



RAINER GANAHL with Sara Roffino

by Sara Roffino

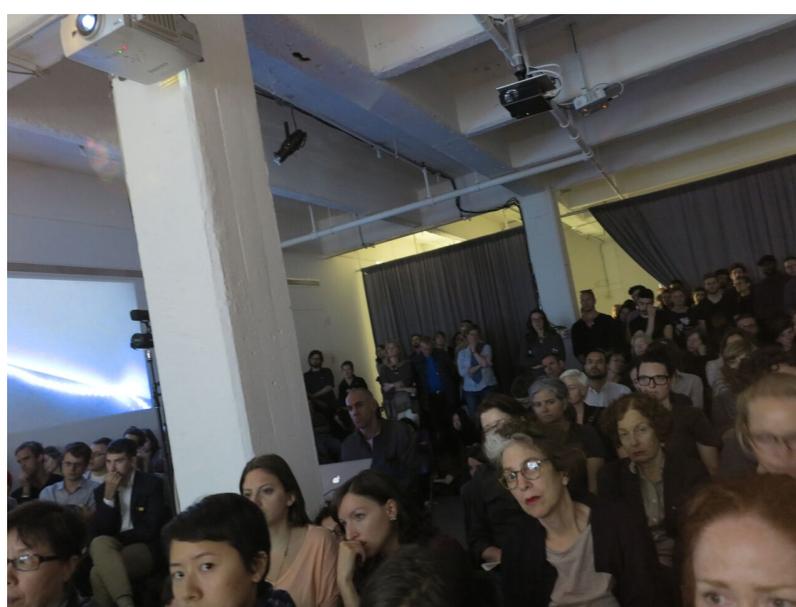
For twenty years, Rainer Ganahl has captured images of speakers and their publics during seminars and lectures for his ongoing series “Seminars/Lectures” (S/L). Other presentations of the S/L series include the Venice Biennale (2007), Wallach Gallery at Columbia University (2005), the Generali Foundation (1997), and at Max Protetch Gallery (1999). Sara Roffino caught up with Ganahl several times throughout the run of his current exhibition, *Artists: Recent photographs from my S/L series*, on view at Kai Matsumiya through November 1.

Sara Roffino (Rail): You’ve been working on this series “S/L” for exactly 20 years. How did the project begin?

Rainer Ganahl: It was Edward Said’s *Representations of the Intellectual* that inspired this project. He was always very influential to me, and in 1994 I was able to audit a class with him at Columbia. He made me realize that we do not really have visual ideas of intellectuals, not even of some of the most prominent names like Paul Virilio or Judith Butler. We rather have more conceptual ideas of them. We embrace their writing, we remember the experiences we have in relationship to their books, but we don’t necessarily know what they look like in

person. We don’t visualize Habermas or Simone de Beauvoir, though there are a few exceptions, like Foucault. It was 1995 when I first started to photograph lectures and seminars—always including images of both the speaker and the audience. If I was photographing an art historian, I also included their projected slides. Now of course, people use digital projections and it’s rare if there is no media. Slavoj Žižek’s lecture “The Obscenity of Power” at NYU was the first seminar I came across where a non-art historian presented films on bulky televisions. I knew from very early on that the title of the series would be “S/L”, a reference to Roland Barthes’s seminal book *S/Z*, but it took me a year or two before I actually understood what I was doing.

Before “S/L” though, beginning in the early 1990s, I had started a series I call *Reading Seminars*, where I function as the organizer or as a leader for communal readings. While the readings, which were predominantly of the texts of the people I eventually photographed for “S/L”,



Rainer Ganahl; *S/L*, Jutta Koether on Agnes Martin, Dia Art Foundation, New York, 9/23/2013; 4 photographs, 20" x 24", Edition of 4

were taking place, I would capture photographs of all the participants, including myself. So from the very beginning, photographing people who are reading, listening, speaking, and reflecting has been a part of my practice wherever I was in the world.

Rail: At first it appears as a documentary practice, but it goes much deeper than that.

Ganahl: I've never felt content with the term "document." Even when I was working with *Reading Seminars* I would enlarge the images to 20 by 24 inches, which resulted in something that is beyond a simple document—I always looked at it as an artwork. When I photograph Douglas Crimp, it is not only that I want to show how great Douglas looks—he has a very striking, Foucault-like appearance—I also pack the non-visual importance of his texts into these images, like his work in the fight against AIDS, which was very influential to me. This all constitutes meaning for me, or strings of meaning I want to share so that other people can learn from him and enter the works with their own experiences and histories. When I see his name and his images, I remember my time spent reading his texts and learning about gender identity and gay politics and the connections between his biography, AIDS, and art. Obviously, this aspect of the series is what I call indexical, or a reference to something that isn't present visually. Engagement with the work depends on whether a viewer is already familiar with the artist or thinker. All the "S/L" sets are titled according to the title of the presentation or lecture, the hosting institution, the city where it took place, and the time of the event, for example "S/L, Jens Hoffmann, Martha Rosler, Jens Hoffmann in conversation with Martha Rosler, Art Basel, Basel 6/18/2010." This straightforward information is important in understanding and experiencing the work as it develops over time.

Rail: You're contextualizing these artists and thinkers within a historical framework.

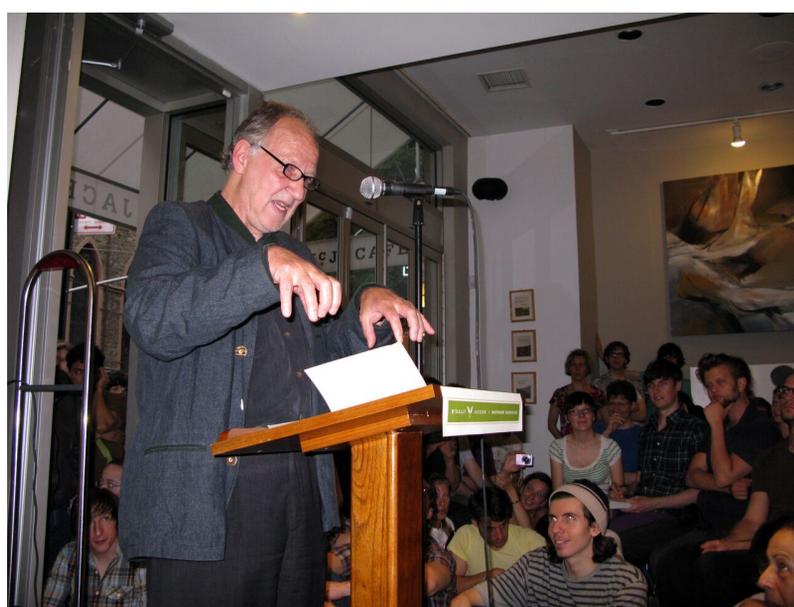
Ganahl: I want to make a monument for the people involved—a monument to their way of thinking and reasoning, their struggles, their epoch, and their artistic, cultural, scientific, social, and political stakes. It's not only about their texts, but also about the images they choose to discuss and project as well as their ways of living and the causes they are engaged with. For the show at Kai Matsumiya, I focus specifically on artists. All of the subjects, which include Jutta Koether, Werner Herzog, Ken Okiishi, Willem de Rooij, Jeff Wall, Harun Farocki, Yael Bartana, and others, are presenting their own artworks or are having it shown by art historians. I've been most focused over the past ten years or so on photographing artists, which partially reflects the lectures I've come to appreciate the most.

Rail: Do you think of the series as homage?

Ganahl: I don't want to use the word homage. It's too French, too male and too romantic, since it derives from *homme*, "man." Maybe we should start speaking of *femme* [Laughs.]. I also have to say that, even though I just used the word "monument," I don't think that's quite right either. Let's just think in terms of anti-monument.

Rail: At the same time, there's something very human in these images.

Ganahl: Enlarging the photographs to 20 by 24 inches



Rainer Ganahl; S/L, Werner Herzog, Conquest of the Useless, Reflection from the Making of Fitzcarraldo, Reading & Signing, McNally Jackson Bookshop, New York, 6/26/2009; 2 photographs, 20" x 24", Edition of 4

renders people beautiful. It recently occurred to me to compare my interest in people to that of Andy Warhol, who focused on celebrities and friends partying or posing in otherwise flamboyant, ecstatic, or narcissistic ways. I search for that visual delirium and beauty in the way people look when they think, speak, and listen—when they are completely committed and concentrated on a speaker. I really love watching people listen and speak. It is not a normal state. It's actually a kind of paranormal state of focus. And I really like this simultaneous absence and presence due to moving in and out of various states of concentration: it exposes hints of people's vulnerability. Attentive listening or speaking lifts the usual guard and control people have over their faces and expressions. They are really dedicated to something and they forget their appearance. There's a big discrepancy between the way we imagine thinking looks and the way thinking actually looks.

Rail: Does showing what these people look like change the experience of their ideas?

Ganahl: No, of course not. Absolutely not. And that's also a limitation. Showing intellectuals is not an extension of reading them. It isn't a substitute for knowing the work or engaging with it. Both the strength and the weakness of this series is that if someone isn't familiar with the artist represented, AA Bronson, for instance, their accessibility to the work is limited to just what they see, so they are less engaged with the visual and historical significance of the moment that is represented.

Rail: The result of which is that you are very much at the center of this—it's as much about the historical contextualization as it is about your personal contextualization.

Ganahl: Yes, in a way, it's a very biographical project. By showing a circle of people who have been important to me for all different reasons, I am telling a certain story about my own life. If I don't like someone, I don't go to photograph them. Most of the people I have photographed, I have learned something from. Many of them are people I am in touch with, or I have read their books. The artists in the current show are all people I think of as my ideal audience. In order for me to include someone in the series, I need to at least be interested in them and feel that we are working toward similar aims. It's sort of like a primitive Facebook, with people you are either friends with or want to be friends with. We are not growing up intellectually on isolated islands. We are part of the world that other people share and help create, and I want to contribute to this.

Rail: Each series includes many elements in addition to the speaker. Can you talk a little bit about everything else that is documented in the images?

Ganahl: This series is also a very analytical work, where I am depicting a site of knowledge acquisition. For example, if the lecture is in a university we see who has the privilege of sitting there—it shows privilege and it shows lack of privilege. Are there only white people sitting there? Is the place shabby or is it clean? Is it an Ivy League university or is it Zuccotti Park? I really hope that future generations will find something to discover in these images, something they will be able to read about these moments and places.



Rainer Ganahl; S/L, John Miller, Diedrich Diederichsen, John Beeson, Book presentation. Mike Kelley, Educational Complex, John Miller in discussion with John Beeson and Diedrich Diederichsen, Berlin, 8/28/2015; 4 photographs, 20" x 24", Edition of 4

Rail: The series also taps into larger implications of history and knowledge and where the two meet.

Ganahl: I have been building this series for twenty years, which is both a lot of time and no time at all. The history of the visualization of knowledge is very much related to technological progress, with the most important milestone of this progress being the printing press. The production of knowledge exploded after Guttenberg in a way not entirely different from the explosion we are experiencing right now with digital, cloud-based information. I hope that this project contributes something that can account for a certain historical moment within cultural history without simply pointing out the obvious. People are always enjoying or hating each other, and people are always learning from each other, though the way they do so changes over time: the clothing, the body language, and the settings change. Even the way we do or don't pay attention to things and the way we multitask. We talk to different people and different media at the same time and even eat and drink in class. I hate it, but the open display of a multi-local and temporal presence is becoming the normal and I, too, am very guilty of these communication crimes, speaking with people while messaging, sending emails while talking or reading the news or Googling while listening to people's presentations.

Rail: In addition to the TK photographic works in the show, there are two silkscreened banners hanging in the back of the gallery. One reads, "Why do we fail," and the other reads, "Why do we fall?". How are these works related to the "S/L" series?

Ganahl: The banners are a contribution to Mike Kelley, who I was able to meet a few times. In 1985 I was working at a gallery in Vienna that was showing his textile banner works. I had these pieces in mind, along with a general previously unarticulated existential question of what constitutes failure for an artist. In the first large-scale presentation of the "S/L" works, which was at the Generali Foundation in Vienna almost twenty years ago, I titled the show *Educational Complex* after Mike Kelley's piece and included a work by him, which was of puppets placed on a blanket on the floor pretending to be lecturers and making fun of each other. Mike Kelley's suicide made me think a lot about these questions of falling and failure.

Rail: And what do you think is the difference between falling and failing?

Ganahl: I think failing is the beginning of falling. Failing is a condition where you fall. You might be failing, but you still might be going. You might be not falling and still fail. But I think it's possible that you can fall, really fall, without failing. And that's where Mike Kelley comes in. He fell on the level of subsistence, but that doesn't make him a failure. You might make a mistake and not immediately confront the consequences, but when you fall you are on your ass, you ruin your

shirt, you ruin your hat, you ruin your car, you ruin your equilibrium. There are different gradations of falling. I think every artist needs to have their own criteria of success and subsequently their own measure of failure. As for me, the most desirable accomplishment, of course, would be relative independence from all the usual expectations and superego formations that one usually trips over.



Rainer Ganahl, WHY DO WE FALL? WHY DO WE FALL?, 43" x 59" each, Silkscreen on silk, Edition of 3

*
For more on Rainer Ganahl, please visit the artist's website.

CONTRIBUTOR

Sara Roffino

Sara Roffino is a writer based in New York City.

SUBSCRIBE

to the *Brooklyn Rail*
start your subscription today!