

# A Few Howls Again

Silvia Kolbowski



Even if I destroy myself.

**G44** Centre for  
Contemporary  
Photography

**Images**  
FESTIVAL

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Co-presented with Images Festival

# A Few Howls Again

Curated by Jared Quinton, Alexandra Symons Sutcliffe and Magdalyn Asimakis

The emergence of poststructuralist art in the 1970s brought a radical reconsideration of the documentary form. Images could no longer be seen as reliable representations of or sources of information about the world; there was a new insistence on reading the documentary image only for what it literally contained. Decades of this insistence on the literal, however, have allowed an amorphous idea of resistance to an external, oppositional alternative to be imagined—usually to some form of violence, capitalism, fascism, “the man,” or whatever else is seen to plague contemporary life, politics, or aesthetics. This escapist fantasy and its attendant binaries—us/them, inside/outside, subject/object, true/false—have ultimately allowed critical practices to be absorbed by institutions like the “art world” and the “art market.” Indeed, maintaining faith in critique and the possibility of opposition is part and parcel to breeding consensus.

Silvia Kolbowski’s video, collage and installation works address and collapse historical figures and events. The exhibition *A Few Howls Again* includes: *Like a Clap of Thunder* (2015), which reimagines the murder of Marxist revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg; *After Hiroshima Mon Amour* (2008), which overlays the invasion of Iraq and devastation of Hurricane Katrina; *That Monster: An Allegory* (2019), which imagines the contemporary global rise of fascism through the lens of Frankenstein, and *Missing Asher* (2017–2019), which addresses the exhibition history of one of Kolbowski’s site-specific works. This exhibition also includes a restaging of an installation the artist created in 1990: *Enlarged from the Catalogue*.

Kolbowski takes the inadequacy of documentary forms to represent history as a given, and adapts some of the idioms of her critical-conceptualist forebears, but does not allow her work to exist in the realm of the literal. Instead she seeks formal and discursive strategies that trouble the usual binaries through an investment in unfashionable questions of psyche and subjectivity. For Kolbowski, the political stakes of image-based art are inextricable from the production of spectatorship. The bad “other” is named and, more importantly, the viewer is implicated in this naming.

*Like a Clap of Thunder* is a stop-motion animation that loops eight minutes of text, images, and images superimposed with text. The texts weave together Luxemburg’s writings with an imagined first-person account of her imprisonment and murder by counterrevolutionaries; a disembodied third-person narrator frames the stakes of Luxemburg as a historical and political figure. The images, meanwhile, show a contemporary actress restaging the well-known anthropometric prison photos of Luxemburg from 1906,

followed by a computer-animated version of her who appears later in the video where she is shown from above lying prostrate on the ground, looking up to meet the viewer’s gaze. The work’s final moments contrast the violent tactics of “they” (those who killed Luxemburg, those who continue to silence figures like her) with the solidarity and sacrifices of “we” (the working class revolutionaries).

In 2006, Kolbowski published an epistolary dialogue with artist Walid Raad as the Israeli military bombed Lebanon, Raad’s home country. “The burden of representation, for artists, of bringing historical material into the present, is always underestimated,” Kolbowski wrote, as their conversation turned to the question of how to make art about war. “Because such artists are dependent on some kind of source material, and the tension between material and maker is always present, a theoretical rigor is required to understand what produces who, as much as who produces what, and in what form.”<sup>1</sup> Despite the specificity of her historical reference and the directness of her address in *Like a Clap of Thunder*, Kolbowski is not asking viewers to identify with Luxemburg or moralize her death. Rather, the video’s language veers between militant defiance and moments of softer, empathetic humor; the content seems to demand an affective response, yet the banal aesthetic of the video renders it deeply depersonalized; the actress is definitely not Rosa Luxemburg. The video’s troubled subjectivity allows it to “pierce a moment in time,” as the narrator calls for, and through this rupture offers the viewer (as well as the artist herself) an ethical approach to a violent history, producing a subject capable of layering its truths and fictions onto the present moment.

In the video work *After Hiroshima Mon Amour*, Kolbowski’s refracted re-interpretation of Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras’s 1959 feature film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, the continuum between eroticism and violence is told dialogically by actors playing romantic couples, and through scenes of political abjection compiled from footage of the American invasion of Iraq and the effects of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Kolbowski’s *Hiroshima* is a study of film’s capacity to move between the scale of the interpersonal and the seismically political. It addresses both the imaginative and political capacity of cinema and the limitations of our interactions with technologies of vision.

In Kolbowski’s film, the line “You saw nothing in Hiroshima. Nothing” appears as a subtitle over grainy footage of a violent intrusion into a home, the blue tone and pixelated image quality marking it as video from military surveillance equipment. The invasion of Iraq and the wider “war on

1 Silvia Kolbowski and Walid Raad. *Silvia Kolbowski / Walid Raad: Between Artists*. 2006. A.R.T. Press. 166 (e-book edition).

2 Asher quoted in Silvia Kolbowski, “Psyche-specificity.” In *Out of Place*, Spring 2017. Italics are the authors’.

3 Ibid.

4 Michèle Thériault. “Models of Intervention: A Discussion between Michèle Thériault and Silvia Kolbowski.” In *Nothing and Everything*. Montreal: Bina Ellen Gallery, Concordia University.

terror” has its own visual culture. It coincided with the first blossoming of social media and user-generated content. As in the case of the infamous images of torture at Abu Ghraib, these platforms created a new category of war reportage in which the soldier is both an actor in the violence and an agent of its wider dissemination. Despite this well documented context of increased visibility the statement that Kolbowski overlays the image with is: “You saw nothing....”

The explicit refusal of another’s experience is a strategy of power that plays out between individuals and on the macro level of the colonising or invading nation state. The refusal of the other’s testimony in the face of evidence denounces their legitimacy as a subject who can speak or act. In both films, cinema is proposed as a mechanism that sells plausible truths to a credulous public. The consenting viewer counter-signs the internal logic of the filmmaker’s world, but from the very first statement they are then told that their vision is flawed or invalid, the contract is breached within the first few minutes. This seems to be an underlying lesson of *After Hiroshima*, the fragility of the relationship between experienced truth and its visual representation.

This video also uses subtitles to reflect on the inherent uncontainability of site and narrative. At one point, an image of a military-occupied street in Iraq is overlaid with the subtitle, “this could only happen in one city. Hiroshima.” This representational disjunction does not only point to the pathologically cyclical patterns of war; the obvious gap between the two contexts represented in text and image unravels the concept of site-specificity as something untethered to a larger lived context. With an incisive swapping of representational elements, Kolbowski eschews a singular narrative address and gestures to the numerous, entangled relationships that surround and are embedded in these wars despite their representational absence. Through this method the artist suggests that the unsettling of the spectator can only occur by breaking down the boundaries of site, and acknowledging it as a physical, psychic, and discursive space.

These concerns extend into Kolbowski’s installation work. Included in this exhibition—in Gallery 44’s vitrines—is a restaging of the project *Enlarged from the Catalogue*, a selection of catalogues from major art institutions in New York during the month of February 1990. The inclusion of this archival project in *A Few Howls Again* reflects Kolbowski’s practice of overlaying temporal and spatial narratives while maintaining gaps in representation. In her accompanying text the artist highlights the violent hierarchies that exist in this art publication cross-section, in which one of two binaries dominate: conscious/unconscious, thought/desire, experience/dream, real/imaginary, black/white, man/woman, centre/margin. While the resonance of the displayed power structures (along lines of gender, race, and class) remains strong, the 30-year lapse of time since the

work’s original installation creates an obvious disjunction that is typical of Kolbowski’s approach to site-specificity. To understand these publications as a literal, or even accurate historical representation of art in February 1990 would be obviously incorrect, and by extension, their restaging in 2020 only makes this more glaring. However, the intentional incompleteness of *Enlarged from the Catalogue*’s account gestures to the discursive entanglements of representation through site-specificity and restaging.

In the 1980s, Kolbowski was influenced by artist Michael Asher’s approach to site-specificity. The questions he posed, such as “why put something on the wall; why put something on the floor?”<sup>2</sup> resonated deeply with Kolbowski’s concerns around institution and physical site. While a common approach of many of her contemporaries from the ‘institutional critique’ era invested their efforts into revelation—gestures of revealing, “power, inequity, and unquestioned customs as they congregated within institutions of art”<sup>3</sup>—Kolbowski went a step further to question the psyche’s tendency to manipulate this logic and truth claims more broadly. In her words, “the past is filtered through the present, and the present is filtered through the past, which involves psychical processes such as identification, projection, and displacement.”<sup>4</sup> By incorporating the psyche into the examination of institution, Kolbowski’s works address the relationship between representation, reception and institutional site—a relationship she has referred to as ‘psyche-specificity.’

In deference to the artist’s embrace of inadequacy<sup>5</sup> as a discursive strategy, *A Few Howls Again* aims to weave a productive, incomplete tangle of Kolbowski’s work. The videos and films, restaged installation, and textual selections from the artist’s archive illustrate the concerns that have animated Kolbowski’s practice for decades, while at the same time suggesting their contingency, perhaps even their mutual unintelligibility. The works shown within the space of Gallery 44 question both the representation of politics and the politics of representation at a time in which the gaps between images and truth claims are more visible than ever. This exhibition acknowledges the need to make space for practices that actively ask questions around knowability, and eschew summary in favour of critical inquiry. The exhibition’s title is taken from one of Kolbowski’s videos that has not been included, though it easily could have been—a companion to *Like A Clap of Thunder* that concerns the 1968 death of another radical leftist feminist, Ulrike Meinhof. The phrase itself is borrowed from Meinhof via the Italian writer Curzio Malaparte, invoking the layers of dislocation and appropriation that characterize Kolbowski’s particular ethics of historical representation. In *Water Cannons: Against Women, Too* (1968), Meinhof writes, “Malaparte’s image of dogs with slashed bellies who don’t howl because their vocal chords have also been cut is no longer totally apt. We are hearing a few howls again—at least a few.”<sup>6</sup>

5 See also: *An Inadequate History of Conceptual Art*, 1998/1999

6 Emily Apter. “Silvia Kolbowski with Emily Apter.” *The Brooklyn Rail*. October 2011.



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## Cover image and poster image

Silvia Kolbowski, *That Monster: An Allegory* (still), 2018, film projection, black and white, 18 minutes (9 minutes with sound, 9 minutes silent).

**Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography** is a charitable, non-profit, artist-run centre committed to supporting multi-faceted approaches to photography and lens-based media. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of artistic practice, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for meaningful reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography. Gallery 44 is committed to programs that reflect the continuously changing definition of photography by presenting a wide range of practices that engage timely and critical explorations of the medium. Through exhibitions, public engagement, education programs and production facilities our objective is to explore the artistic, cultural, historic, social and political implications of the image in our ever-expanding visual world.

**Silvia Kolbowski** (New York) is a time-based media artist, who addresses questions of historicization, political resistance, and the unconscious. The structures of spectatorship—psychical and political—are a central concern of all her projects. Her work has been exhibited in many contexts, including The Taipei Biennial, The Whitney Biennial, and The Hammer Museum.

**Jared Quinton** is a curator and critic based in Chicago. He has organized exhibitions at The Kitchen (New York), the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and Terremoto La Postal (Mexico City), and his writing has appeared in *BOMB*, *Artforum*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*.

**Alexandra Symons Sutcliffe** is a writer and curator based between London and Berlin, her work is focused on performance, documentary and artist moving image. She has curated exhibitions and programmes at PS120 (Berlin), ESSEX STREET GALLERY (New York), the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), The Kitchen (New York), Auto Italia (London), Jupiter Woods (London), Arcadia\_Missa (London) and ma ma (Toronto). She is currently a PhD candidate at Birkbeck University, working on British portrait photography of the 1970s and 1980s.

**Magdalyn Asimakis** is a curator and writer. She has organized exhibitions and programs in Toronto and New York, and co-founded the project space and collective ma ma in 2018. Her writing has been published in art magazines such as *Brooklyn Rail*, *Art Papers*, *Artforum* and *Canadian Art Magazine*, as well as exhibition catalogues for the New Museum and SFMoMA. She is currently a PhD student at Queen's University where she is studying the display of global modernisms in museums.

This exhibition is presented in collaboration with the **Images Festival, April 16–22, 2020**. For more information visit [imagesfestival.com](http://imagesfestival.com)

Jared, Alexandra and Magdalyn have been collaborating since 2016 when they met at the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. This is the second exhibition they have organized together, after the 2017 group show *That I am reading backwards and into for a purpose, to go on:* held at The Kitchen.

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