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Kota Ezawa in Conversation with Constance Lewallen

By Constance Lewallen

In late June this summer, *Rail* consulting Editor Constance Lewallen visited Kota Ezawa's 22nd Street studio in San Francisco to talk about his life and work. (Since the interview was conducted the two works that will be in his new show *Multiplex*, which will be on view at Murray Guy from Sept. 6 to Oct. 18, 2008, *Brawl* and *LYAM 3D*, have been altered. *LYAM 3D*, which is based on *The Last Year at Marienbad*, is now a single channel film presented in 3D, and viewed through red-green glasses. The work based on the Pacers-Pistons basketball fight is titled, *Brawl*, is also a 16mm animated film, and it now has a soundtrack composed of audio recordings from the event.)

Constance Lewallen (Rail): Would you describe what you're going to be including in the show?

Kota Ezawa: That's a difficult task, because I always think I know what I'm going to do and then two days later I change my mind about certain works. Last year I produced a short commission and there are two versions of it. Right now, we're looking at the 4-channel version, which I've never shown, and which will be shown in this show. The title is *Last Year at Marienbad*. The word "Last" is black, the word "Year" is dark gray, the word "at" is a light gray, and "Marienbad" is almost white, so the title also reflects the four screens, which fade from dark to light gray tones.



Brawl (2008). 16mm film with sound. (detail one). Courtesy of Murray Guy.

Rail: How many scenes have you extracted from the Resnais film?

Ezawa: I cut out all the scenes where the actors are in freeze frame positions. It happens throughout the film where the actors don't even blink; they just stand in statuesque poses and I put them next to each other; the scenes make up about four minutes, which is the perfect amount of time for an animation. I also

thought it was an interesting formal issue to make a character animation where the characters really don't move at all. The characters almost become like furniture or spatial elements.

Rail: I've heard that you think of your animations as moving paintings, so it's an interesting inversion—the film contains sections that are like still photographs and you're taking those sections and presenting them as a video projection. Why are you using this film as a source? I know you've used other films in the past like *Who's Afraid of Black, White and Gray*, which is based on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.

Ezawa: I work with archival source material, but I really never sit in an archive to consider footage. It has to come to me. I was interested in discoloration—how can an image be shown in different color values and produce a unified experience? I actually was an artist in residence for seven months at the Akademie Schloss Solitude, which was a baroque castle outside of Stuttgart in Germany. *Last year at Marienbad* also takes place at a baroque luxury hotel in the Czech Republic. It was there that the film came to me as a personal revelation. Of course, the artists in residence look nothing like the actors in the film.

Rail: [Laughs] I know that you're interested in subjects that have a psychological charge, like the reading of the verdict at the end of the OJ Simpson trial, which is the subject of your piece *The Simpson Verdict*. Similarly with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, but how about *Last Year at Marienbad*?



LYAM 3D (2008). 16mm film, silent (film still). Courtesy of Murray Guy.

Ezawa: Well, the story, if you want to call it a story, is that two hotel guests debate whether or not they have met before. The man is convinced that they have had some sort of an affair the year before in the same hotel, while the woman keeps denying it. You can

read this scenario in ten different ways, but it's also a story of desire portrayed in a very austere way. Many people say they fall asleep during this film because of its calmness and emptiness, but on the other hand there's incredible tension. Maybe that's the psychological charge in this film.

Rail: It's also a mystery—you never really know the truth. It is made of a series of events moving at a slow pace. It's also beautiful and classic compositionally.

Ezawa: The film was lauded for its cinematography, and that is why it's discussed in so many film history courses. It's also a film about the camera, and so to take that as a subject of animation is also an interesting problem, because animation is camera-less. It's almost like an experiment—what does cinematography look like in the absence of the camera? And to my surprise there's a strange perceptual thing that occurs. It almost appears to be 3D when objects and figures in the foreground shift against the background in the process of translating cinematography into flat, abstracted animation. You almost think you're looking into a 3D model.

Rail: To create your animations, you take a segment of the source material, the film in this case, and subject it to an animation program. This results in highly simplified images from which the detail is drained. Is that a result of the program you use or do you do something beforehand?

Ezawa: The program does very little. It's a very traditional animation technique. This could also be done just by using cut paper and cameras. There's no digital effect used to create this animation. The only

reasons why I do it on the computer are time, efficiency, and cost. It's almost like backward engineering. I look at the film, and then I try to recreate it using very crude means, a very specific number of elements. For example, there's never a variation in a person's skin tone—each person has one skin color, while in reality every person has millions of different colors in their skin. By simplifying the drawings, the result can be read in a variety of ways. People who have seen this film will see the process where I extract enough information, or, in some cases, I highlight information that makes it recognizable.



Brawl (2008). 16mm film with sound. (detail one). Courtesy of Murray Guy.

remember when you see, for example, the images of eyeballs, eyebrows, bushes in the garden, and so on. It's impossible, otherwise, to remember the original of *Last Year at Marienbad*—there's so much detail, and it's so complex.

Rail: As I understand it, in earlier works you use a collage method that simplifies the source image as an intermediary step. In other words, in *Lennon Sontag Beuys*, for which you extracted iconic moments or speeches from each of those artists and presented them in three images simultaneously, is it true that you created the imagery first in paper cutouts?

Ezawa: It's not true. **Rail:** Then where does paper collage come in to the process?

Ezawa: Paper collage is one step that can occur in image making. I made an exhibition at Haines Gallery in San Francisco in 2006 in which I showed digital images along with slide projections, film projections and paper cutouts. And to viewers who were unfamiliar with my process it read like I made paper cutouts, next I made high-gloss digital images based on the paper cutouts and then I animated them in films. But in reality the process is the complete reverse. I can't tell you exactly why it needs to be in this specific order but the process is non-linear. What I attempt to do is make snakes that bite their own tail. One example is this photograph you see over there. This is a C-print and it started out as the famous battlefield photograph by Jeff Wall—"Dead Troops Talk." I made a Jeff Wall-like box, and then I made a drawing on my computer, based on the Jeff Wall photo, and next I produced it as a 35mm slide and then printed it in a book. Finally, I made a paper cutout collage based on my digital drawing. The paper collage was exactly the size of my C-print, which is a 100% scan of the collage.

Rail: So, you provide just enough information to create that perception of recognizability.

Ezawa: It's a strange claim. I'm trying to look at my own work with cold eyes—not liking or disliking it—just trying to see what's happening. And I have a feeling that the imagery that is my animation is hyper-recognizable, in a way more recognizable than the original. It seems like a contradiction.

Rail: Because you've stripped it down to its essence.

Ezawa: And it's actually easier to read and to

Rail: What you are saying, then, is that a work may exist in many versions—35 mm slide, light box, moving image or still photo. Moreover, the order isn't, as it appears to be—from the simplest to the most complex.

Ezawa: It has to do with my wanting the work to progress rather than to stay as one thing. And progress is a very difficult word. In the past people associated progress with things being more complex or technologically advanced, but I find that simpler and more natural materials are often more progressive than high-tech elements. In other words, paper can be progress from the digital. Now, computers in my studio surround you and maybe ten years from now all there will be are two telephones and a lot of plants or scissors and glue.

Rail: Post post-studio art.

Ezawa: Yeah. I am of the opinion that now progress can mean making things more low-tech and biodegradable.

Rail: Going back a little before going forward again. I know that you went to Düsseldorf Academy where you studied with Nam June Paik and Nan Hoover.

Ezawa: Nan was also a visiting artist at the San Francisco Art Institute before she went to Düsseldorf.

Rail: So you came to the Art Institute, got your BFA in 1995, and then went to Stanford for your MFA, which you received in 2005. Going back, where did you grow up and when did you move from Germany to the U.S.?

Ezawa: I grew up near Stuttgart and came to the U.S. in 1994.

Rail: It must have been a great experience to study at the legendary Düsseldorf Academy where the ghost of Joseph Beuys was still present.

Ezawa: The director was then, and still is, the painter, Marcus Lüpertz. In the early '90s it still had the reputation of being the cutting edge school of West Germany, but it had moved in the direction of a painting and sculpture program. A.R. Penck started teaching there at the time. The film and video program was not even in the same building, and photography was with architecture in a separate building. But I felt really comfortable in film/video, because I thought it was more international than the big German painting classes.

Rail: Was the study of painting required?

Ezawa: There was a first year program that included painting. There was something that I really appreciated about Lüpertz—under him it was just an academy. Once you were accepted you were just part of this atmosphere and forum of ideas. There was no formal course of study. Then the German government required that every institution of higher learning offer a degree program. Marcus Lüpertz gave a speech saying, "This school now offers a degree program, but I tell you: DON'T do it." *[Laughter]* He was rebelling against the idea of an art degree. That's one big difference from American art schools—it was a lot less academic. The other difference is that the course program is like a master apprentice program rather than curriculum based. After the first year you have to show your work to one of the master teachers, and the master says, "I'll take you," or "I won't take you." If you're not accepted you take your portfolio to the next professor until somebody says yes.

Rail: At the San Francisco Art Institute in the New Genres department, who was your primary teacher—was it Paul Kos or Doug Hall?

Ezawa: Neither of them, unfortunately. I was only there for three semesters, and had no encounters with them. I met Paul Kos later on, and I wish I had studied with him. But luckily, the person I met in my first semester and studied under was Nayland Blake. He really turned my work around. I already had a developed body of work out of my studies at the Kunstakademie, and I was very interested in conceptual videos and minimal forms. And after taking the course with Nayland I started making these exuberant and

hard-to-define narrative pieces. They are nothing like the work I do now, so he didn't set me on the track I followed, but he really shook the foundations of my practice, which I'm very grateful for.

Rail: Let's talk about the first piece that put you on the map, *The Simpson Verdict* (2002), which features three minutes around the reading of the verdict. Did you make it in the same way you make your current work?

Ezawa: More or less. I mean the material is the same. The process changes very slowly and very incrementally. But *The Simpson Verdict* was the piece where I developed this entire process.



Portrait of the artist.
Pencil on paper by
Phong Bui.

Rail: The sound is the actual soundtrack from trial, coupled with the animated imagery of the reading of the verdict and the various attitudes and expressions that transpire across the major players. I've seen that piece many times and still find it really gripping. You've also said that the inspiration for your imagery is not other video art, but painting—going back to Russian Suprematist painting and Minimal art, passing through Ellsworth Kelly, perhaps.

Ezawa: Yeah, that's the visual language. Color values create the visual experience, and there's no camera image. It's video, because that's the technology that's used to display it. I often times think of the work of Nam June Paik, because he really understood so well what a monitor is and what a projector is. I think he called them video suns and video moons. He understood how viewers interact physically with these machines. That's definitely a part of it. But the form within the video image comes out of painting. And not all animation looks the same. There's a problem calling this animation. Most animation doesn't use this kind of color value imagery. It's created by black outlines that are filled in with colors. There are no black outlines in my work. I feel that's

almost like a political stance. In the Renaissance Italy there was the School of Venice and the School of Florence. Florence used lines, and Venice used color, and I'm Venice.

Rail: [Laughs] That's a good way of putting it. The Simpson video was shown in 2002, but it probably took you a year or so to make it. Is that generally the case—you work on one piece over a long period of time?

Ezawa: I can make one or two animations a year while making etchings or photographs at the same time.

Rail: *The Simpson Verdict* was followed by *Who's Afraid of Black, White, and Gray?* which refers, title-wise, to Barnett Newman and Robert Irwin who both used the title *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*. They must be two artists that you admire.

Ezawa: I have to say it was really Barnett Newman who inspired the title. He was one of my first encounters with abstract art and really changed my perception.

Rail: When I saw the piece *Lennon Sontag Beuys* at New Langton Arts in San Francisco, the effect was cacophonous in that you really had to strain to isolate one soundtrack from another, and sometimes you couldn't. But you've shown it in situations where it's easier to discern the three texts separately, so I guess for you it works in both ways.

Ezawa: New Langton Arts was the first showing of it. And I can't really say that a piece is ever...of course it's a completed work, but it's not necessarily finished. But the second time you show it there's usually a difference from the first time. The second time was at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh. And this frustration that you describe of not being able to understand what was being said was a surprise to me. I realize that that was a reaction that the piece received at New Langton Arts. I was never so concerned with the literal meaning of the words. It comes from being a foreigner. You can understand language as a sonic

experience. But for native speakers, English is married to extraction of meaning, so when people hear voices they want to extract meaning. So I thought in later installations that this opportunity should be available, but there should also always be moments where frustration becomes one part of this piece—an opportunity to dig for meaning.

Rail: *[Laughs]* Well, the meaning of the piece obviously depends not only on the text and the imagery, but also on the three subjects, who all have an indelible place in the art culture and also, beyond that, in the political culture. Putting them together really does make you think about their involvement in the world, as well as with their own professions. In Sontag's case it's writing, and with Lennon it's music, with Beuys it's making art, teaching, a little bit of everything. Did you ever actually meet Joseph Beuys?

Ezawa: No, he died in the '80s, before my time at the Academy. Of course in Düsseldorf Beuys comes up every ten minutes. For example there's always controversy—he made so many pencil marks on the walls...

Rail: Oh, whether to erase them or not? *[Laughs]*.

Ezawa: *[Laughs]* Whether to erase them or whether they could paint over them. For example, this may be legend but someone once told me, that there were Beuys pencil marks all over the wall in Markus Lupertz's office. He didn't want to always be surrounded by Beuys pencil marks, so they built walls—

Rail: In front of the walls *[laughs]*. Well that's a good solution.

Ezawa: There's one thing that just came to my mind also about this idea of meaning or legible text and illegible text. I've not only shown my work in the U.S. but also in a number different countries. *Lennon Sontag Beuys* was also shown in a traveling group exhibition in Spain; it traveled from Barcelona, to Bilbao and Mallorca. The curators of the exhibition said the Spanish public really doesn't understand English, so this work needs to be subtitled. I was always against subtitling my work, because I felt all of the work is visual, and there cannot be any additional visual elements. But then I asked what language the subtitles would be in, and they said they would be in Catalan and Basque, and I allowed them to do this. It really became this Tower of Babel—it was really hard to understand the speakers speaking English and at the same time subtitled in two different languages.

Rail: *[Laughs]* But it must have been disturbing to the image, no?

Ezawa: For some reason I thought it created a really interesting conflict—the image of Susan Sontag with Basque text.

Rail: What other pieces are included in the show?

Ezawa: One is titled *Pistons Pacers*. What you actually hear is two TV simultaneous broadcasts, and each one has two commentators; ESPN, and the local Detroit TV.

Rail: They're overlapping?

Ezawa: Yes, and something really crazy happened during this game. To me it has nothing to do with sports. During a play one player got fouled and a fight broke out. Although it only lasts about five minutes, it became really monumental. Nobody really got hurt or anything, but it became almost like a Rubens painting; it just started becoming bigger and bigger. Normally sports broadcast is very centric; it focuses on the ball or the action around the ball. This broadcast was very confusing, because there were so many centers of action. Therefore, the commentators had to adjust their usual way of commenting. The interesting problem for me is how to translate that into animation. It's really a problem of abstraction.

Rail: So what was the idea behind combining the two soundtracks? To echo the chaotic activity on the screen?

Ezawa: It's really also the problem of image and sound. With *The Simpson Verdict*, I used the original soundtrack—it was kind of an accident. My initial idea was to recreate the sound just like I would recreate the image—to recreate the sound with voice actors. But then I did a work in progress screening at Stanford, and because I didn't have the real soundtrack completed, I just used the real soundtrack, and the result was

interesting. It's because hearing and seeing are two completely different physical activities; we think that they belong together, but they really don't. It's more like... eating and walking. That's why I think it works well to use image and sound that have different origins and qualities. So that's why when I make this collage of sound, I try to make it more abstract and more its own thing in order to create a contrast to the image. We talked about suprematism and constructivism, but Sergei Eisenstein was also an inspiration for me because he was one of the film directors who were really upset about the advent of sound film, but then when it came, he embraced it. He said that when we use sound, sound has to be in a battle with the image, they have to be in competition. Just like I create an abstraction of the image, I also want to create an abstraction of the sound.

Rail: How about a sculpture with video combination? Is that the third possible piece?

Ezawa: It was originally meant for the *Pistons Pacers* animation, which is shown on four flat screen TVs that hang like a chandelier from the ceiling. Then the chandelier slowly rotates like a carousel or a disco ball. And here you have some speakers for the sound. But at some point I got disenchanted with what the image does to the sculpture or what the sculpture does to the image, because it could look like a stadium display, and I didn't want it to be an abstraction of a stadium display. I wanted it to be more like a reference to Alexander Calder—a video mobile. And now I have an idea of different imagery that will play on these monitors.

Rail: That will be new for you—video sculpture.

Ezawa: Yes. It's a practical issue. Not every building ceiling supports such a hanging structure.

Rail: Will it be designed so that the monitors are above one's head so you'll be looking up at them?

Ezawa: Yeah. Eight feet high maybe.

Rail: So are you now developing the new imagery?

Ezawa: I think I know what it is, but, like I said, it's a fluid process.

Rail: There's another piece of yours we haven't talked about, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which is based on D.W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* about the assassination of Lincoln, combined with the Zapruder film of the assassination of Kennedy.

Ezawa: It's a 16mm film, which parallels my still image series "The History of Photography Remix". To me it was a mini film history. The two pieces bracket the development of film from 1930 to the '60s, and in between that time major things happened. It's really an odd piece. I felt uncomfortable with it at first, because it's such trodden terrain. There have been so many artists who have already dealt with this issue. But it's really intriguing to work with these materials. These two film clips have a real magnetism. They are the same length—30 seconds each—and they have an interesting dialogue with each other. Of course they both show an assassination of a U.S. president, but they also talk about film in interesting ways. D.W. Griffith was the inventor of narrative fiction drama, the founder of Hollywood. Then Zapruder's film was the first in which amateur recording became more significant than professional recording; the tv broadcast was nothing compared to the amateur recording. Now we've fully moved into the era where amateur recording and amateur broadcast (YouTube, etc.) have surpassed professional broadcasting, professional production.

Rail: Yeah, that's right. Are you familiar with the Ant Farm video, *The Eternal Frame* (1976)?

Ezawa: Yeah, that was a little bit of my issue with these. I knew of the Ant Farm film, and of the Bruce Conner film (*Report*, 1963-1967). The dialogue that occurred as a result of doing this almost banal piece, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, I found quite interesting. The first to respond to it was [the] Wrong Gallery in New York. They created an exhibition for the 2006 Whitney Biennial and they included it. It created an interesting context with other artists' work. I thought that just by their choosing it that it meant that there's something wrong with this piece [*laughs*], and I'm really interested in wrong.

Rail: We haven't really talked about "The History of Photography Remix" (2005), which is based on photographs, both amateur and professional, from the history of photography, and is interspersed with

personal photos. I read that it came out of your first formal study of the history of photography at Stanford. It was a requirement, but then it stimulated your interest in these images. Are you still attached to it?

Ezawa: Yeah. I think it was kind of a problematic project to start with. It was problematic in so many different ways—technically, legally, conceptually—I can't even list them all, but problems bring you to new ways of working, new ways of seeing what you do. I also learned something about my drawing process, that it doesn't only simplify imagery, it also erases a lot of things. When Walter Benjamin wrote about photography he said that the great advantage of photography is that it gets rid of the patina of an artwork, it's a factual experience of art, and not the romanticism of the aging surface. But I find that's exactly what we admire in photographs now—the bent corners, and the sepia tone of the early photographs, the fading black and white of photos in photo albums...but by redrawing them, I really got rid of the patina of the photographs. So a photograph from 1920 looked exactly like a photo from 1995.

Rail: So it was a kind of leveling.

Ezawa: Yes, leveling. A destruction of the linear history of photography. And then another thing you mentioned—personal versus iconic photography—it also erases that history. You have been a professional in the art world for a long time so you probably know many of them, but you don't know every Winogrand or Friedlander photograph in the world. So there's always confusion: is this a well-known photograph or an amateur snapshot? They equalize in this process. They are not distinguishable. In the galleries you can distinguish them. For example, when you see a mural size photograph by Richard Misrach, you know that no amateur has the means to make a photo that size.

Rail: Right, or technical proficiency.

Ezawa: But in my redrawn style a Misrach looks exactly like the same as a picture my aunt took.