not surprising then that when a young artist happened upon an answering machine complete with its original tapes at a Value Village in Mississauga, she saw it as an opportunity. An avid thrifter for most of her life, having accompanied her mother and sister on expeditions as a young girl, Alison S.M. Kobayashi had already made performance videos based on found objects. In 2003, while riding her bike along the Winston Churchill Boulevard QEW overpass on her way to work, she came across a note labeled "From: Alex, To: Alex." Three years later she translated the found letter into a video, imagining and performing each character referenced or alluded to by the author. In the letter Alex, who has just celebrated his 14th birthday, attempts



to arrange a sexual encounter between the two boys. "Remember, if you want head it's up to you. And I won't get offended if you say no," Kobayashi narrates, "but it'd be nice—LOL!"

But, Alex warns, all of this has to be kept "under wraps" because of his homophobic older brother whom, ironically, Kobayashi must perform in drag. Her depiction is a convincing one of a spitting, smoking, Nirvana-obsessed, tough guy who is both angry at the world and awkward in his own, spotty skin. While characters are often framed in tight close-ups (one sequence recalls Andy Warhol's 1964 film *Blow Job*, in which only the subject's facial expressions make clear the sex act occurring off-screen), occasionally multiple characters will simultaneously occupy the screen. When their mutual friend Vickki slips Alex the note during a sex-ed class, we are keenly aware that it is Kobayashi playing each role. Yet the action is so seamlessly edited that we are unfazed by the technology, and instead engrossed in the exchange. In *From Alex To Alex* (2006, 6min, video), each sequence of the letter is meticulously re-imagined by Kobayashi, whose attention to mise-en-scène—everything placed within the frame from costumes to props—and the direct camera address of her performance, make the translation of the letter both humorous and poignant. "If you're wondering," Alex confesses in a postscript at the end of the video, "I'm way more gay than



straight."

When Kobayashi discovered Dan Carter had left the cassette tapes in his answering machine, she realized the opportunities to expand upon this strategy were endless. She had been collecting answering machine cassettes for a few years, but something about Dan Carter's tapes seemed like a readymade script waiting to be performed. More complex in comparison, it "seemed that all of these different layers of his life were unraveling as the tape progressed," she explains. Unlike the narrative arc of a letter, answering machine cassettes offer a more fractured, non-linear structure. Even though she makes no edits to the tapes themselves and the soundtrack remains unaltered, Kobayashi wastes nothing; silence and pauses become randomly inserted scenes, while bursts of bleeps and electronic sounds on the tapes induce the rhythmic editing.

Except for Dan's brief outgoing message (with its humorous tag "Giddy-up!"), it is through the throaty voice of his fiancé that we enter his, or their, world. With each new message we are introduced to an extended cast of characters, again, all performed by Kobayashi—their children from previous marriages, divorce lawyers and real estate attorneys. The answering machine's outdated technology lends itself to the campy, late 80s early 90s production design with props and costumes procured from, of course, thrift stores. Each tale of the disembodied voice is visualized and performed with a relentless humor, which does not sway even in the most poignant moments—at a friend's funeral, or when Dan's son Spencer calls repeatedly after he is forgotten at home. Because she uses humor as a point of entry it would seem incongruous, however, and even contrived if Kobayashi added drama to these moments. To become the characters in Dan Carter (2006, 15min), Kobayashi must invade the interior lives of the unknown other. But instead of being trapped in the quagmire, she plays with these issues of identity, crossing from male to female, young to old. As Jennifer Matotek, Assistant Curator of Exhibitions at Toronto's Power Plant, suggests, "Kobayashi's reverse alterity resists and ruptures notions of fixed identities and the potential for moral judgment, and instead insists on, and



Kobayashi's—whose videos deconstruct the visual language of gender, race, class and sexuality—clearly follows along the path of Cindy Sherman and other artists who assume and perform identities for the camera. Like Sophie Calle, whom Kobayashi also sites as an influence, her works not only explore issues of intimacy and identity but also allude to the liability that comes with appropriating found material and representing complete strangers. Her appreciation of the characters' situations and their lives is, in fact, sincere. "When I work with the found object it becomes very personal," she explains about her process. "I make an effort to relate to the stories and the characters and try to imagine their lives and personalities." Unlike sympathy, it is said that empathy requires an active imagination as one attempts to feel with another. It is only through Kobayashi's full-on, all-out performances that she may reclaim what once was lost, giving it new meaning as it migrates from found object to performance video.

For her Hallwalls exhibition, Kobayashi has installed Dan Carter and *From Alex To Alex*, and in addition, has created a site-specific video. *Period 4L* is based on a letter found by Hallwalls Visual Arts Curator John Massier, at the bus stop by the now defunct Dickie's Donuts on Elmwood and Hertel. The video developed over the course of a month with scenes shot around Buffalo, and props and costumes scavenged at local thrift stores. The letter has posed new challenges for Kobayashi who must contend with its extremely sensitive content. Themes of suicide and sexual transgressions within the family unit are conveyed in this note, written by a mother to her son. Again, Kobayashi performs multiple characters including the Son, Sarah (the Mother), Andrew (the Stepfather), Jacquie (the Babysitter), and Diana (Sarah's young daughter). It may seem controversial for her to include an unambiguously African American character, but it is also worth noting the exaggerated white mother—not only the pasty makeup but also the pinched nose (achieved by a strategically positioned rubber band) that imitates the Caucasoid features.

Performing other races and genders is not new to Kobayashi's work. In fact, an awareness of and a desire to enact the complexities of performing the other can be traced to an early theatrical stint in a high school production of *Auntie Mame*. As a drama major, Kobayashi (who is multi-ethnic, Japanese-Canadian) had spent most of her time behind the scenes helping with costumes. But when the only Asian male in the drama department decided not to audition, Kobayashi was awarded the role of the Japanese butler, Ito. "Looking back it was a very offensive role and a total stereotype—his dialogue was broken English and the accent that I had to perform with was awful," she recalls. "I guess I started off performing to an audience with a

privileges, fluidity."

pretty open idea of what types of identities I could pull off."

Whereas a contemporary artist such as Niki S. Lee in her *Projects* series seeks to pass by mimicking the characteristics of the other, Kobayashi's reflexive strategy considers the act of crossing as principally about disruption. The racial implications in Kobayashi's early work have been an ambiguous blurring of ethnic lines that, while omnipresent and subversive, implies a type of crossing rather than transgression. There are exceptions. In one of the closing scenes of *From Alex To Alex* a wedding portrait of an Asian couple is prominently positioned behind one of the characters and in Dan Carter, the fiancé's attorney is made-up to have a dark complexion, suggesting an unknown ethnicity. Unlike the naturalistic representation and essentialism of Lee's *Projects*, Kobayashi's work distinguishes itself as an exaggerated cultural masquerade, a type of ethnic drag that calls attention to itself as both performance and spectacle.

Kobayashi's explicit performances deconstruct as much as they represent, examining race, gender, and sexuality as performative acts. But performing identities requires equal parts assembling and dismantling for not just the performing body, but the viewer as well. Kobayashi's works ask what happens when we invite the viewer to gaze upon the performing body. We must ask ourselves as viewers, what meanings do we create when we perform the act of looking? How do we construct and maintain race and gender off-screen? Kobaysashi uses humor and empathy to destabilize our notions of representation, and exposes the instability of identification for both the performer and the viewer. Is there any limit to what one person can portray? As a result we are effectively dislodged from our complacency in this purportedly "post-racial" moment. The very concept of "post-racial" seems to be the death knell of identity politics, robbing us of discourse around ethnicity and difference and, especially, the role that power plays in our ability to invent ourselves and others. By reclaiming found objects and by migrating the narratives into newly imagined spaces, Kobayashi's work thwarts this type of identity theft.

Carolyn Tennant
Media Arts Director

1 Jennifer Matotek, "Voice on tape: The reverse alterity of Alison S.M. Kobayashi's *Dan Carter*" (2008), p.27.

2 There is not enough room within this essay or within this footnote to cite the many scholars who have written on these topics and whose writings continue to inform the work of contemporary artists. A partial list, however, might include the writings of Judith Butler, Homi Bhabha, Katrin Sieg, Stuart Hall.

Alison S. M. Kobayashi is a visual artist working in video, performance, installation and drawing. She was born and raised in Mississauga and is currently working in Toronto. Her interest in found narratives resulted in two video works, *From Alex To Alex* and *Dan Carter*. Finding a lost letter in the first case, and a discarded answering machine tape in the second, Kobayashi imagines identities for each person mentioned in the narrative and then performs all the roles herself. In 2006 she won the TSV Artistic Vision Award for Best Local Short Film at the Toronto Reel Asian Film Festival and in 2007 was awarded the Mississauga Arts Award for Best Emerging Artist. Her films have been shown in Canada, the U.S. and Hong Kong. The artist would like to thank: Erin Kobayashi, George Kobayashi, Eleanor Kobayashi, Carolyn Tennant, John Massier and Christopher Allen.

Hallwalls' visual arts program is supported by generous grants from The Nimoy Foundation, The New York State Council on the Arts and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

images top: *Dan Carter, From Alex To Alex*
images bottom: *Period 4L*



The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts



M&T Bank
Understanding what's important.

HALLWALLS CONTEMPORARY ARTS CENTER
341 DELAWARE AVENUE BUFFALO, NEW YORK 14202
716.854.1694 www.hallwalls.org

