Say Something Bunny!
Alison S.M. Kobayashi in Conversation with JH Linsley

ALISON S.M. KOBAYASHI, *JULIETTE, AGE 7. COURTESY OF FAMOUS PLAYERS, 130 W. 56TH ST. N.Y.C.,* 2016

Alison S.M. Kobayashi has been called an 'identity contortionist'. In her single-channel video work, installations and performances, she is often the sole performer in a production with a sprawling cast of characters. Each character Kobayashi portrays is finely developed through elaborate costumes and props, as well as skilled physical technique. At the same time, a DIY aesthetic and simple materials lend a hand-made quality to these feats of persona. Kobayashi's work, then, frames identity as mutable and indeterminate, but also reveals the labour and strain that goes into the performance of the self.

Much of her work is based on found objects and media: answering machine tapes, a handwritten love note, items left behind in abandoned motels, the inscriptions on the inside cover of a book, or audio recordings made in a family home in the 1950s. Many of these objects reveal intimate and unguarded moments in seemingly private spaces. Kobayashi asks her audiences to confront anxieties around exposure and invasion while also modeling a kind of radical empathy. By locating herself so fully in the position of a stranger, she reaches to the edges of what it is possible for us to know about each other. However, she also draws on public records and journalistic accounts to construct her narratives, proposing, it seems, that who we are is always in dynamic relationship to both public and private forces.

Kobayashi has long performed for the camera in her work, but following her first public performance, *Defense Mechanism* (2011), the live and the theatrical have become significant parts of her practice. The exhibition *Say Something Bunny!* at Gallery TPW uses the form of a 'read through' of a script made from a 1950s recording of a family in New York, which was discovered in an estate sale. In the following conversation JH Linsley (who has been writing about Kobayashi's work since 2012) speaks with Kobayashi about how she appropriates processes of amateur research, how she negotiates boundaries of public and private, and how she uses performance to invite audiences into practices of imagination.

JH Linsley: **Often in your work you use outdated technology, but just recently outdated. In** *Dan Carter***, you reconstruct the domestic life of a man based on messages left for him on his answering machine. You found these tapes in a charity shop just after cassette answering machines fell out of popular use. Your project** *The Possessed Artifacts and Detritus of Mrs. Florence Hazel Davis Bland* **(2014) similarly imagines the life of a woman whose book collection is held by the Elsewhere Museum in Greensboro, North Carolina, with an interactive website using just slightly outdated —**

Alison S.M. Kobayashi: — early Internet Dreamweaver.

JHL: **Right. Whereas** *Say Something, Bunny!* **is based on audio recorded onto wire, an early consumer technology which was supplanted by tape. You came across these recordings entirely by chance, when someone gave them to you after finding them at an estate sale. They are old enough and obsolete enough that the people who are speaking on them are mostly dead.**

ASMK: True. It's become increasingly interesting to uncover these people's histories through traces left behind in the public domain. The whole project is based on two audio recordings made by a family in the early fifties. We hear the youngest son, Larry, go through puberty, his voice transformed in the latter recording, Grandpa's unforgettable rendition of Yankee Doodle Dandy, and a moment when a character named Bunny Tanenbaum is quizzed on "Why in the world would she smoke Lucky Strike cigarettes?" She replies, "Pleasure!" Between the two tapes there are aunts, uncles, grandsons, neighbours, about fifteen characters in total. I'm so drawn to the recording because it captures the whole spectrum of a family gathering, from moments that are lively and

musical to the coy and mundane. Several of the characters were born in the 1800s and most of the people on the tape had passed away by the time I came across it. If they were all still alive, I could try to track them down and interview them but I'm not trying to make a sprawling documentary about this family's history. It's really a more narrow vision of what is contained in this audio recording and how I can make sense of it 64 years later. I've been mining public archives and trying to find as much information as I can about the family but this has a lot of limits. As 'non-celebrities' who lived their lives before the internet age there aren't narratives readily available about their lives. So the piece becomes a mix of fiction and non-fiction in my attempt to make sense of the recording using the peripheral research that I have gathered.

JHL: **I really appreciate the tricky balance you strike in your work between awareness of potential problems with privacy invasion or unintended exposure, and your keen desire to explore how traces of lives accumulate in unexpected places. There is also an edge of daring in some of your work. How far will this go? How comfortable will an audience be with the information you present? The anxieties these questions produce are very real, and you create opportunities for complex exploration of these anxieties. At the same time, as you say, you do draw lines in what you will reveal to a public audience, and every document you use you've found in public places. Then with** *Say Something Bunny!* **you also have the distance of time.**

ASMK: So much of the information I have accumulated is from government documents, public records or grave stones. Much of my understanding of the characters in the recording started with their data found in

the U.S. Census. For example, I came across the line: Sam, 43, married, wholesale liquor salesman, New York City. It's minimal information but there's so much I can glean out of those words. While researching the characters present in the recording, I was surprised to come across only one obituary. An obituary is a rare narrative gift to the project. Obituaries neatly describe people's lives, their relations, habitations, some of their community affiliations... but they are often written by their children, so it's a very specific view of the person.

I found out recently that the mother in the recording, Juliette, was a child actress in silent films between 1916 and 1919. Unfortunately these films are largely uncatalogued or inaccessible and difficult to trace. This is a common occurrence with this family. I'll find something and think, "Oh, wow! They're in a film! There's a film with them in it!" And then I realize it is no longer accessible.

This family's media manages to evade preservation. A film that the son, David, wrote as an adult is included on a 1986 list titled, "The Disappearing Dozen" of highly sought-after films that are "virtual video impossibilities." So it is reassuring that it's not just me who is unable to source some of these archives. They're gone.

There is a short documentary about David, too. It was a graduate school thesis project made about ten years ago. The filmmaker went into advertising and probably just thought, "No one is going to want to watch my thesis documentary." He lost all of the original interview tapes and apparently there is only one DVD of the film left, stored in one of his relative's attic somewhere. I'm hoping to continue to be in touch with the filmmaker

ALISON S.M. KOBAYASHI, *DAN CARTER*, VIDEO, 2006

about gaining access, but this could be difficult. It's a very delicate thing.

JHL: **Right, there's a fine line between flattering curiosity and invasiveness.**

ASMK: So yeah. Nothing exists. Everything I find a trace of, that I'm really excited about, just doesn't exist anymore.

So an interesting solution arises from this archival failure. Since many primary sources have become obsolete, I'm working with what can be garnered from people's memories and impressions.

JHL: **To return to the question of the personal for a moment, I'm interested in the sometimes-vulnerable information you reveal. In your video work** *From Alex to Alex* **you recreate the lead up to a sexual encounter between two teenage boys based on a handwritten note you found on a street. In** *Dan Carter*, **the answering machine tapes you use have some really emotionally revealing moments on them.**

ASMK: In *Dan Carter,* a lot of callers leave their phone numbers on the answering machine which I bleeped in the final video — but this made people feel really uncomfortable. There's a moment of identification with the viewer when you feel embarassed for the subject because most of us have left behind vulnerable voicemails that we don't expect anyone to pay attention to. Memoirs are wonderful narratives of our experience and much easier to digest, but I feel like these amateur and accidental recordings contain something really special about our day-to-day lived experience. Moments like sitting in a room with another person, talking about a television show or gossiping about their relatives can feel uneventful and most people don't feel any desire to document them. Luckily, David, who owned the wire recorder, felt that these conversations should be recorded. There is this timelessness about

ALISON S.M. KOBAYASHI, WHO WERE THE WOMEN WHO DANCED AS CIGARETTE PACKAGES IN THE CHESTERFIELD COMMERCIALS? WHAT DID THEY DO TO RELAX?, 2016

more "up-to-date" information about the family. On sites like ancestry.com, once a person passes away, their profile and family tree becomes public. However, those linked to them who are still alive can choose to be identified or not. You'll see strings of family lineages but once you arrive at more recent generations they show up as 'private users.'

JHL: **Death turns you into public property.**

We talked earlier about how this project is informed by, or even appropriates, processes of historical research, and particularly amateur historical research. You're using sites like ancestry.com, for instance. And another thing that's specific to the amateur historian is that the research isn't necessarily directed towards a particular thesis. In your project, you're not working on a thesis about middle class Jewish life in postwar suburban New York, or the origins of the off-off-Broadway 'nudie' musical. Those things are referenced and available in this project, but your approach is much more intuitive and idiosyncratic, and the motivations are a lot more obscure. There's a multiplicity of reasons that you're doing it, but there's also no real reason to ever stop. So I wondered if you could talk a little bit more about that.

ASMK: Where I'm coming from as an artist is something of an 'every-person'. There's so much of this that's an issue of resources and access. Ancestry.com is something that I can have access to, and can afford. This entire project sounds like it is an elaborate advertisement for ancestry.com!

JHL: **That's interesting about access. It's amateur not because there's not incredible effort and thought; it's amateur because it's operating outside of systems of verification and standardization.**

the interactions that this family is having with one another; even though it was 64 years ago, it feels completely contemporary and familiar to my own experience.

JHL: **There's an interesting distinction between information which is sensitive because of potential emotional vulnerability, and information like phone numbers which come from external institutions but become private**

because they can be exploited. You sent me a spreadsheet where you've been collecting information for Say Something, Bunny!**, and you've got things like social security numbers.**

ASMK: Well, it's very interesting because a lot of that material enters public domain after your death. I found that there is a 72-year restriction rule on the U.S. Census so if I revisit this project in a decade I'll have a lot

ALISON S.M. KOBAYASHI, *CHRISTMAS 1954, SAM HOLDING 'CHEMANAMANEURIAN' COLOURED PANTS, A GIFT FROM DAVID,* 2016

ASMK: I really do like amateur paths of research. It's funny, I feel like I'm at a point in my life where I should be looking at my own family history, and it's almost like this project has both sidetracked and informed that process. I've become much more invested in this completely unrelated family. It's been really helpful for my research that users in these amateur networks make their research public in hopes of connecting to distant relatives.

I'm watching them do that and finding these wonderful fact checkers who are confirming or making me question my narrative hypotheses.

JHL: **That's what I think is interesting! There's this idea that it's a very lovely, cheerful thing, but then there's also this slightly sinister…**

ASMK: It is really dark, isn't it? I did ask myself, "should I pretend I'm a distant cousin so I can get access to this family's tree?" It's based on trust and I could scheme to get in there. But I decided to draw a line there. It was too sinister. I decided to access only what's available to the public — though I do wonder what kind of gems would be available to a distant cousin. I appreciate the observation on this from Sam Cotter at Gallery TPW that I don't want to impersonate the family, but through my work I become them.

JHL: **I think what's even more interesting is this idea that seemingly the only person who would be interested in closely researching a family tree would be a distant cousin. And yet, you *are* really interested in doing it. That, to me, is a central mystery of the project. There are all kinds of mysteries that you're solving by doing this research, like who these people are and how they connect, but there's**

this central mystery which you never solve or even really address, which is, why do you *care*? I find that work that I like the best has something unresolved like this.

We talked the other day about your interest in thinking yourself into that room while the recording was being made. What does it take for you to do that? What sort of knowledge do you need?

ASMK: The first time I listened to the recording, I had a really difficult time identifying who was speaking and in many cases what they were saying. There are many moments of the recording that are inaudible, distorted or congested with multiple voices talking over one another. I wanted to keep all of this in the piece; I prefer not to edit anything out of the original source material and like to let it play as I first heard it. It began as a challenge to transcribe this type of audio, then it became quite a pleasure to make these moments of dissonance funny or interesting. I could identify a few characters with really distinctive voices such as David, the grandson and owner of the wire recorder. David and his family have a shared set of references — you'd have to be up on your Broadway musical game to hold a conversation with this particular family. They're saying things like, "I'm seeing *Fanny, Fanny* on January 16th," and, "You know Eddie Fisher has a piece off that." They're reading all the gossip columns. So before I get to know a character like David, I would have to learn a bit about Broadway musicals at the time so I can at least listen to the conversation with a sense of comprehension.

JHL: **Would you say that your personal goal with this project is that if somehow you were able to get into that room at that moment, you'd be able to participate?**

ASMK: I would always be a step behind, trying to catch up. I want to be in that room, but I wasn't really invited.

JHL: **You were totally not invited!**

ASMK: Yeah, I'm hovering over the room from the future.

JHL: **Right, you're hovering from the future, but you're trying to think yourself into the past. You're trying to unravel all of these levels of implied knowledge and references and relationships. It's almost an infinite knowledge base that you would need if you were going to think yourself into that room. A room you would never be in! You weren't even alive!**

ASMK: Yeah, and they would *never* invite me.

JHL: **I guess I don't mean to ask how you would actually participate. I'm just so intrigued by the lengths you're going to in order to try and understand the people on these tapes. It reminds me a bit of 'Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote', by Jorge Luis Borges, which is about a fictional writer who tries to re-create *Don Quixote* — identical in every way to the 17th century original — by producing all of the conditions that would be necessary for a contemporary author to write it authentically. There's this sense in what you're doing of not just recreating what's happening in the room, but trying to reconstruct everything that made what's happening in that room possible.**

ASMK: There are so many concentric circles of interpretation coming out of this wire recording. At the centre is the noise of the room itself, which we hear as voices and conversation. The moment that this is transcribed it is filtered through a series of assumptions which can have significant consequences.

For example, you look at primary sources like the U.S. Census and even those documents are dealing with the same issues that I am coming across in my own process of transcription. The census taker is hearing people's names and occupations and transcribing them in their little census chart. As a result, the spelling of people's names changes from year to year; it's a document full of flaws. Juliette for example appears in one census as "Juliette" but appears more regularly as "Juliet" with only one E and one T. So in my transcription I wrote her name as "Juliet." By some fluke, I researched her name as "Juliette" with her maiden name and found documentation about a child silent film actress with the same name and realized it was her! It's funny how being decisive about the spelling of her name for transcription shifted the research path for her. It was such a late discovery. I mean, she was very obscure. She was in a handful of silent films as a child and then stopped before the age of 10. After transcription comes understanding the relationships between the people, and then a ring of contexts of their conversation topics, jokes, references. My realization of this moment is likely very far away from the original interactions, but at the same time I'm trying to get closer to it.

In so much of my previous work, the difference between fiction and non-fiction is blurred. I think that a lot of history needs that fiction to fill in the holes. So much of it is not there, and you need to start imagining how these things are connected, and get an approximation of what actually happened. Personal histories get further from fact as we learn to tell a better story. It is our acts of exaggeration and censorship that strengthen mythologies, they are are both a fault and a virtue.

JHL: **As we've discussed, some of your earlier projects have really been about creating a fictional world. You decided how you thought Dan Carter's fiancée looked and you imagined all these different people in his life. You created a world for Alex, with friends and family. For this project it seems like it's less about that and more about using live performance to let audiences come up with their own interpretations. It's quite a *theatrical* work you're making. You're really using conventions from the theatre and it's interesting to me that that's the strategy for getting people to think for themselves, somehow. For a long time I think theatricality has been dismissed for being clunky or too much about representation on the one hand, but too literal on the other. Whereas I think now artists are — and your project is a really good example — actually using the theatrical mechanism for all kinds of things.**

ASMK: I've been developing the performance with Christopher Allen and we wanted to treat the transcript as if it were a script for a play in early production. This decision references the personal history of David, who was responsible for making and preserving this audio recording. Unfortunately he passed away in 2007 and I was never able to meet him. However, I discovered that he was a playwright and a lyricist and was involved in musical theatre. I think David had many moments like the one I'm creating at Gallery TPW, where a group would gather in a room for a cold reading, seeing a script for the first time and trying to understand the plot, characters and motivations. So much of theatre exists in the imaginary before it comes together in real space and I like that moment of potential and possibility when you first engage with a piece of writing.

JHL: **I was wondering — about the performance, when you're doing it with people around the table, what kind of instruction or direction are they going to get?**

ASMK: Each audience member is assigned a different character from the recording. I'll address them as a director to help them learn and find identification with their character. They will not have to speak aloud or perform — I always feel very fearful of being pointed out as an audience in performance situations. But, I'll be directly speaking to audience members as a way to talk about characteristics of a person in the recording. Instead of saying, "so Larry's this kid, he's charismatic, he's funny, he's a bit of a class clown," it's much more interesting to say, "Larry, *you* are 13, going through puberty and it's awkward." It's how I would engage with an actor. There's an element of joy and play that I want the participants to feel when thinking about these characters. There's this pleasure when you see your part come up in the script but the pressure is off because you don't have to perform.

JHL: **That's my line!**

ASMK: Yeah! And thinking about his motivations too. It's like, "Larry, you're always trying to push your brother's buttons, and you're the baby of the family, so you get away with a lot."

I've been listening to this audio for such a long time and it never felt right to restage it or recreate it with actors. It exists in the imaginary, and there's a pleasure of creating these scenes in your mind. So how can I fully flesh that out for people? How can I create images in people's minds without just giving it to them? I'm introducing these elements of reality and mixing in fiction and once

the audience of fifteen leaves the gallery, fifteen new interpretations of the audio will have been imagined. With this, the audio recording can have a number of lives and can be preserved in the minds of those who see the performance or installation.

JHL: **So the framework is not that it's a performance. It's a rehearsal. It's provisional.**

ASMK: Exactly, a highly orchestrated rehearsal.

Exhibtion Credits:

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JH Linsley

JH Linsley lives and works in London, UK. Her interests include documentation, sound/listening, queer domesticity, collaboration, and formations of the public. Her text, performance and curatorial projects have been presented in the USA, UK and in Zagreb, Copenhagen, Brussels, Bogotá, and elsewhere, including the Museum of Modern Art Doc Fortnight(New York City), the Volkesbuhne Theatre (Berlin), and London venues such as the Hayward Gallery, Barbican Centre, Wellcome Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum, the British Film Institute, and the Delfina Foundation. She is a founder of the performance collective I'm With You. She is also a co-founder of UnionDocs, a centre for experimental documentary in New York. www.jhlinsley.com

Alison S.M. Kobayashi

Kobayashi's short videos have been exhibited and screened widely in Canada, the United States and overseas. She was a guest artist at the 2008 Flaherty Film Seminar and her body of work was a Spotlight Presentation at Video Out, Jakarta International Film Festival, Indonesia and is a 2016 MacDowell Colony fellow. In 2012, she was commissioned by Les Subsistances in Lyon, France to produce her first live performance, *Defense Mechanism*. Alison S. M Kobayashi was born in Mississauga, Ontario and is based in Toronto and Brooklyn, NY where she is the Director of Special Projects at UnionDocs, Center for Documentary Art.

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