Single Wide
Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler

Here Is a Story

They remembered the things they had seen in the forest, on the contrary, the way you remember those very few dreams—almost all nightmares—which have the quality of life itself, not of phantasm, or shifting provisional scene-set….they remembered too-solid flesh, too precise a stink, a rattle and soughing which thrilled the nerves and the cartilage of their growing ears, in the memory, as in such a dream, they felt, I cannot get out, this is a real thing and a real place.

—A.S. Byatt, "The Thing in the Forest," from Little Black Book of Stories

To live is to leave traces. In the interior these are emphasized. An abundance of covers and protectors, liners and cases is devised, on which the traces of everyday use are imprinted. The traces of the occupant also leave their impression on the interior. The detective story that follows these traces comes into being….

—Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century"

Here is a story: The ticking of the clock is too loud, louder than it should be outside the windows through which you are voyeuristically watching a woman perch before her tiny dressing table, smoothing her hair. There is a cut or perhaps a birthmark over her left eye. Her flannel shirt is slightly disarrayed, her expression unreadable. She gets up, carrying a bulging bag from which a teddy bear's head peeks over the top, and you follow. Your vision is obscured by walls as she moves through what seems to be a small house or trailer, leaving by a cheaply made door that sticks as she slams it shut. The night sounds swell and your hearing, you realize, is partly hers, partly your own. Her expression is mildly deliberate, melancholic, opaque. She climbs into a pickup truck parked out front, lights already on, and ignores a cell phone that rings insistently. You move steadily around the truck, backing away as the motor revs. You think she drives off, but now you are already on the other side of the house and cannot be sure. She's leaving for good perhaps. You keep going, circumnavigating the house, finding yourself sometimes outside, sometimes inside the improbably dissolved walls. Things look crisp and too perfectly placed. The colors seem more saturated, more velvety matte or acidic than they should be. You pass a child's room with a tiny single bed, a pink crocheted coverlet; a living room with a nubby green recliner, a white cake under a glass dome on the counter that demarcates the kitchen. Each slow gliding movement presents another almost-picture, a precise composition that you pass and keep recircling. The bathroom light is a buttery yellow, the folding chair that suffices at the vanity is askew. The phone inside the house rings insistently and you hear the truck's motor again. Has she returned? She sits in the truck out front now, crying, screaming, pounding the steering wheel. You are moving again, backing away as she revs the motor and the truck rolls forward.

Teresa Hubbard and Alexander Birchler know how to tell a story as well as they know how to untell it. Emerging from their earlier highly staged and meticulously crafted photographic work, their cinematically referential, single-pan videos ask the viewer to consider how a story

arises, and how it is simultaneously constructed. Drawing on the notion of architectural space as a psychological metaphor, Hubbard and Birchler employ and, as in this installation, often exhibit precisely built models and stage sets, combining them with camera motion that confounds the viewer's expectations to explore and ultimately blur the distinctions between inside/outside, real/artificial, light/dark, and cause/effect.

The tightly framed, intensely saturated imagery creates a series of almost photographic tableaux, a conscious production of framed moments heightened by the continuous motion of the spectator's gaze.

In their recent video installation Single Wide (2002), the slow, meditative movement of the camera traces what appears to be an evolution toward a violent event that has happened or is about to happen. The pace of the video creates dramatic tension in the implied story, but the "plot" remains ultimately unresolved as the video loops back seamlessly to its "beginning." Hubbard and Birchler are strongly influenced by Alfred Hitchcock's innovative early use of "wild walls," set walls that could be moved immediately in order for the camera to capture uninterrupted pans, employed most notably in his 1948 film Rope.[1] Hubbard and Birchler's video works also build on Hitchcock's treatment of film as a constructed reality that nonetheless maintains the immersive quality of narrative. Unlike a full-length film, however, their videos consist of an ultimately ambiguous sequence of moments, an excerpt of time that captures a defining moment within a larger, inaccessible event. They depict a melancholic, emotionally charged experience that suggests an existential conflict roiling just beneath the calm surface of the familiar.

Separation and isolation—both physical and emotional—are themes in the work, and often the architectural spaces rather than the actors take on psychological expression. A pervasive sense of mourning and loss combines with uncomfortably intimate access to individual vulnerability in these quotidian events—a young girl's rained-out birthday party in Eight (2001) or a teenager throwing rocks at a garage studio in which a group of boys rehearse their band in Detached Building (2001). Nonlinear narratives that lack a clear beginning, middle, or end, the viewer is drawn in by their continuous flow, thus participating in and constructing their meaning.

The gentle poignancy of Hubbard and Birchler's earlier videos is retained in certain moments of Single Wide but contrasts sharply with the violence of the focal event in this work. The video's looping strategy runs counter to the standard format of most films with their pattern of buildup, climax, and resolution, since it deliberately thwarts the expectation of an "answer" to the questions raised by the narrative. An anguished ambiguity develops the longer one watches; the pristine, precisely composed spaces themselves seem to embody an increasingly uncanny tension. The idea of "before" and "after" dissolves; causality

diminishes. The act of viewing becomes unusually empowering. Indeed, the simple timing of when the viewer begins to watch the piece affects the understanding of what is happening and what is the outcome. What appears to be an act of escape turns into an act of aggression and back again. Different versions of the story exist simultaneously and, drawn in by the seductive visual images of the work, the viewer can construct and reconstruct them infinitely but without active resolution. Each pass around the house in Single Wide layers a new story, a new meaning.

Here is a story: You hear the sound of a crash, glass shattering. You pass a child's room with a tiny single bed, a pink crocheted coverlet, and a pink dollhouse—its façade removed so little hands can reach in, move things around, change the scene, the story. You see a living room with a nubby green recliner toppled over by a truck that somehow is plunged through the exterior wall into the kitchen, now destroyed. A white cake stands under a glass dome on the counter that demarcates the kitchen from the living room. The woman in the truck holds her hand over her mouth and looks around, eyes wild, horrified. Was it an accident? A violent, unpremeditated act of anger? You pass a small bathroom, the light a buttery yellow. A dripping faucet seems unreasonably loud against the steaming truck engine in the kitchen. The bedroom is nearly pristine, so neat it might be artificial, or else has been arranged in that terrible, deliberate way one has in desperate, solitary moments. The silence is strange. You should be able to hear something other than the sound of the clock ticking—it is far louder than what you would hear from outside the windows, where you realize you now are as you round the corner. Weren't you just inside? The back of the pickup truck protrudes from the side of a single-wide trailer house, the woman inside struggles to push open the truck's door against the crumpled aluminum siding. Faster, past the porch, looking into the girl's room very closely, you hear the distant sound of a train whistle and see the pictures on her tiny bookcase. You pass the living room, a toppled nubby green recliner, a bright yellow plastic dish drainer. The woman gets out of the truck, clutching a bulging bag with a teddy bear's head peeking over the top. She has an angry fresh cut above her left eye. She picks her way through the debris to the bedroom and lays the bag on the bed. She stands before the vanity mirror, touching the cut and her body gingerly, checking for injury. She sits down and begins smoothing her hair. You are so close you might be standing right behind her.

Hubbard and Birchler's photographic and video work often focuses on marginal moments, outtake views, or punctuated non-events within an unremarkable narrative. In Single Wide, however, they have incorporated the cinematically climactic action of a truck crashing through the wall. But this anchoring moment becomes progressively more surreal as it is repeated. The action itself—the car crash—begins to lose importance. Violence functions increasingly as a mere marker, as each time around the suspense of an upcoming action diminishes while other details take precedence.

The viewer's position as an individual subject is problematized by the lack of a singular viewpoint; while a strategy used in conventional film, the artists deliberately call attention to the multiple narrative perspectives of Single Wide, rather than attempting to mask the

transitions and create a seamless experience. As each loop further denies cause and effect, it undermines the logic of the narrative, and enhances its impossibility, its artificiality. As in Hubbard and Birchler's photographic and video works overall, Single Wide ultimately is posited against the creeping fictionalization of the world, wherein arguably our entire framework of viewing and interpreting current existence has been funneled through the entertainment medium. A broad body of media theory has articulated the extreme extension of this idea to a near post-human state in which all aspects of engagement are artificially constructed—drawn from cinema to be sure, but applied far beyond, to politics, social relationships, and economic desire.

Fundamentally aware of the paradox of using this medium in an ambiguous position of critique and celebration, Hubbard and Birchler highlight artificiality to acknowledge it, rather than to "trick" the viewer into thinking it's real. They aim to intensify the specificity of the viewing experience, to heighten awareness through the fragmentation of space and the circularity of the video. The artists foreground the recognition of the viewer's own physical presence, the realness of a body standing there, which cannot be entirely forgotten in this narrative as it often can when immersed in the traditional cinematic experience. In this way, they ultimately draw out the difference between the notion of art as ekstasis, a Greek term meaning "letting us stand outside ourselves," and the primary goal of entertainment (from the Latin intertenere, "holding among or within"), a drawing in of the viewer that denies perspective.[2]

The sense of personal invasion and alienation in the video's content—and the viewer's physical relationship to the video itself—underscore how Hubbard and Birchler choose to emphasize the individual viewing experience rather than appeal to a mass audience. Standing in front of the looming image in the darkened gallery, anxiety and doubt increase as the unending narrative encourages an awareness of your own subjective manipulations of "reality." You know the loop is 6 minutes and 10 seconds long (it says so on the wall label), but each pass seems to last a different amount of time. The rhythm of the camera seems to speed up or slow down, the light changes, colors brighten, and previously unnoticed forms sharpen as your attention shifts.

Starting with what appears to be a simple, logical story presented in an illogical spatial or temporal format, Hubbard and Birchler explore the psychological impact of architectural form, drawing on a rich history of constructed space and theories of framing the viewer and spectator. The strategy of physical separation and visual connection, of "framing," recalls early modernist architectural precedents from Le Corbusier to Adolf Loos, in which the understanding of the mediated eye of technology—of the camera and, increasingly, of the cinematic medium—transforms both our physical and psychological experience of space. As architectural historian and cultural theorist Beatriz Colomina has written, "The perception of

space is not what space is but one of its representations…."[3] Hubbard and Birchler deliberately create constructions that play on and subvert the modernist theory of the domestic space as the "theater box" in which inhabitants function as both actors in, and spectators of, the family scene, involved in yet detached from their own space. "Architecture is not simply a platform that accommodates the viewing subject. It is a viewing mechanism that produces the subject. It precedes and frames its occupant."[4] In Single Wide, one experiences increasing claustrophobia as the video continues its obsessive looping, and the abstract sense of being trapped in an unresolvable equation is literalized by the tight, narrow course of the architectural sets. But the trailer that the protagonist of the piece navigates is clearly that, a set, and not an attempt to create a true window into an illusory space. The notion of staging a story is again made literal by the photographic and almost sculptural aspect of the interior rooms, and is enhanced further by the presence of the model the artists used to construct the sets.
Significantly, the model is placed just inside the gallery doors, seen by the viewer before entering the darkened space of the projection.[5] Within the piece itself, the idea of the diorama is slyly reinforced by the presence of the pink dollhouse, which echoes the set itself with its transparent façade.[6] Like a dollhouse, the objects within the rooms themselves have a surreal precision of form, placement, and vernacular reference—so correct that they nearly vibrate with their own uncanny perfection.

This dioramic quality of the sets creates a sense of the "too real," denying the possibility for the illusory realm often sought in narrative film. While Hubbard and Birchler are self-proclaimed movie fans, their works clearly imply that simulations are suspect, and refute the constructed sensationalism pervading not just contemporary cinema but the hyper-mediated environment of contemporary media and life as well. The meditative pacing, the increasingly troubling lack of logical causality in the loop structure, and the claustrophobic unease that grows the longer one views the piece all call attention to its construction, and suggest that finite realms and clear dichotomies should be questioned beyond the inescapable loop of Single Wide. Hubbard and Birchler suspend their video work between the outside world (the idea of the real) and the illusory nature of cinema—a state of perpetual liminality made manifest in the structure of the piece itself, the literal spaces of the set, and the architecture created by the movement of the camera.

Throughout the piece, the viewer's eye is fused with the camera's, moving continuously from inside to outside. At times, however, the perspective is omniscient, with walls dissolving and the point of view hovering and swooping from above. Our vision is also confounded by moments of blindness, in which our view of the action is obliterated by a sudden reversion to a real space. You couldn't see into the room that the woman walks through if you were actually standing there outside the window, where your vision is temporarily blocked by the exterior corner of the trailer as you move past. The artists have referred to these moments as

"interpretive voids," in which they purposely disrupt the viewer's sense of continuity and undermine the possibility for a full understanding of the narrative. In fact, Hubbard and Birchler have used the words "seam" or "strip" for this strategy they employ in all of their videos; it connects the images while simultaneously creating the necessary rupture.

Here is a story: The ticking of the clock is too loud for what you should hear from outside the windows, through which you are voyeuristically watching a woman perch before her tiny dressing table, smoothing her hair. What you're sure is a recent cut over her left eyebrow peers at you angrily from the mirror. Her flannel shirt is disarrayed, her expression unreadable. Her calmness seems oddly detached from the destruction that has just occurred. She gets up, carrying a bulging bag with a teddy bear's head peeking over the top, and you follow her along the trailer's exterior until she exits by a cheaply made door that sticks as she slams it shut. The night sounds swell, her expression is determined but melancholy. You can almost feel your eyes adjusting to the deep blue light; it seems darker, more ominous. You are palpably aware of the form of the house behind her. She gets into the pickup truck that is parked out front, the door already open, lights already on, and ignores a cell phone that rings insistently. You notice her second of hesitation; she places a hand on top of her bag as if thinking twice. Circling around the trailer again, a dog barks, the wall dissolves into a girl's room, a bright blue book in a pool of strong light on her little desk. The door is open, the room too pristine, too empty. The ringing phone grates on your nerves, you see the wagon-wheel coffee table in the living room, and feel as if you're moving faster. The kitchen table is set for two; there is a white cake under a glass dome on the counter that demarcates the kitchen, which is clean, nearly sterile. You know what's inside the refrigerator (a child's drawing tacked to the door), because it's sprawled and toppled on its side, a strangely intimate violation. A pair of jeans hangs from the folding chair that suffices at the vanity, pulled back as if someone has just stood up. You are so relieved when the phone stops ringing and you hear the truck engine outside. Are you moving faster or much, much more slowly? Now it's hard to tell. The headlights glint off of an aluminum trashcan outside. The woman cries, hands on her face and, in the interior light of the truck's cab, you clearly see the recent angry cut over her left eye. As you keep moving, seemingly forward, time unravels. It is after the crash but before it again. The cut is because of the crash or what precipitates it. Is it her violence or someone else's that you see? The tension between silence and sound increases each time you walk around the house. With each pass by and through the windows, the phone that you know will ring each time becomes more jarring than the anguished sound of her voice as she pounds the steering wheel.

The Greeks had two words to classify time, kairos and chronos. While chronos designates the continuous measurable flow of the temporal process, kairos points out an emotionally significant moment, an idea of the immediate present that creates meaning. Chronos might be called clock time—determined by the movement of the earth around the sun, constant, calculable, regular. Kairos points to unique experiential occurrences in which this regularity dissolves because of the qualitative, rather than the quantitative, sense of that moment. Single Wide closes the gap between these two disparate perceptions of time, using chronos in service of creating kairos, and kairos to elicit awareness of chronos. Measurable time and

"the moment" become one as the endlessly cycling series of images build and progress and then collapse back on themselves.

Though referencing the cinematic use of slow-motion action to create this conflation of chronos and kairos, Hubbard and Birchler instead treat the entire piece as a kind of narrative slow motion, one that traps you in that experience of time without the sense of normalcy against which to measure it. The Greek approach to kairos dealt specifically with an extension of presentness—essentially "being in the moment" so intensely that it breaks with steady chronos time and expands endlessly to fit the importance of the experience (i.e. a moment of dying, pain, love)—but Single Wide also makes reference to this phenomenon as it relates to memory. The logical progression of moments is undermined by the looping of the video, and the repetition of images with minor variations becomes a literal demonstration of the malleability of memory. That is, significant events in one's life occupy different amounts of memory space, collapsing time and translating it into its importance and impact rather than its temporal actuality. Years of steady, uneventful moments can collapse in "memory weight" against one crucial day, one moment of rupture. The nature of that moment may be monumental and dramatic, or it may be subtle; the character of the memory is less important than its effect. Similarly, in Single Wide, the first story may focus on the truck crashing through the side of the house, the second on the impossible-to-determine origin of the cut over the woman's eye, and by the fifth or sixth it is that unreasonably blue book on the little girl's desk, the ticking of the bedroom clock, or the white cake under the glass dome. "Life," writes A.S. Byatt, "runs in very narrow stereotyped channels, until it is interrupted by accidents or visions…"[7] In Single Wide, accidents and visions become the same, ever-present interruption and suggest that ultimately, the "real thing, in a real place" is only a point of departure to seek the possibilities beyond it.

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NOTES

1. Martin Hentschel and Konrad Bitterli, Teresa Hubbard/Alexander Birchler: Wild Walls (Bielefeld, Germany: Kerber Christof Verlag, 2002), 83.
2. Neal Gabler, Life: The Movie (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 18. Gabler provides a clear, if fairly singular, sociological summation of this process in America, linking the basic premises of more opaque media theory—ranging from Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, and Donna Haraway—to the historical evolution of American entertainment culture.
3. Beatriz Colomina, "The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism," in Sexuality and Space (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 75.

4. Colomina, 83.
5. Hentschel and Bitterli, 79.
6. In addition to his seminal innovations in early photographic mechanics, Louis Daguerre is also credited with the creation and articulation of the diorama. Benjamin's essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" discusses this relationship of the backdrop/panorama and the construction of public space as performance as emblematic of modern life.
7. A.S. Byatt, "Body Art," in Little Black Book of Stories (New York: Knopf, distributed by Random House, 2004), 99.