

CONNIE SAMARAS
angelic states ~ event sequence



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THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

ALLAN DE SOUZA

Like the re-issue of 1982's *ET: THE EXTRATERRESTRIAL*, Connie Samaras' current show is a sequel—to a 1994 show at New Langton Arts, in San Francisco. Titled *A PARTIAL CORRECTION TO THE REPRESENTATIONS OF EARTH CULTURE SENT OUT TO EXTRATERRESTRIALS ON THE UNITED STATES 1977 VOYAGER INTERSTELLAR SPACE PROBES*, the show was a heady mix of additions and correctives to Carl Sagan's predictably orthodox selections of humanity's supposed history. In the *ET* re-release there have also been additions and removals: mostly enhancements of special effects for today's tech-savvy audience, but also correctives for our post-Columbine moral climate; for example, the digital erasure of drawn guns carried by a group of policemen chasing *ET* and friends. On the back cover for the catalogue of Samaras' show is a cropped close-up of the cuddly alien's eye peering at us as if through a portal. Inside the catalogue, the same close-up is inserted into an aerial map of Samaras' neighborhood. It encapsulates the show's explorations and puns on surveillance, paranoia, alien abductions and popular culture. Just who is being abducted by whom and for what purpose?

In the series on display in this exhibition, Samaras also seems to be making digital revisions to our sensing of reality, and yet, though digitally printed, these photographs are pointedly unmanipulated by the computer, drawing instead upon the supposed verité of that quaint anachronism, "straight photography." Samaras is a straight photographer mimicking digital production, and a lesbian photographer masquerading as a straight one.

What does it mean to be a "lesbian photographer" and is such a qualifier even required? While those questions wouldn't necessarily arise from looking at this present body of work, certainly Samaras' broader oeuvre raises them. In earlier work, the "alien" is considered in relation to socialized otherness and as a consequence and projection of alienation. Are abduction stories accounts of actual aliens, or accounts of alienation caused by either individual trauma or from a general social malaise? Why are the overwhelming majority of accounts from the Northern Hemisphere, and more specifically from North America? Why are most "abductees" white, heterosexual women (but most cinematic representations are of white, heterosexual men)?¹ Are the accounts of medical examinations and impregnations (also) fears of miscegenation, or a more generalized loss of control or invasion of one's body (exemplified by the classic, *INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS*, as well as its numerous spin-offs and imitators)? Samaras approaches these questions from her own particular positionalities—not to assert an identity but to dissect what might otherwise escape our attention as normal or naturalized. She uses photo-technology and photo-practice as tools to locate and identify an entity or a discourse in order to analyze and, if necessary, resist it.

Unlike the filmic stagings of Gregory Crewdson, for example, Samaras photographs existing sites, but ones whose very theatricality reveal their constructedness, rather than the other way around. As “straight” photographs, these are documents of actual places and events. However, these documentary facts are masquerading as science fiction, with a further layer added by the fact that what Samaras photographs is often a simulacrum, a copy of an original that doesn’t actually exist and is therefore an entity that is based on a fiction, but one which nevertheless exists as fantasy. If it sounds convoluted, it is; but these are precisely the unmappable territories in which Samaras operates.

Beyond documentation, these images share visual commonalities, leading us as viewers to consider underlying political commonalities. The lights in a Vegas parking lot are not dissimilar to the krieglights of an LA ghetto-bird chasing a murder suspect, which are not dissimilar to the police presence at the LA Democratic National Convention, which connect again to the police car parked next to Ground Zero; but are these simply arbitrary visual coincidences or can we make further connections? This is one of many questions Samaras poses, and her ploy is not to provide us with an answer, but to pile on the evidence, such that coincidence upon coincidence upon coincidence begin to seem increasingly unlikely, and the possibility of an underlying pattern seems more probable. Though Samaras is not operating within the realm of conspiracy theories, she does pursue them, but as symptoms of a social need for information and answers; a need which flourishes in this society that—modeling itself on the Garden of Eden—claims to be open and pursuing happiness while enforcing the right to protect its citizens from knowledge.

If we are sufficiently delusional to imagine that we are living in an edenic phase of history—and it would seem that selective blindness is a necessary state to enjoy escapist paradises—then Samaras is assuming the role of a trouble-making Eve, refusing to accept filtered, official versions of information. The sites and situations in which she photographs are already highly monitored, with some in fact closed to photographers. At the Democratic National Convention, for example, Samaras was able to photograph behind police lines by “allowing” herself to be mistaken for a police photographer—another instance of her passing for a straight and, in this case, officially sanctioned photographer. There is a joke here, but also an element of risk, with Samaras having described “shooting” from a roof-top but keeping her hands and camera visible so that she isn’t mistaken for a terrorist sniper. But the joke continues, because she is in fact conducting a transgressive shoot.

Her subjects are the rapidly globalizing growth industries: entertainment, tourism and the military; the diversions of the former two being conceivably necessary for the unchecked growth of the latter. Beyond the working relationship between the Pentagon and Hollywood, with the army providing military hardware and script guidance for “sympathetic” films, American popular cultures are keenly militaristic with little scope for non-violent alternatives. While globalization is touted as liberation from restrictive nationalist forms, its detractors point out that what are being globalized are American military power and consumer culture, with Hollywood as their marketing agency.

Samaras leaps squarely into that fray. Her mimicry of the unreal reality, or real unreality of Hollywood studio sets is purposeful and critical, rather than being an empty stylistic gesture. LOS ANGELES HOMICIDE, 2001, for example, bears strong resemblance to a Spielbergian suburb of leafy streets and warm porch-lighting whose mellow security is broken by the intrusion of the alien or the unexplained. That ET was a metaphorical working through of the young Spielberg’s parents’ divorce is well known; Samaras’ photographs also revisit sites of social trauma, but trauma that is so masked that its wounds are not only unseen but also celebrated. From an upstairs window of her house (also the vantage for other photographs here) Samaras photographs the police search following a shooting. Hunters, hunted and victim are not depicted; we are only shown the once-peaceful street invaded by mysterious lights. Gangs? Police? Aliens? We can’t know from the image itself, but somehow—saturated as we are by their cinematic depiction—aliens seem the most likely. We want to believe (in the alien), because the reality (of the familiar) is more frightening.

Although I have personally witnessed some of the situations that Samaras has photographed, one in particular stands out in my memory. On a late summer afternoon in 1998, I was walking to my home in West Hollywood when, at an intersection, I noticed a small group of highly-animated people, all looking at the sky and each one gabbing away furiously. I looked up, too; high in the sky and out over the ocean were manic trails of rainbow-hued smoke or vapor trails, like the last-gasp scribbles of a suicidal sky-writer. I had no idea what it could have been and joined the group to exchange speculation. This, of course, was how the group had formed, one stranger looking up, another stopping, then another. Bonding through our initial curiosity, lack of answers and, finally, fear, our explanations became increasingly apocalyptic. I realized then how closely we live with such fears, that living in a city like LA provides sufficient cause for a barely submerged paranoia. Samaras’ photograph of the occur-

rence, MINUTEMAN MISSILE BEING TESTED OVER THE SKIES OF LOS ANGELES, 1997 (cover), provides the answer in its title, but looking at the image one has the same question: what is it? The photograph is a paradigm for looking at any of Samaras' photographs, in that it undermines our ability to explain what it is that we are seeing, and exposes the perhaps necessary paranoia behind any answers we might have. And yet, answers are not a required response, since the unknowable and the act of questioning can in themselves be productive.

Some of Samaras' images depict or suggest ruins, or remnants of something which has ceased to exist; others are of building sites, the constructive ruins of what is to come. The most disconcerting and yet now emblazoned on the collective consciousness are her images of Ground Zero in New York. Though they may have gained familiarity by their media circulation, within the context of this show it seems almost as if these were specially created as inevitable outcomes to the sense of foreboding within other images. Rather than photographing "acts of evil"—a phrase which stems essentially from a metaphysical conspiracy theory—Samaras historicizes these sites within political and cultural processes of exploitation, control, manipulation and unleashed terror.

If we extend these issues of representation to other images, we may well ask: what is the trauma of a Las Vegas casino? For those of us who have not lost fortunes small or large, Vegas might represent the cure for trauma— family fun, escapism and/or the pleasures of the flesh (depending upon one's predilections). But, as I have already mentioned, escape necessitates a willful, if temporary blindness. We seek escape from what we are otherwise required to face, the mundane traumas of everyday life. Also, by entering a site as monitored and controlled as a casino, we assent or at least acquiesce to that monitoring and control. As citizens we constantly negotiate the balance between individual liberty and public safety, parting with one in order to gain a little more of the other. In a casino, a local mall, or even in the apparent privacy of our homes we exchange "lesser" liberties for an assurance of safety and for participation in the prime directive to consume. Samaras' ongoing project suggests that it is not an exchange we should make so lightly, since each time the balance returns incrementally less to the side of individual freedoms.

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¹ Samaras herself has written about these questions, most notably in her article, "Is it Tomorrow or Is This the End of Time: UFO Culture and Cultural Anxiety," in *PROCESSED LIVES: GENDER AND TECHNOLOGY IN EVERYDAY LIFE*, ed. Jennifer Terry and Melody Calvert, Routledge, 1997.