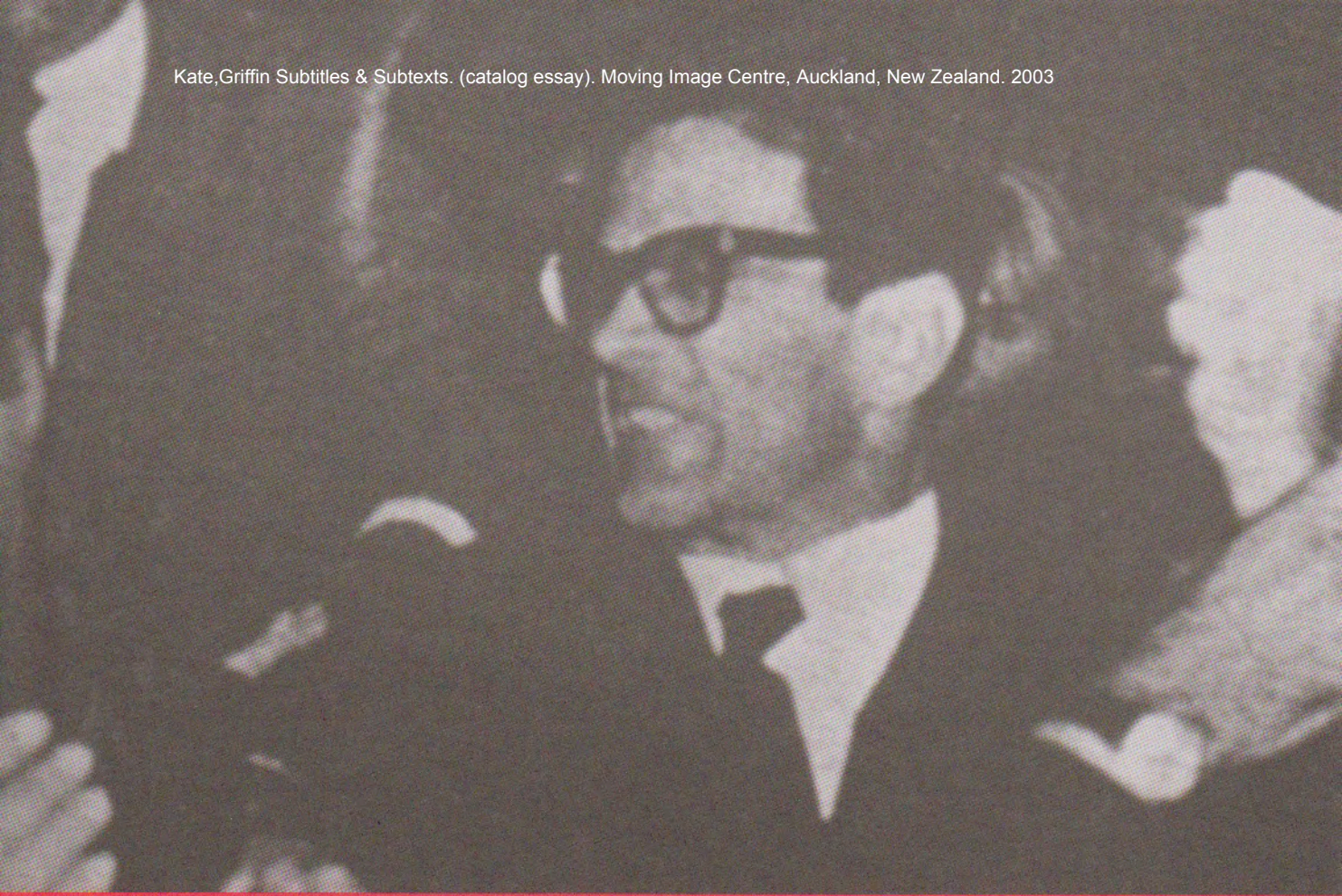


Kate, Griffin Subtitles & Subtexts. (catalog essay). Moving Image Centre, Auckland, New Zealand. 2003



Picturing Pasolini
Subtitles and Subtexts

John Di Stefano

In setting out his rationale for the 2002 Biennale of Sydney (*The World May Be Fantastic*, Richard Grayson acknowledges the plethora of contemporary artists who use fictions and invented methodologies as starting points for their work. "These approaches", he asserts, "celebrate the potential of the creative act to generate alternative worlds or to offer alternative readings of this world and so suggest that our everyday belief systems may also be changeable, constructed..."¹

On first encountering the works in John Di Stefano's inter-disciplinary installation *Picturing Pasolini: Subtitles and Subtexts*, one might suppose that Di Stefano typifies the artist to which Grayson alludes. Indeed, for many, a certain 'foreignness' will characterise the exhibition on entry; titles will lack immediate purchase and, for all but a few, the name Pasolini will remain elusive.

Such indicators might reasonably lead viewers to conclude that the subject of the installation is an elaborate manifestation of fiction. Certainly, in the absence of the knowledge required to decode the constituent works in terms of their cultural and historical specifics, the installation is read more abstractly. Fiction and reality are blurred.

That the exhibition is, in fact, an historical meditation on the life and work of controversial Italian filmmaker and poet - Pier Paolo Pasolini - is not entirely at odds with its potential positioning in the domain of fabrication. In his lifetime, Pasolini was himself the object of multiple and conflicting readings, and while he was a prodigious poet, novelist, filmmaker and critic, controversially he was also a political activist and openly homosexual. The Italian media were largely responsible for making his name synonymous with scandal and marginality. In effect, his persona was fictionalised.

Taking as their starting point pre-existing paparazzi images of Pasolini, the four photographic works comprising *Tenebre* (1994/2001) seek to reclaim Pasolini from the frame of the dominant media. By cropping and re-photographing the original images using a large-format Polaroid camera, Di Stefano



focuses attention on simple human gesture. The form of Pasolini emerges from the emulsion as a ghostly apparition - bringing to bear the elusiveness of 'true' identity under the media lens.

Locating the exhibition on the knife-edge of fact and fiction simply heightens Di Stefano's stated intent to investigate Pasolini's identity and to examine the texts and subtexts - both real and constructed - with which Pasolini's public persona was inscribed.

Indeed, Di Stefano's approach is investigatory. The exhibition suggests a bringing together of documentary evidence; an ordering of information for the purposes of classification; and a dedicated concern for the preservation and presentation of compelling historical matter akin to museological collecting and display. The quiet austerity of the installation, its concealed emotion, belies the volatility of the cultural and political climate which defined Pasolini's life and work.

In order to uncover alternative readings of Pasolini, Di Stefano deconstructs and reassembles textual and photographic representations, combining them, to

effect, with selected fragments of Pasolini's own output as a filmmaker and poet. There is no attempt by the artist to propose a revised history or to present a linear biography. Instead, he offers a series of works through which he interrogates established perceptions and definitions of Pasolini as 'other'. At the core of the exhibition are the mechanics underpinning identity. Through the act of mediation, Di Stefano exposes the slippery terrain which lies between objective and subjective truth.

Picturing Pasolini brings together nine allied but discrete works produced and exhibited internationally over a ten-year period. It represents the culmination of Di Stefano's engagement with Pasolini and charts the artist's own self-reflexive examination of the controversial Italian's life.

The complexity of this group of works lies, in part, in the superimposition of Pasolini's biography with that of the artist himself. It is no coincidence that the visual and textual materials comprising the exhibition are, in fact, a collection - Di Stefano's personal archive - which he began accumulating while still a boy. "Even before I knew who he was, had read any of his poetry, or had seen any of his films, I collected [] images of Pier Paolo Pasolini. Pictures of Pasolini were abundant in the Italian language magazines and newspapers that were the life-lines to my parents' native country, to their native language and culture."² And so, for Di Stefano, a first generation Italo-Quebecois/Canadian, Pasolini became an identifier for his 'homeland' and has remained a site for self-analysis. *My Affair with Pasolini* (1997/2001), a formally published written work presented in *Picturing Pasolini* as transparency films, blurs boundaries between Pasolini's and Di Stefano's narrative voices. By layering their distinct histories, Di Stefano facilitates a self-referential and critical inquiry into notions of identity, gender, sexuality, social and cultural politics.

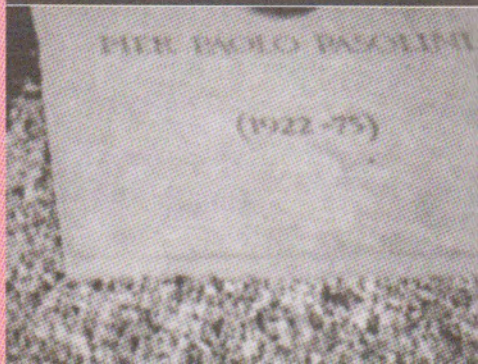
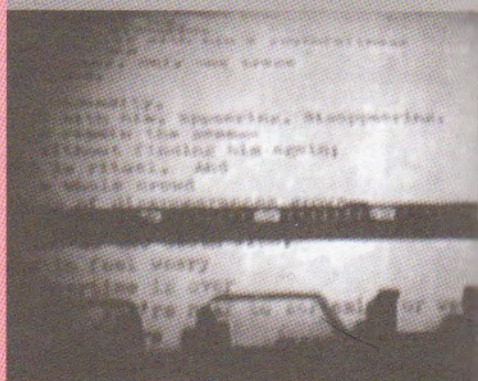
It is little surprise that the technologies, media and objects employed by Di Stefano resonate with the biographical constructs of Pasolini's activities. The typewriter, the medium through which Pasolini translated his own thoughts into words, is a recurring motif in the installation. In *Senza Parole* (2001) Di Stefano isolates a fleeting moment in Pasolini's film *La Ricotta* (1962), in which the filmmaker shows two men dancing the twist, and projects the sequence onto a ream of paper spilling from a table-mounted typewriter. A political statement on behalf of the gay Pasolini, these images are used by Di Stefano to reflect on the ambiguity of visual referents. The performance of these objects - an empty chair, table, typewriter - in space, at the same time highlight Di Stefano's sensitivity to their suggestiveness.

While the project is certainly interdisciplinary - comprising as it does, film, video, photography, object-based installation, text and book-works - it is seldom far removed from the concerns of photography. In its use and manipulation of photomedia as both source material and mediator,



Al Consiglio Direttivo dell'Associazione
per l'Autonomia Friulana

Il sottoscritto Pier Paolo Pasolini
di Carlo nato a Bologna
il 5 marzo 1922 abitante a
Via Verzuta
professione studente presa
articoli fondamentali dello STATUTO, chiede a



the exhibition examines photography's claim to the objective real. Using a range of strategies, Di Stefano decontextualises and re-presents photographic and filmic material in a manner that questions authenticity of meaning. In *Volgar Eloquio* (1999/2001), for example, a graphic torture sequence from Pasolini's final and perhaps most notorious film *Salo'* is slowed down in order to deconstruct the spectacle of violence and to expose the artifice implicit in the filmic representation of brutality. Meanwhile, on the facing wall, a large-scale projection of a manual typewriter taps out, in real-time, Pasolini's poem *Lines from the Testament* (Solitude). In juxtaposing these seemingly disparate fragments of Pasolini's oeuvre, the attributes of 'real' experience are questioned. Indeed, what is more affecting - the torture scenes from *Salo'* or Pasolini's personal meditation on despair and isolation?

Throughout the exhibition Di Stefano deftly separates the distinct levels of experience that are inherent to filmic viewing - sound, image, dialogue, effects - and presents component parts at a remove from their intended cinematic context. His strategy is to reconfigure these elements so as to describe the contrived space of film in relationship to the constructed space of Pasolini. In the work *Theorem* (1998/2001) Di Stefano manipulates the narrative structure of subtitles. Lifting the dialogue from Pasolini's 1968 film *Teorema*, the artist overlays it on the unrelated image of Pasolini's brutalised body, disseminated in the Italian media following his assassination in 1975. As Di Stefano observes "the circulation of this horrific photographic image was intended as a type of propaganda...transforming the remains of his physical body into a political text."³ In an act of subversion Di Stefano confounds a literal or, indeed, political reading of the image.

Throughout the exhibition, Di Stefano's collected ephemera and accumulated knowledge are deployed in a non-linear, non-didactic fashion. In the unbound book-work *November 2, 1975* (1990/2001) - the date of Pasolini's assassination - the artist literally collates his archive of images. Moments in Pasolini's life are randomly superimposed according to the format of the microfiche.

Comprising 84 loose panels, the transparencies physically manifest the multiplicities and layering of Pasolini's public persona. In that it invites re-ordering, this work, like others in the exhibition, makes multiple reinterpretations possible.

Whether familiar with Pasolini or not, the works in Di Stefano's *Picturing Pasolini: Subtitles and Subtexts* are an engaging investigation of identity's construction and comprehension. The exhibition presents and legitimises the paradoxical co-existence of fact and fiction, demanding that the viewer become involved in an ongoing (re)construction of Pasolini. In the process of establishing meaning, we are called upon to actively engage in the interpretation of the visual. *Picturing Pasolini* raises as many questions as it answers. Definitive conclusions are not on offer.

Kate Griffin
October 2003

1. Richard Grayson, The Artistic Director's Introduction, *Biennale of Sydney International Festival of Contemporary Art: Exhibition Guide*, 2002, p.4.
2. John Di Stefano, *Picturing Pasolini: Notes from a Filmmakers Scrapbook*, Art Journal, New York: College of Art Association. Summer 1997. p.18
3. John Di Stefano, *Picturing Pasolini: Subtitles and Subtexts* (unpublished artists statement), 2002.

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Kate Griffin is Exhibitions and Public Programmes Officer, Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington.

John Di Stefano is an artist, videomaker, writer and curator who has been exhibiting and publishing internationally since 1985. He is the Director of the Postgraduate Studies Programme in Fine Arts, School of Fine Arts, Massey University, Wellington.

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Moving Image Centre
PO Box 78172, Grey Lynn Auckland, New Zealand;
ph +64 9 360 2502; fax +64 9 360 2583;
hello@mic.org.nz; www.mic.org.nz