



After Effects

MARTIN HERBERT ON THE ART OF ANJA KIRSCHNER AND DAVID PANOS



Opposite page: Anja Kirschner and David Panos, *He Doesn't Know You Don't Love Him*, 2011, stills from a two-channel color video, 33 minutes. From the installation *Living Truthfully Under Imaginary Circumstances*, 2011.

Above: Anja Kirschner and David Panos, *The Last Days of Jack Sheppard*, 2009, still from a color HD video, 56 minutes.

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Anja Kirschner and David Panos, *The Last Days of Jack Sheppard*, 2009, stills from a color HD video, 56 minutes.



ALTHOUGH ANJA KIRSCHNER AND DAVID PANOS'S 2009 video *The Last Days of Jack Sheppard* is set in the early 1720s, its chaotic mise-en-scène is a familiar one. We are in London in the wake of a financial boom fueled by contagious speculation. Fortunes have been made virtually overnight, although a subsequent stock market crash has just as speedily vaporized them. Inequality in the distribution of wealth is extreme, but social mobility is also, for a few, increasing—controversial celebrities transfix the public, their antics popularized in part by new technologies that circulate information at unprecedented speed.

Indeed, *Jack Sheppard* leaves no doubt about the similarities between our own time and the disorienting swirl of Georgian England—the dawning era of financialization and the moment of its first major wobble. The time and place of the London-based artist duo's lavishly costumed and staged, nearly hour-long HD video is defined by several watershed events: first, the bursting of the South Sea Bubble, a market tumult occasioned by an overwhelming rush for stock offerings related to virtually any company claiming ability to profit from trading in the South Pacific (including a firm hawking guns that fired square cannonballs); second, the rise of the printed word; and third, the incorrigible acts of Jack Sheppard, a notorious young housebreaker whom none of London's prisons could hold. Sheppard was celebrated in his day as a working-class hero, which has always been something—perhaps—to be.

"Perhaps," because Kirschner and Panos's five major works since 2006—a quartet of increasingly lengthy and polished interrelated films (shown in both galleries and cinemas) and a multiscreen installation—identify the artists as adepts of expansive, nonmoralizing historical parallelism. They question art's political agency, its misty givens regarding resistance, rebellion, and the left. Kirschner and Panos accordingly structure *Jack Sheppard* around the (true) story of their protagonist's path to the gallows, from his quickly abandoned apprenticeship as a woodworker through multiple thefts, incarcerations, and jailbreaks, filling in the backstory using interviews between the young outlaw and the English novelist Daniel Defoe, who many historians believe ghostwrote Sheppard's life story for a pamphlet published at the time of his execution.

Sheppard remains a folk hero in parts of East London today, but in Kirschner and Panos's telling, he's no Robin Hood. He may scorn the delusions of the day ("Their land of Cockaigne is near, and we all live on credit," he tells Defoe sneeringly) and have a code of ethics—others, including his brother, might sell him out to save their skins; he won't do the same—but he's not a straightforwardly swashbuckling hero. For example, the artists portray him with a stammer.

And having been painted when in prison by the king's portraitist, he is presented here as becoming increasingly enamored of his own desperado image. He is trapped in representation, in the inflation of his own myth, even during his lifetime. Aptly, his final capture comes after a night of drunken self-celebration.

But if Sheppard ends up double-crossed and dead—the publisher of his life story dishonestly promises to arrange for a surgeon to revive him after hanging if he publicly endorses the ghostwritten memoirs—the financial cataclysm of the 1720s is also conceivable as a liberatory moment, for which Sheppard's many escapes serve as a kind of allegory. The upending of society plays out in all kinds of ways: Turmoil is evident in scenes of the recreational decadence of the wealthy, just as it is manifested in a fascination with masquerades, drag, misrule. The imagination is let loose in this moment's undoing of the idea of due measure, when fortunes could inflate and deflate at such breakneck speed. The myth of Jack Sheppard was partly a product of eighteenth-century mass culture's own hunger for spectacle, and it is no coincidence that the English novel finds its form around this time: Defoe's own *Robinson Crusoe* was published in 1719 (he gives a copy to Sheppard in the film); in another tale of being washed up, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), so many things are too large or too small, overturning previous notions of objective measurement. (Defoe himself is a cipher of ambivalence in the piece, a major artistic figure who has hired himself out as a hack—as Sheppard scathingly points out.) The era's disorienting displacements and shifts in scale apparently conjoined with a desire for narrative, perhaps as a way of making sense of things.

Jack Sheppard's Hogarthian tableau is, then, far less doctrinaire than it could at first have appeared. Nonetheless, it demonstrates the *longue durée* of a financial system that doesn't learn from its own catastrophic mistakes. References to a later age of cupidity and crash, the 1980s, are enacted via formal experimentation: The film incorporates emphatic colored gels and cinematic echoes of the historical films of Derek Jarman and Peter Greenaway. More than an indictment, *Jack Sheppard* can appear as a mirroring of such moments of crisis and possibility. So although Kirschner and Panos's film might resemble political, polemical art, it ultimately reveals itself as a non-dogmatic distribution of positions that come close to canceling one another out: The romantic hero ends up being questionable, capitalism not entirely bad, the intermediary—Defoe—an indivisible alloy of pros and cons. And the film's adoption of tropes from costume dramas and soap operas also appears significant—it shifts Kirschner and Panos's art close enough to mainstream entertainment to suggest that the distinction between political critique and the



Anja Kirschner and David Panos, *Polly II: Plan for a Revolution in Docklands*, 2006, stills from a color video, 30 minutes.



culture industry has collapsed to the point of indistinguishability. At the same time, however, the pair employ these forms as a scaffold for deferral, making their art a deliberate system of incompleteness, show-downs, suspensions. In its refusal of glib certainties, it operates in impatient contradistinction to the soft criticality—the reflex liberal gesturing—that riddles the art world, whose homeopathic drip of left-wing pieties, narcissistic admissions of guilt, and even old-school muckraking allows the viewing public to feel good about themselves while avoiding social and political action.

KIRSCHNER AND PANOS have long been clear-eyed about what *doesn't* work, or at least does so dismayingly infrequently, having come up against the limits of various other strategies of activist-inflected representation. Prior to their collaboration, Kirschner had studied film (with ethicists of the lens such as Lis Rhodes), begun making documentaries, and become increasingly unhappy with the ethics of representing and mediating conditions of labor and of poverty. Panos had read philosophy, gotten involved in housing

activism and a local East London broadsheet, begun making films, and reached a similar point of dissatisfaction. Their first collaboration, the thirty-minute video *Polly II: Plan for a Revolution in Docklands*, 2006, accordingly marked a swing away from relatively transparent documentary and toward speculative fiction. (One can, as the Defoe character says at the start of *Jack Sheppard*, "represent one kind of imprisonment by another.") Here, in a fractured narrative that blends Ballardian sci-fi, soap opera, eighteenth-century theater, and Brechtian alienation, is an allegory of an underclass literally left to drown. Yet the work, in spite of its underlying anger and the tone of its title, doesn't offer a solution.

The video's template is *Polly*, John Gay's West Indies-set and instantly banned 1729 sequel to the previous year's *The Beggar's Opera* (itself the basis for Brecht's 1928 *Threepenny Opera*), which explores the colonial aftermath of the South Sea Bubble. "All three plays," write Kirschner and Panos in a booklet that accompanied the work's screenings, "deal with the malign influence of capitalism and commerce on moral and ethical life and portray

corruption at every level of the class system." In their version, the Docklands area of East London has suffered a catastrophic flood, the tower blocks there left to submerge. (This fictionalized scenario came to appear unnervingly prescient when, two months after they completed filming, New Orleans was deluged by Hurricane Katrina.)

As with the broad triangulation of the insubordinate Sheppard, the intermediary Defoe, and the dispassionate ruling classes, *Polly II* ventriloquizes positions on a panorama of inequity. It does so by updating a handful of Gay's characters. The crime boss Mr. Peachum becomes the turncoat leader of a community co-op, literally selling workers down the river for his own financial advantage; Polly, Peachum's daughter, rebels against him and joins the motley crew headed by Macheath (here a black pirate known as Morano) in order to fight the authorities. Using rudimentary computer animation to simulate a flooded city—variously a sloshing hell for workers and a floating playpen of new luxury properties for the rich—Kirschner and Panos speed through set pieces showing, variously, a fractious meeting between



This page and opposite: Anja Kirschner and David Panos, *Trail of the Spider*, 2008, stills from a color video, 54 minutes.

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workers and a government representative who promises regeneration as water sluices in under the door, drunken antics among pirates and a remorseless city-worker hostage, and a coordinated strike by pirates whose specialty is blowing up buildings across this *Waterworld* version of London.

Kirschner and Panos had, by the time they made *Polly II*, gained firsthand experience of failed resistance to profiteering gentrification—of the working classes being forced outward, at the behest of developers, if not into flooded tower blocks then at least onto inhospitable peripheries. A half decade earlier, in the area of Hackney, East London, where they lived, the duo had been involved in a protest occupation of social housing, which was sold off for profit from under the feet of tenants, who had been lied to about their right to buy and then ordered to leave. In *Polly II*, likewise, there's no pabulum of a long-term happy ending, only "a brief jubilee," as one character describes it, "before renewed repression and reprisals." Where Kirschner and Panos stand on the efficacy of such resistance—their films don't condemn violent revolution, nor do they unequivocally endorse it—may not ultimately matter as much as the fact that they are making works that reflect a condition of social explosiveness.

This air of combustibility, the sense of a system teetering on the brink of collapse or implosion, again brings to mind Brecht and the moment in which he posed his models of didactic/hermeneutic emancipation. Indeed, the video, with its compressed set of

scenes embodying discrete standpoints, is patterned on the German playwright and theorist's concept of the *Lehrstück*, or "learning play." *Lehrstücke*, performable by workers or schoolchildren, are designed to work in the absence of an audience: They are intended to allow their participants to work through a dilemma-like situation and reach a conclusion (usually the one ring-fenced by the playwright). For *Polly II*, accordingly, Kirschner and Panos deliberately used actors who'd grown up in the East End with an awareness of the area's social housing issues, and who had also studied acting techniques with Anna Scher, who trains actors for soap opera—a format that, like Brecht's theater, dramatizes social conflict, albeit to quite different ends.

If Kirschner and Panos are suspicious of telling audiences what to think, it's worth emphasizing that their use of Brechtian distanciation techniques—at least in their early films—was, they say, a way of testing the validity of such an approach in the present day. With their next work, the fifty-four-minute video *Trail of the Spider*, 2008, the duo accordingly traveled farther along a neo-Brechtian trajectory by casting nonactors who had been involved with the Hackney housing occupation. *Trail* is a densely plaited piece of historical parallelism: It refers to the violent displacement of Native American communities in nineteenth-century America along the Trail of Tears, the links between those communities and African-American former slaves, and the repossession of previously



ceded territories by white settlers, who rushed in and founded places such as Oklahoma City overnight. All these layers become a way of considering the contemporary situation in East London, where local communities were being pushed aside once more, this time by construction for the 2012 Olympics. A spaghetti western of sorts, with borrowings from zombie movies and soap operas, as well as a mythological spider figure that inhabits various characters in turn, *Trail* again compresses its arrayed ethical positions into single characters: a black cowboy outlaw, a rapacious speculator and his squads of surveyors (wearing Klan-like masks), a middleman setting up punitive communities in the unclaimed lands, and a woman who, beaten down by life, sides with him in hopes of a little material comfort. The middleman inveigles the outlaw into taking on a job, betrays him, and is betrayed in turn by the speculators; they consequently come under fire from the woman, who—à la Joan Crawford in Nicholas Ray's 1954 western *Johnny Guitar*—has had a change of heart and gone for her gun.

Finally, however, the capitalists get their way (the main speculator, though seemingly fatally shot, rises like the undead), and the film ends, fusing temporalities, with middle-class whites in modern garb rushing desperately to grab stakes on a virgin—or, really, cleared—field. Again, the morality is ambiguous and leaves no room for the kind of certainty Brecht was after, or the deconstructive critique that was heir to his political theater. Turnwood, the shifty middleman, could be construed as merely following survivalist instincts in a cutthroat world, while the outlaw—who simply walks away at the end—leaves one wondering about the effectiveness of his position and the romanticism clinging to it; he leaves one questioning, moreover, whether heroes like him absorb social energies rather than redoubling them. *Trail* ends up appearing at once angry at contemporary circumstances and unable to conceive a way out.

This is not a failing, however, as much as it is a reflection of the disappointments of utopian endeavors over the past century, including Brecht's own project. By the sour end of *Trail* in particular, what began as an inquiring experiment in reprising distanciation in a properly Brechtian manner seems to be turning on itself. If revolutionary energies are stomped at the work's close, then the avant-garde strategies bound into the tale-telling feel implicated in that failure. Again, it's significant here that Kirschner and Panos's work, in its adoption of televisual and cinematic vernaculars, echoes mainstream culture. Breaking the fourth wall, such mimicry reminds us, is by now part of the lingua franca not only of contemporary art but also of the world of advertising, where it is just one more option in the tool kit of persuasion.

ONE SOMETIMES FEARS that art's last task is merely to exemplify the impossibility of critique, through its own permanent and apparently inescapable incorporation into consumerist spectacle. Kirschner and Panos aren't quite so pessimistic—their art feels less like resignation than like an attempt to change a conservative conversation that's being mistaken for radicality. But one might certainly see their films as measuring the specific circumscription of art vis-à-vis activism at the moment of the artwork's conception. The exposure of the limit conditions of instrumentalization is key to Kirschner and Panos's stand against the notion of criticality, and it informs the shape, scale, and texture of their work. Certainly there are precedents for their extended blurring of narrative cinema, art film, and documentary—think Alexander Kluge, Harun Farocki, Hito Steyerl—but the pair also react, film by film, to real-time conditions in ways that feel more like action than fiction: Refusing, after *Trail*, to continue using nonactors or to engage community politics in an expectantly ameliorative way; refusing, after *Jack Sheppard*, to keep sourcing picaresque working-class characters; refusing, since 2011, the certainties of a written script and the blandishments of expensive productions. Considered together, the turns they've taken refract changing conditions of reception for politically conscious art and film—and, sensitized to such shifts, they model a conscientious response, one that requires a continual repositioning.

Even, perhaps, unto self-defeat. For another issue addressed by their work has been the destabilizing capacity of information density. This may be fitting for a moment of abundant referentiality within contemporary art, where press releases have become crib notes, but it raises the question of how much backstory and intertextuality an artwork should, or could, contain. In *Trail*, even if one is *au fait* with American history and British urban politics, the symbolism of the spider is intricate and resistant to swift summary, as are Kirschner and Panos's embedded references to East German "Marxist Western" comic books, the mythos of the black cowboy, and the fallout of the colonial adventure.

In the seventy-eight-minute video *The Empty Plan*, 2010, this scavenger hunt for clues has become baroque nearly to the point of impenetrability, and the filmmakers are asking, more explicitly than ever, how one syncs the artistic impulse with the activist urge for transparent and partisan communication. Their most polished production thus far (whose smoothness, predictably, they also work to undermine), the piece brings Brecht center stage, via multiple reconstructions and interpretations of rehearsals and performances of his 1932 play *The Mother*—in Weimar Germany, in 1930s America, in East Germany—as a way of considering how art is necessarily shaped and rerouted



Anja Kirschner and David Panos, *The Empty Plan*, 2010, stills from a color HD video, 78 minutes.



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by its moment. In Weimar Germany, for instance, an aggressive policeman forbids the actors to gesticulate, which results in their performance being ghosted with constraining social context in a way nobody could have predicted; while in America actors trained in Stanislavskian realism misunderstand Brecht's conception of epic theater entirely. Intercut with these scenes, though, are shots of the playwright in sunlit exile in 1940s Los Angeles, agonizing over art's relation to class struggle: Dogmatism, he finally decides, unavoidably displaces artistry.

If art should be brackish and potholed with ambiguity, as *The Empty Plan* suggests, the work pushes this logic to an extreme: It is laden with intricacies that can leave a viewer longing for a cheat sheet. Here, we get actors impersonating historical figures impersonating their contemporaries, a cameo for an English astrologer predicting the course of World War II, and a distinct lack of hand-holding concerning which historical period we're viewing at any time. And if the HD video, which seduces formally, is thus an entangling, imploding system of restlessly shifting layers, its genre flipping redoubles such unbalancing, sliding swiftly between registers from, say, documentary to melodrama. This functions as a Brechtian puncturing of artifice in its own right, of course, even if Kirschner and Panos are well aware of the changed significance of such gestures both in contemporary art and in culture at large. Aply, the "Empty Plan" that Brecht ends up espousing to the actress with whom he brainstorms in the film is a wholly opaque concept; certainly she doesn't understand it (and, Kirschner and Panos say, neither do they). It redounds as a possibility, a perpetual horizon.

IT'S A TRUISM BY NOW that the past, far from being dead, is not even past. The historical, self-evidently, is in these works always being restored to agitating relevance, or at least asking to be considered in today's changed light. The artists have perhaps never pushed this approach further or more incisively than in their recent installation, *Living Truthfully Under Imaginary Circumstances*, 2011, on view at Hollybush Gardens in London last year and to be shown this fall at Artists Space in New York. (The duo are currently, tantalizingly, in Greece, shooting a work titled *Look, the Palace Is Collapsing!*, as the country's debt crisis unravels.) Spinning off from their research into historicized modes of acting in *The Empty Plan*, *Living Truthfully* features a two-channel projection and two monitors. One of the latter loops a fourteen-minute edit of a 1985 documentary on Sanford Meisner, anatomizing the influential American acting coach's particular technique—which involves less acting than reacting to whatever's said. This, the work implies, is hardly mere gesture: Meisner, who

grew up feeling overpoweringly guilty over the death of his brother, and who taught acting in the wake of the Great Depression, which left many feeling at the mercy of external events, had a vested interest in a style of acting that would bypass the subjective mind and its sense of responsibility.

The thirty-three-minute projection (independently titled *He Doesn't Know You Don't Love Him*, 2011) shows neophyte actors being trained in Meisner's method, performing repetitive exercises, some involving lines from Clifford Odets's 1937 drama *The Golden Boy*, in which Meisner played the lead role. These scenes have the unmistakable flavor of contemporary, mainstream American acting: a stylized, escalating simulation of emotion based on mirroring what the other speaker says. The remaining monitor shows a silent six-minute montage of actors trained in the method—from Cameron Diaz to Jack Nicholson to Diane Keaton, Tom Cruise to Michelle Pfeiffer to Dennis Quaid—in scenes of heightened emotion or violence.

That's where it takes off. Once you see the method being taught and being distributed across American cinema down the decades, you recognize it as a historicized kind of naturalism, as of-the-moment as Brecht's theater was, but one whose subtext is "Don't think." The process, says Meisner, is designed "to eliminate all intellectuality." ("The 'head' is identified as the enemy," Kirschner and Panos write in the accompanying handout, "because the kind of thought, the kind of analysis that could carry over into action is either not recognized, feared and repressed, or has turned against its own subject [who wants Stalinism?]") If we accept mainstream television and cinema as subjectivity incubators, discomforting philosophical consequences here come to the fore. Art—a three-screen installation in, for example, a modestly appointed East London gallery—feels very small up against that. The work implies that it's not necessarily art's job, or even within its reach, to legislate against the covert operations of the military-entertainment complex. As positions collide under Kirschner and Panos's ministrations—because Meisner is such a persuasive figure, because sometimes the acted emotion feels compulsively real, because some of the clips are from cinematic masterpieces—one can almost feel the aim of art being pointedly, tactically, lowered, recalibrated to a level that admits how little its emancipatory hopes have been borne out in the historical record. Art's field of operation here is a different one, its purview the creation of a dialectical problem space, an embodied irresolution, a perpetually fluctuating intonation of an old question that would have been all too familiar to Brecht: What is to be done? □

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From top: Anja Kirschner and David Panos, *Some Meisner-Trained Actors*, 2011, still from a color video, 6 minutes. Cameron Diaz. Still from Anja Kirschner and David Panos's edited excerpts from Nick Doob's *Sanford Meisner: The American Theatre's Best Kept Secret*, 1985. Anja Kirschner and David Panos, *Some Meisner-Trained Actors*, 2011, still from a color video, 6 minutes. Michelle Pfeiffer. All images from the installation *Living Truthfully Under Imaginary Circumstances*, 2011.

