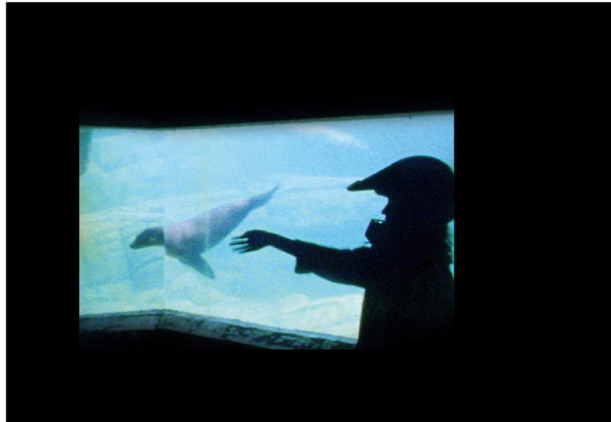


Shezad Dawood
by Doug Ashford

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Still from *It was a time that was a time*, 2015, HD, Super 8 and Super 16mm transferred to HD, 16 minutes, 27 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Timothy Taylor, London and LUX, London.

Shezad Dawood and I met at last year's Vienna Biennale, where we were both part of the exhibition *Future Light*. During a walk-through, the curator, Maria Lind, asked us to spontaneously speak in front of our work to a group of artists and other visitors. Hearing Shezad speak, I noticed right away our affinity across a prime spectrum of methods and how we both saw the form of our work as an embodiment of doubt. I have often been struck by connections between art workers that are made at the moment of display and by feeling the energy of a work's proposal together. But the parallels between Dawood's and my own approach were unexpected, crossing media and time.

After our first encounter, Shezad and I pledged to see each other again; we continued our dialogue in front of pictures by Paolo Uccello and Henri Rousseau at the National Gallery in London, and later at his recent exhibition at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn. The Skype conversation below took place in December and was expanded in writing.

—Doug Ashford

Doug Ashford Tell me about your thoughts on the relationship between history and fiction. How do you bear the mandate of historical responsibility and its insistence on causation? Your films are so well researched and do seem to cycle around facts, but never epistemologically address events as exactly knowable. Or at least they seem to resist the present industrial atmosphere of "knowledge production" in art.

Shezad Dawood For me it's about avoiding the didactic. It's about work being historically and epistemologically researched to the point that you can hit the self-destruct button on your own set of references. That opens up a generous proposition to the audience. The idea of constructing an exhibition is never separate from an ethical relationship to audience. Ethical is non-didactic, it's non-dictatorial. One of the things that had interested me both with Group Material and with your practice subsequently—the kind of continuum that is also a metaphor for our friendship—is a generous ambiguity. Does that make sense?

DA It does. My past practice, as a member of Group Material, consisted of consolidating art around the editorializations of history through exhibition design. This practice has now developed a new context as I'm building form back into historical references through the reminiscence of abstraction. After seeing your work at Pioneer Works in Brooklyn this past fall, I realized that your own reinvention of references mirrors what I'm interested in. The ambiguities of a crystalline present in the moment of an exhibition could be seen as a way of reflecting on time and history. Perhaps for us, the caprice of history and its documentation can

be exploded into a dream state, a performance outside of any concrete referent. All we have left are images.

SD For me, it's about being meticulous in the crafting of rereadings of history. I see history as a reediting cycle of constructs, fictions, call it what you will, that start to create concentric rings around each other. That's where the segue from history into time becomes quite pivotal. Thinking about time scientifically—very much as non-linear—and thinking about quantum fields and parallel universes, everything in that speaks to artistic possibility.



Menhirs III, 2010, acrylic on vintage textile, 69.3 × 52.4 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Jane Lombard, New York.

DA These days I would like to think that as artists we're always working outside of linear time. As someone who was trained in the schizophrenic context of the '70s art academy—reading with Martha Rosler in the morning and speculating on dreams with Reuben Kadish in the afternoon—the institutional settings that lock art into a regime of progress were completely scrambled. Institutional Critique was always matched for me by an anti-historicism, one of those post-Surrealist and early Marxist narrations of art's potential. This was an Abstract Expressionism that was being fed in a different way than we were asked to understand by most art historians and in which the artist was imagined as always outside of time in order to make the historical past uniquely contemporary in their own work. Reuben used to insist that he was in a present-day collaboration with the Renaissance painter Uccello, and if this sounded like a phantasmagoric statement in the '70s, I realize more and more that it's actually a very practical statement.

SD I see my practice always as collaborative—whether that's the literal collaboration that takes place in the production of a film where you've got many people working with you to realize your vision, or in the making of my textile pieces with the original weavers of those textiles. It's a process of sitting with a bunch of ghosts in a room.

DA In 2013, the Metropolitan Museum produced a textile exhibition called *Interwoven Globe*, which I believe meant to outline the influence of the different contexts of colonial exchange on textiles in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. It blew my mind seeing how specific forms were used and reused as emblems of human life across cultures. For instance, a palampore bed cover from Tamil Nadu depicting the tree of life would be cut up and made into a priest's vestment in Mexico City and simultaneously copied in Albany by a careful farmer to display on his wall. This idea of recombining not just the means of production—the base context of economic exploitation—but the super-structural dream state of emotional attachment to the same image, the same tree ... it was overwhelming. Perhaps this transubstantiation is particular to textiles in the sense that the existing body of cloth, the useful thing, allows us to carry hidden or unwritten histories as we go from event to event, and from place to place. The thing's imagery would then be reinterpreted at each moment to have a different kind of life.

SD I see a parallel between that and how you use and explode abstraction. Patterns have a wonderful segue where it actually ceases to be important whether something is a figuration or an abstraction. It's more about what it reveals structurally, whether that's a literal geopolitics

—I don't know if you know but all the textiles I use as the grounds for my paintings come from Pakistan and from the '70s, when I was a kid there. I grew up in Karachi, which is part of the province of Sindh, and the city has a long-standing tradition of nomadic Saami weavers. We had an industrial textile boom there in the '70s, all these new factories popping up. But the nomadic weavers started to build their huts around the factories and incorporated the new mechanized prints into their hand-weaving. Although beautiful and highly decorative, they were utilitarian in that they weren't for sale. The particular quilts and textiles that I use in my work are actually the continuity of these weavers' passage through space. Literally, their shelters would be temporary but these quilts, which were often three to six layers thick so they'd be more hard-wearing, are the continuity of their narrative.

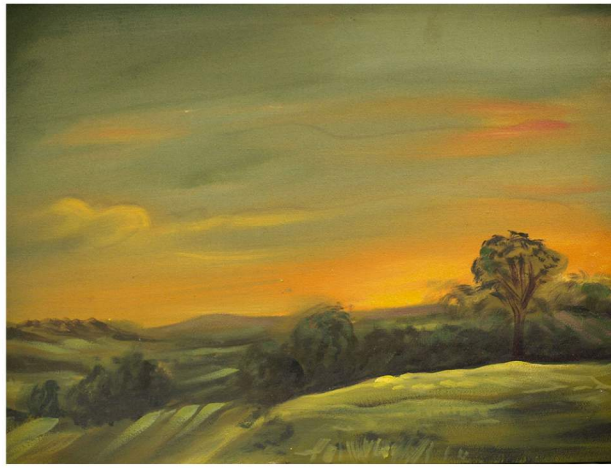
DA It's beautiful to see this confrontation between felt histories and the contexts of economic determination. It can physically produce political affinity.

SD It becomes interestingly hybrid. There's another layer to it: these factories were initially responding to demand not from the West but from the new South-South. These exchanges were going on through the Non-Aligned movement when it was at its high point in the '70s. So you had all these patterns coming in from places like Lagos, Kyoto, Shanghai—I don't know how exactly they might have progressed but I love to speculate. Let's say somebody from Lagos liked the Japanese pattern and said, "We want one of those but with more saturated color." So the patterns started to melt and morph into this utopian frisson, which added another layer on top of the utopian frisson of hand and machine interlocking. So you arrived at these cyborg textiles, with all these cultural juxtapositions or mutations happening. Interestingly, these textiles were only really produced until 1979, the year the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. A couple of years earlier you have the military coup in Pakistan, which then falls very much under US influence. So actually the beautiful, social aspects of these textiles also have this oddly geopolitical resonance—they speak of an ultimately temporary cosmopolitan utopia.

DA Things glow beyond their utility. That vibrancy allows a connection that I can have now, hundreds of years later, to recognize another human's value. This may be similar to the way that abstract form built social identification, in the utopian sense, for people in early twentieth century Europe. It is sad though that, in their obsession to collect and classify, the modern recipients of that colonial narrative had to name the Other with such brutality. But what began the discussion around abstraction in the first place were the clashes around what could be understood as a valuable form or means of representation. For the German art historian Wilhelm Worringer, abstraction was understood as coming from what he called a "primitive" culture. The crisis of the modern imagination, which he felt was locked in the mistaken capriciousness of naturalism, could only be overcome if we faced our anxiety by confronting abstract forms. These were the forms he found in the ethnographic collections of his time.

SD You also see it in Mondrian's blanket shift from naturalism to abstraction. This reaching after points of origin is ultimately the last fictionalization. Mondrian's shift into abstraction was very much informed by certain esoteric schools of this time. You see it even more in Kandinsky's writing and his debt to theosophy.

You were picking up on my Skype profile photo, in which I'm wearing a hat in front of a fake John Constable painting. It's an early body of work for which I commissioned cinema painters in Pakistan to make scale copies of twenty Constable landscapes. The whole piece is called *Arcadia* after the Poussin painting, so it's already replacing one landscape painter for another. But the point of entry for me—in terms of fictionalization or abstraction of landscape—was that by the time Constable had his children, he was already living in an urban London setting. But the settings of the paintings were already popularly known as Constable country, like Cornard Wood among others. Interestingly, in his diaries there's a whole record of his daughter bugging him to go and visit this famous Constable country and so he organizes a trip with her and she turns around—he records this in a journal entry—and says, "But, Daddy, it's just fields."



Arcadia, 2003–2004, oil on canvas, series of twenty paintings, variable dimension. Courtesy of APT Collection.

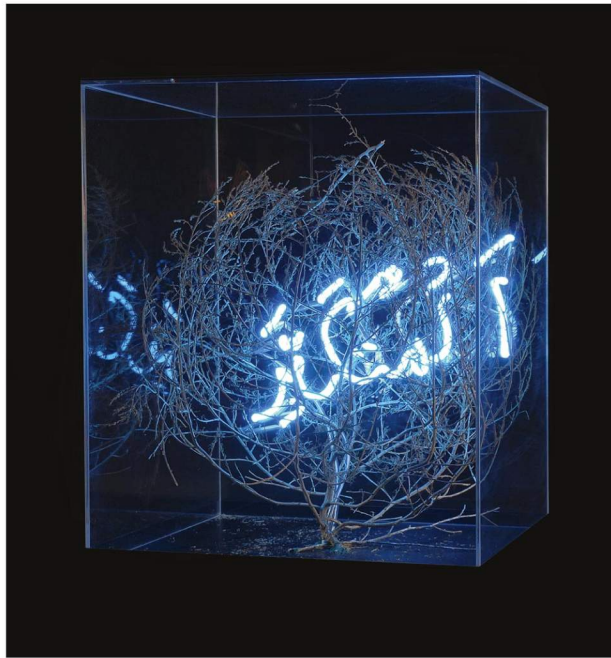
DA (*laughter*) I love Britain's capacity to reorganize reality according to the vision of the artist! Was it Oscar Wilde who said that there was no fog in London before Turner? One could see this as ambiguity but I see it as a radical insistence on interpretation—the making of new feelings as establishing facts in the future.

SD I'd agree with you there. I tried to leverage my use of ambiguity with that backstory, but the key term is generosity. It's become all too fashionable to close down a series of statements. What your early work with Group Material freed up by exploding meaning is very important. Art needs to be an internalized critique rather than an objectivized critique, which always falls victim to its own attempts to profess, or self-determine as, objectivity. In order to free up the set of references or values or hierarchies that one is forever deconstructing and reconstructing, one needs to actually hit the auto-destruct button and push one reference this direction, that way or another. Then there's actually space for the spectator to enter as an active participant rather than a passive one and a false democratic subject.

DA Exactly, because the democratic subject is made false by being constantly organized around facts, either as display or documentation—facets of contemporary life that pretend to be user-friendly. The reader or viewer is positioned as someone who is supposed to take on the correct interpretation. This to me is a very dark moment in how art is managed. I try to reflect that back to the artists themselves, which is why I like your attraction to the destructive aspect of exploding historical references. A critical project, perhaps too quickly dismissed by Institutional Critique and cultural relativism, can become a new appropriation, or even a theft, of the definitions imposed by the colonialist narrative. So many of the "new subjectivities" built by today's art seem in the end to become just more heroic additions to the European master narrative.

SD Or bourgeois additions at worst. I like to think of not creating an oppositional framework. Something that I took from your writing and from your practice is the generosity in leaving a space open for both an internal and external narrative to play out, because it's just a more honest attribution of what we can do as artists. There's the research, there's the intuition. If it is only one or the other, it's lacking a fundamental humor or a human quality. Oh dear, I sound like I'm stepping into a kind of Romanticism there.

DA For me, a significant part of this conversation finds its origin in a radical Romanticism, one that should be remembered in the sense of Friedrich Hölderlin's maxim that the reorganization of the subject has to happen in the *caesura*, the disruption, of the procession of real things. We are able to act differently in a world that has been reassigned with aesthetic value, a new kind of action that produces social rupture. Which is why the different Romantic traditions, including those enveloping Constable, have such political currency. They create a moment, as you might call it, of destructive reuse.



The Majestic, 2007, neon, tumbleweed, and enameled aluminum plinth, 64.2 x 20.2 x 20.1 inches. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London.

SD I'm thinking about the British tradition of bricolage as a popular form of image-making that goes all the way back to King Mob and to the punk movement. It's a way of playing with radical subjectivity but in a self-aware way. It's not unconscious; it's very much an active, engaged subjectivity.

DA But the subject of art these days seems so limited by the cult of biography—this may be a vestige of the dark side of Romanticism. A film production is collaborative and generative—it happens across disciplines, agency, and with other people. But often the work ends up being reduced to just being about us as individuals. Are you finding this also to be the case? Maybe I'm just complaining about art's reduction to commodification.

SD You know I spent so much time worrying and auto-criticizing on this subject that I ran the danger of solipsism. I got too fixated on the problem and was actually enforcing or reinstating it. Every time things were going well, I'd think, How do I free this up? Every time my work was actually making money, I got a little nervous. There was this notion of—if this is where value is starting to condense, I need to go off here for a while. Then I can revisit this space when it's more fluid again. Looking back I can actually see how well that's served me in terms of keeping my thinking and practice from concretizing around similar structures of value.

DA Yes. It's not that the immediate compensation of our labor is corrupt, it's that the context of this labor is forced to reflect a larger corruption.

SD At one point I was making sculptural objects with neon Arabic script inside of tumbleweeds. Each one represents one of the ninety-nine beautiful names of God. For me these sculptures are a metaphor for the clash of civilizations and things occurring within and without. They were meant to be a concise statement about material and immaterial forms and how we spin them in this perpetual opposition to avoid people seeing that they're actually the same form. These became really successful and commodified overnight and I thought, Oh, I need to go make a film now. My gallerist at the time said, "You're making more money than you've ever dreamed of. Why are you going off to a field to make a film with a bunch of performance artists?"

DA We share that interest in a multi-form practice and a remaking of artistic roles. The discomfort in having any unified idea of work or occupation has been something that I've worked hard to overcome. But I still worry—maybe because my current project is so located in the crafting of discrete objects—that autonomy becomes more and more a locus of identification.

SD I don't see your practice in that way. I see it as an open set of signifiers that have their own critical positions. It's a living inquiry and that keeps it very cogent and alive; it doesn't come to rest.

DA Restlessness is probably inevitable for me. When I collected my writings for the little book made at Grazer Kunstverein a couple of years ago, I entered the essays and interviews in reverse chronological order. A reader might walk back through ideas from painting to exhibition and see that the drive to make meaning is consistent—even though the form and context are always shifting. As you know, most of my time is spent teaching at Cooper Union and Yale. Now, at the end of the semester, I'm feeling particularly bruised by the frustrations that my students feel as they try to produce work that is authentic in spite of the accepted bureaucracies of meaning. I try to teach toward what people want and don't yet know, rather than what they can already make for pre-existing places.

SD Well, there's desire and then there's *desire*, isn't there? With my students, for a long time, it was all about managing that question—what was the desire they were voicing and what was the desire that they didn't believe was acceptable within the parameters of the institution. For me, teaching was not only about how to challenge that expectation but also to challenge, quite literally and pragmatically, how that work was valued by the institution. I remember one student who was struggling the whole year, she just couldn't find the form for a set of ideas. So I said, "It's a film script." I was known for encouraging students to go where they really wanted to go but didn't dare to because they weren't sure their ideas were permissible. Institutionally we still struggle with that idea of permissibility.

DA What if we saw the classroom as a film script? Or, as an event organized to design a criminal enterprise, or other paranoid responses to discipline. This is not to say I am against medium specificity and its revelations—I just discovered Venetian turpentine and the clipping mask in *Illustrator*. Perhaps we're doing our students a disservice if we are only teaching them how to fit into what already exists as a context for art, and not providing them with the opportunity to change the institutional setting for artistic practice in general.

SD I'm as uncomfortable in certain art-world conditions as I am in the academy. I think in the wider context of the humanities, the mantra is new knowledge, but it's always within the syntax that already exists.



Still from *Feature*, 2008, super 16mm transferred to HD, 55 minutes.
Courtesy of the artist and Timothy Taylor, London and LUX, London.

DA Can we be against knowledge production?

SD I think it's not about being against knowledge production, though I appreciate the radicalism of that statement. But there's a way of asking, What is knowledge? What do you mean by knowledge? What is it that I or you or my students are truly interested in realizing as a knowledge embodiment? If it's to go and meditate in a cave for ten years, that's valid. If it's to punch people in the face, that's valid within certain subjective restraints (or maybe not). When you talked about the classroom as film script or as crime scene, I was smiling because

I've done both of those.

There was a period when I was brought in to do performance workshops at different academies in Europe. Most of my film practice came out of a performance practice that evolved through questions about documentation and curating events. It somehow segued into film. I'm an accidental filmmaker. I've always been interested in the *Cahiers du Cinéma* approach and its structural syntax. One of my earliest longer form films, called *Feature* (2008), was a play on Samuel Beckett's *Film*— the Alan Schneider film that Beckett and Buster Keaton worked on—and on their famously terrible relationship. I'm interested in those structures, how they recur as open-ended, filmic narratives. Even in my film, *A Mystery Play* (2010), there's still the character of Keaton's ghost walking through. But that film was shot as a series of performative vignettes that I cobbled together into a very awkward film—if it can be called a film. Apropos of crime scenes, at the Beaux-Arts Academy in Paris, I worked with a group of students to make an erotic, crime, exploitation flick. We used Sergio Martino's *Your Vice Is a Locked Room and Only I Have the Key* (1972) as a template.

DA Beautiful.

SD The students and I had to devise ways to use different locations within the institution to invent ever more baroque ways to kill each other. Although I was leading the workshop,

I was also a participant. We had groups and it became like an exquisite corpse in terms of the methodology but also in terms of a lot of corpses ending up around the campus of the Beaux-Arts school, which is a hilariously classical setting, almost the cliché art school in the Romantic tradition.

DA Cliché only in the sense that it will always be true.

SD (*laughter*) Maybe that goes back to your first question about fiction. For me, history and fiction are actually interchangeable to a degree that we are afraid to confront.

DA I'm interested in trying to insist on the idea of making arguments for no longer producing knowledge within the context of an already planned future. The catastrophe of relentless planning and building coherent subjects is something I feel strongly in the bureaucracy imposed around my classroom—it redirects students' energy toward acceptable "professionalism." I recognize in your work an abstract relation to research that lets an audience feel the possibility of theses, but in the end lets them fly loose for speculation and an energetic anxiety. Knowledge made open in a place where all definitions can be doubted—I always wanted exhibitions to be like that. Questioning fixed definitions of what artworks could or should do, but also what you or I could do.



Still from *A Mystery Play*, 2010, super 16mm transferred to HD, 15 minutes.
Courtesy of the artist and Timothy Taylor, London and LUX, London.

SD Or questioning whether the most interesting dimension is the wall, the floor, the ceiling, or the flickering attraction to somebody else who's just walked into the space—understanding *that* as a complimentary, open set of systems is letting loose the referent. I definitely had my more Buddhist phase of negating the referent, but now I think it's about letting loose the referent. Say, in my paintings, I juxtapose an anthropological image which in a particular

context would be read as colonial, with another set of layers that refigures or repurposes it. But it's still repurposed in contradistinction with the next image. That constant process of editing both in time and literally in space allows a very different negotiation of affect, intention, and subjectivity.

But to come back to education, this idea of cohesion that you spoke about, I see it as a key hurdle in the current moment. I don't think it's any surprise that conditions in one system are paralleling conditions in another. I see it in the narrow need for resolutions in cinema these days. I don't want to oversimplify a much larger context where some very important work is being done, but cinema in the public imagination seems to have been reduced to a number of fairly controllable subgenres with very purposeful resolutions to prevent any idea of ambiguity. The closing down of ambiguity I see as the correspondent to a fear-based culture, because a control mechanism is very intelligently operating across different disciplines.

DA I feel this so strongly in the States right now. All context for ambiguous or expansive reformulations of the self are redirected toward fear and sadism.

I guess that fascism is a familiar story.

SD I see it equally in terms of cultural production pegged to serialization and merchandising. There's no space for the Pasolini of this world to occur. Pasolini's radical subjectivity was about opening up a space that was reflecting back on cinema but with all the warmth of someone who was a passionate Romantic and critic. I'm thinking of Pasolini's *Appunti per un film sull'India*, which is one of my favorite works of his—he realized he didn't need to make a film about India and that even the attempt to do so was somehow quixotic. To embody all the potential of what the film might have been and to say, "This is what I was able to think of"—I find that radically political. To actually close it down further in any way would have been a betrayal of the subject.

DA Or to organize the film toward knowledge as a tool for the preservation of the present.

SD Actually both the left and the right are equally guilty of that.

DA Here we are with a kind of heroism that makes me quite nervous. It presents a context for cultural production that's limited to an existing sense of personal autonomy based in either fear or technocratic practicality. The politics of the Occupy Movement were extremely important to me in how they demanded a rejection of rationalized agendas for political work. This implied for me a reorganizing of the document itself, the photojournalistic aspiration of mediation and resolution, which is maybe why I can't take the photograph out of my painting.

SD I think it's always there. It's the construct of the image, isn't it? Because as soon as you have the image set out by an author, however loose, say, even in our case, there is something at stake. That image has been staked. I like to have both—the image being staked but also have the rug pulled out from under it. For me, your *Bakersfield CA Series* from 2013 is all about that. It's about renegotiating a key moment in American subjectivity but in its relevance to the present moment. And the use of abstract painting combined with the photographic archive, it's a questioning on a series of levels up to the meta, but the meta for me is almost in the glass more than in the abstraction. It's the fragmentation of the whole epistemological process. It goes back to this need for resolution that has become the taint of both the left and the right at this point in the proceedings. How do you think of another way of knowledge production or methodology in which we continue to act as artists or activists, filmmakers, writers, curators? For me it's not to abandon any of those positions but to keep problematizing them, to keep asking the questions.

DA Take those references and open them into a situational context in which there can only be speculation.

SD Absolutely! You've hit it on the head. I was going to come back to the film I made in New York state, *It was a time that was a time*.

DA Yes. I was so moved by that work when I saw it with you at Pioneer Works. It was very resonant of the ongoing "emergency" reorganizations of New York City that always seem to result in more gentrifying financialization—Superstorm Sandy being only the latest example.

But you didn't approach Sandy and its devastation with documentary authority, instead you seemed to isolate its experience into an incoherent or unending thesis about how people reorganize themselves face-to-face. After the disaster how should I dress? Who should I address? I'm faced with a human in a fantastical dialogue, with an animal or with her necessary animalism in the state of survival. Living on as improvisational work—I saw that as image in the film and felt it as actual performative process.



Installation view of *It was a time that was a time*, Pioneer Works, Brooklyn, 2015. Courtesy of Pioneer Works, Brooklyn.

SD It was ethically very important not to overstep the whole experience of Sandy, which I had no firsthand knowledge of, and to respect the subjective presence of the whole group of people who worked for that film.

DA You see how anti-documentarian that is, right? And how anti-authoritarian its proposal may be? And then how abstract rebellion must often be, withdrawn and unrecognizable at first, except to just us, just here. If I had to remember such redefinitions around an event, most likely I would think of how after the 9/11 bombing, people on the street walked up to total strangers asking, "Are you okay?" I don't bring that up for sentimentality (although rejection of tenderness seems part of how the event was redirected into war), but more to remember how territorializations of the self are suspended at those moments. Watching the film, I had those memories and felt the work was an enactment of those suspensions: outside of self and even outside species! It reminded me of something Jimmie Durham said years ago: that he feels most proud to be able to identify as a representative of a being that is classified as mammalian. Our brothers and sisters are strong: as bats we can fly like birds and as seals we can swim like fish!

SD There's a beautiful quote from Donna Haraway. She said: "All that is unhuman is not unkind."

There's a redemptive potential that came through in the making of that film through a set of chance occurrences. I'm a believer in "the artist proposes and the universe disposes." On that meeting ground is where the important stuff happens for me, where a set of images, possibilities, dialogues with people both living and dead actually start forming. Yes, I might give them form but that's almost secondary; the primary activity is the form that occurs between those conversations. And in an exhibition like the one at Pioneer Works, the spaces

between the works are the enactments. They represent the speculative possibility of relationship.

DA People often refer to your work as reflecting upon a shamanistic practice, but I don't necessarily agree. I shy away from the ethnographic definitions of the magician or hero and would rather see it related to an institutional rearrangement that is more about an empathy with things that are not us.

SD For me, it's always structural critique. When people ask me questions about magic or shamanism or particular life experiences, I try to maintain a cover of plausible deniability.

DA When a scientist can become a criminal.

SD Yes, and necessarily criminal. I think it's very important to be criminal in terms of our pursuits, our appropriations, our relationships, because otherwise we're not treating them with the appropriate respect. Or maybe a better expression is the idea of fugitive: fugitive meaning, but also *the* fugitive—whether we're aiding and abetting a fugitive or we *are* the fugitive. Meaning is always fugitive and it's instructive: when you have that epiphany nugget or light-bulb moment, that means it's already time to leave.

Doug Ashford is an artist and writer who has taught at The Cooper Union in New York City since 1989. His work from 1982–1996 was the collaborative practice of Group Material, an exhibition form that continues to occupy him in public discussions, writing, and painting installations. A collection of essays, Doug Ashford: Writings and Conversation (Mousse Publishing, 2013), was published on the occasion of his exhibition at the Grazer Kunstverein.