

## X CHARACTERS. SHIFTING IDENTITIES

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The following text is a comprehensive synopsis of the project *X Characters* which has been launched in 2001, and traces the genealogy of this ongoing project framework. The first work in that series, the video installation *A Memory of the Players in a Mirror at Midnight* (2001), was continued by the projects *Coming Attraction: X Characters (in Search of an Author)* (2002/03), *X Characters / RE(hers)AL* (2003/4) and *X NaNa / Subroutine* (2004). The upcoming video/installation work *X Love Scenes / Pearls Without a String* is in pre-production and will be finished by the end of 2005.

The layered narrative of *X Characters* recounts the (unfinished) stories of seven female character icons from modernist cinema. These characters are “released” and “reworked” to be scripted anew as contemporary new versions of their original selves. The character’s original narratives are worked through to set the characters free on their own terms, and to shift them away from being symptoms of directorial desires in order to let them speak with their own voices.

### *X Characters / RE(hers)AL* (2003/4)

*Reading women's travel writing, one notices an absence of the past. Women who leave are not nostalgic. They desire what they have not had, and they look for it in the future. The desire does not take shape as “return” but rather as “voyage”. Nostalgia is substituted by dislocation.<sup>1</sup>*

### Characters as Signifiers

*X Characters / RE(hers)AL* (Fig. 1) is an ongoing project (since 2001) which seeks to develop new female movie characters for future productions. It attempts to envision a contemporary discourse through a consideration of correspondences between eras of feminist film theory and practice, and contemporary constructions of female representation populating the screen. It is rooted in differing notions of “women’s voices” in modernist cinema, and from there develops a performative, character-driven site between cinema, theater, and New Media. Its characters are selected from different film scripts - ranging from 1960s auteur to modernist cinema, to the borderline of the postmodern 1980s.

### Character Outline

*X Characters / RE(hers)AL* releases seven female characters from seven different

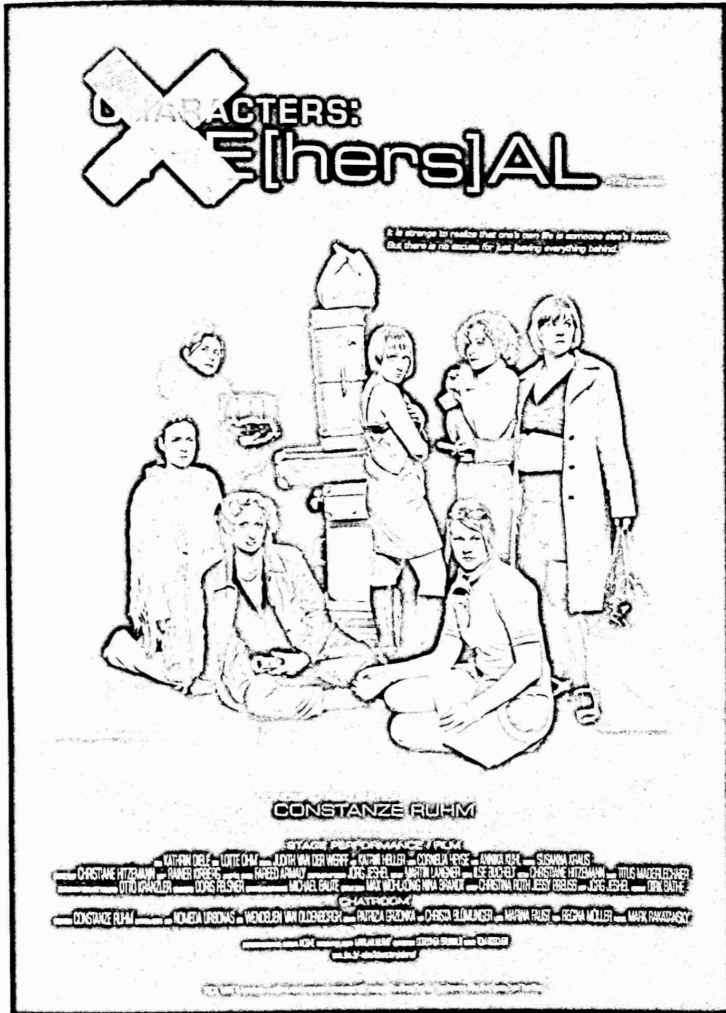


Fig. 1 - X Characters / RE(hers)AL (2003/04).

Filmposter Photo by Noshe / Poster Design by Constanze Ruhm

movies – each an icon from the history of modernist cinema (Fig. 2) – and joins them together as a gang of fellow travelers stuck in the boarding area of an airport. Detoured and out of their historical routines, the seven characters begin to get their bearings in a situation – a crossroad disguised as a holding pattern. Routes intersect, and new patterns emerge as these sleepwalkers, androids, phantasms, prostitutes, and murder victims start to establish relations and new forms of behavior to connect the gaps in their scripts along the lines of a speculative orientation towards an unknown future.

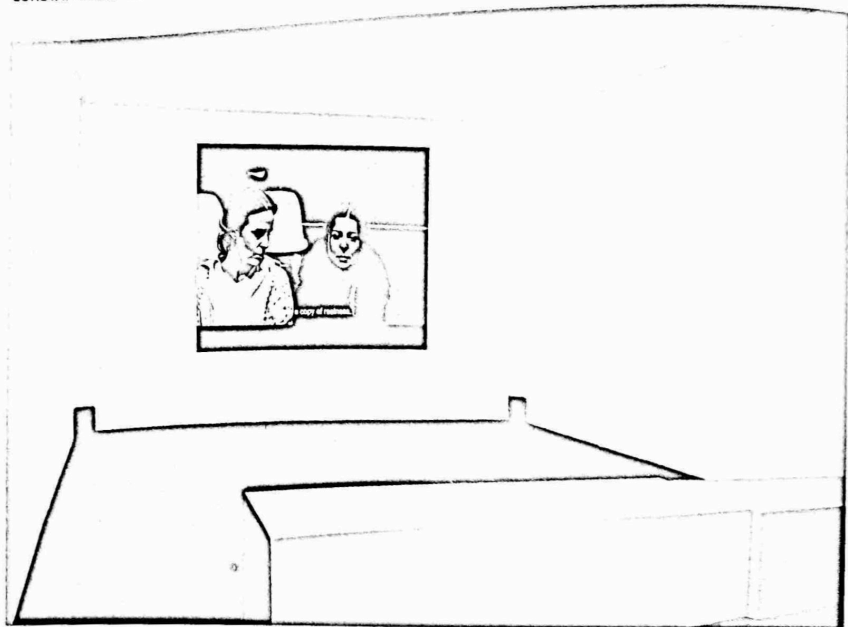


Fig. 2 - *X Characters / RE(hers)AL* (2003/04). Installation view from the 3rd Berlin Biennale, Kunstwerke, Berlin 2004. Photo by Marijan Murat

The compass points are drawn as the relationships begin. New scripts orient the old scripts away from one another and in every direction, to map out a cosmos of shifting identities that are structured by the characters' voices. These voices emerge and shape in contra-distinction to their original roles and along the contemporary notion of joining scripts between film, theater, and chat, and then back again, to a hybrid form of media identity.

The seven female movie characters were chosen as signifiers to enable the shaping of new dialogues and voices, re-scripted along the lines of new media. What is omitted from the original movie scripts – that which is left unsaid – becomes the starting point for *X Characters / RE(hers)AL* to begin routing through new narratives.

The characters are released from their original film scripts, and then transformed through a number of movements: first through performance-oriented chat-room meetings followed by script development and then the final realization process as theatrical performance recorded on video.

### Chat Room

Over the course of a year, invited participants met on a regular basis in a chat room where each embodied one character in the framework of an improvisational performance chat group. Discussions and dialogues were developed around moderated subjects and situations. The participants were meant to reconfigure and adapt the characters' original profiles, thus operating in the gap between their own identities and the characters' desires. The accent was placed on improvisation and live interaction, as well as on the characteristics of the specific situation provided by the chat room. The documents of these live workshop interactions developed a series of possible situations and

materials by which new sets of dialogues and scripts could be established. The results obtained within this first performative movement were used as basic outline for a script, which was edited and transformed. This script charts the movement of both the character's passage and the rites of the story, and was finally realized as a staged performance with seven actresses to be recorded on video.

## Characters

Alma / *Persona* (Bibi Andersson; D.: I. Bergman, Sweden 1966)  
stage actress: Kathrin Diele / chatroom actress: Nomedra Urbonas

Bree / *Klute* (Jane Fonda; D.: A.J. Pakula, USA 1971)  
stage actress: Lotte Ohm / chatroom actress: Wendelien van Oldenborgh

Giuliana / *Deserto rosso* (Monica Vitti; D.: M. Antonioni, Italy 1964)  
stage actress: Judith van der Werff / chatroom actress: Patricia Grzonka

Hari / *Solaris* (Natalya Bondarchuk; D.: A. Tarkovskij, USSR 1972)  
stage actress: Katrin Heller / chatroom actress: Christa Blümlinger

Laura / *Eyes of Laura Mars* (Faye Dunaway; D.: I. Kershner, USA 1978)  
stage actress: Cornelia Heyse / chatroom actress: Marina Faust

Nana / *Vivre sa vie* (Anna Karina; D.: J.-L. Godard, France 1962)  
stage actress: Annika Kuhl / chatroom actress: Regina Moeller

Rachael / *Blade Runner* (Sean Young; D.: R. Scott, USA 1982)  
stage actress: Susanna Kraus / chatroom actor: Mark Rakatansky

## X Characters / RE(hers)AL (2003/04) / Script Excerpt

ALMA, GIULIANA and LAURA are seated in the rows of chairs at the airport boarding area. RACHAEL walks around impatiently. HARI sits in the background, apart from the others. Silence. LAURA sighs deeply. RACHAEL walks over to the windows to take a look outside. After searching her handbag for a while, ALMA produces some medicine.

RACHAEL: We'll never be able to leave. The fog is so thick; it's like we're blinded here.

LAURA: This waiting makes me awfully anxious... as if we were sitting here just waiting for something terrible to happen.

ALMA starts to treat LAURA. RACHAEL pauses for a moment. She glances at LAURA with a bad conscience.

RACHAEL: I am sorry about my "blindness" comment – that must have sounded so insensitive...

LAURA remains silent, distracted by ALMA's treatment.

RACHAEL (*adding sympathetically*): But you shouldn't worry: I understand they are making great advances in eye transplants nowadays.

LAURA (*sarcastic*): Sounds really great.

RACHAEL (*guileless*): I used to know someone who made great eyes, but he's dead now.

GIULIANA looks at RACHAEL disconcertedly.

LAURA (*suddenly scared*): Something is going terribly wrong out there. Could someone please have a look?

*X NaNa / Subroutine* (2004)

*In computer science, a subroutine (function, procedure, or subprogram) is a sequence of code, which performs a specific task as part of a larger program; such code is sometimes collected into software libraries.* <sup>2</sup>

*X NaNa / Subroutine* (Fig. 3) was developed as a subroutine to the original program, *X Characters / RE(hers)AL*. It represents the first of a planned series of character spin-offs. In *X Characters / RE(hers)AL*, the figure of "X" laid out the original position marks of the seven women. Through *X NaNa / Subroutine*, "X" signifies a newly created interesti-



Fig. 3 - *X NaNa / Subroutine* (2004), Filmposter. Design by Constanze Ruhm and Dorothea Brunialti

tial space in the closed narrative of the film *Vivre sa vie*, and at the same time points towards a subsequent production called *X Love Scenes / Pearls Without a String* which is in the process of being realised and will be finished by the end of 2006. In this next production, the marker “X” turns into a projection surface for a new version of the character of Giuliana from *Deserto rosso*, which is split into three sub-characters.

Insert

In *X NaNa / Subroutine*, the character NaNa (Fig. 4) is long since freed (by her own devices) from the dead end originally offered her within the film *Vivre sa vie*. In the new work, Nana becomes NaNa: she is transformed into a contemporary version of the original Godardian character. NaNa works as a sales girl in a record store to avoid falling back to her former illicit activities, which amongst others things included data-bootlegging. Things get complicated when a former colleague-in-trade pays her a surprise visit. He presents a job “with her name written all over it”. NaNa appears to reluctantly accept the commission, in order to ensure that she remains free on her own terms whilst confronting her Godardian heritage. She performs one last data-search, in order to locate her original “source code”, the film *Vivre sa vie*, whose resolution demands her character’s death.



Fig. 4 - Annika Kuhl as NaNa at the film shooting, Berlin 2004. Photo by Kai Rabenau

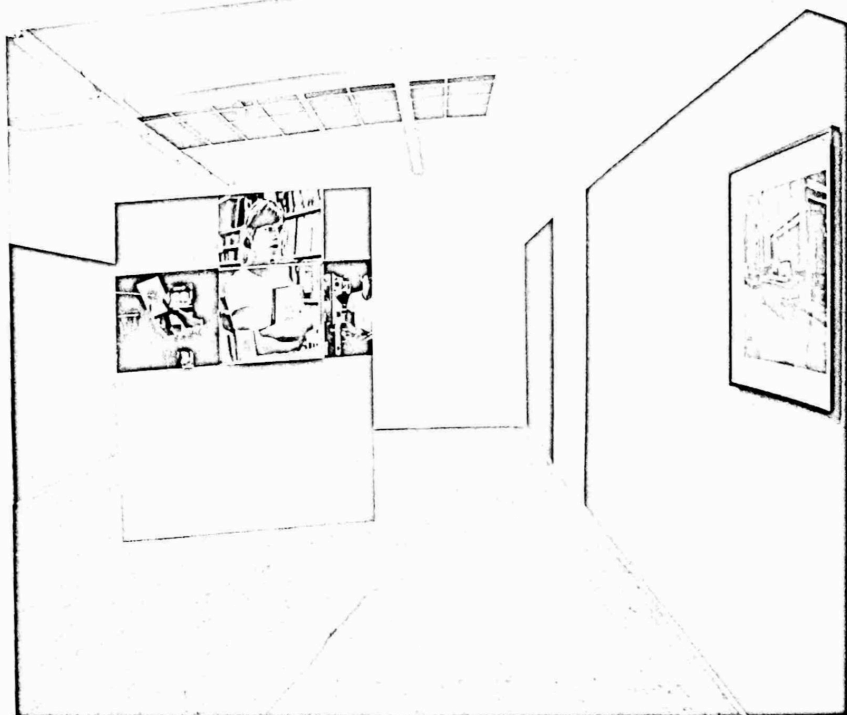


Fig. 5 - *X NaNa / Subroutine (La difficulté d'être)*. Installation version, Engholm Engelhorn Gallery, Wien 2005.

NaNa is the first character emerging from the original template of *X Characters / RE(hers)AL* with a new story. NaNa creates and keeps open a new space in the closed conventions of the Godardian narrative (Fig. 5). She does so to establish a condition that will allow for the future productions of each character to define their relations within, and all mediated through, the "X". Thus her role in the overall program is also to chart and indicate a sense of spatiality required for the program series of fellow X-characters still to come. Thus, NaNa is at the origin of a series of contemporary narratives, each scripted specifically for every one of the six other characters. The syntax of the program *X Characters...* is developed out of a weave of relations that is close to a networked space in behavior and operation. NaNa also foregrounds that which all other characters desire as well. By conveying her illicitness as "freedom", she suggests the potential for independence, so directed in force as to enable her to alter even her own original script.

*X NaNa / Subroutine (2004) / Script Excerpt*

HERMAN (turns back to NANA, smug that he has the winning storyline no matter what happens now): *I guess the world really needs some over-narrator, but for now, it's everyone for their own storyline. Look... NaNa... I would love to continue all this at another time.*

NANA is still holding her book, arms crossed across her chest, listening but looking for an opening for one more chance to throw it at him.

HERMAN: *But... how can I put it... The only reason you even see me here is that someone is interested in finding something, and you are part of... "the equation". Here... (hands over a slip of paper with something written on it)*

NANA (looks at him then picks the paper up to glance at what is written there. Her face registers concern when she reads it, but still feigns a distanced approach. Looking around to watch if someone is "too" interested in their conversation): *I am kind of familiar with your "equations"... Oh... (sharply) I doubt that is possible...*

HERMAN (suddenly surprised... suspicious): *But... it's so clear. Come on, it has your name written all over it!*

NANA (she is looking around nervously, as if something is wrong with this job. She wants to insult him to get out of it): *You know what your problem is – you've become too comfortable interpreting other people's words. Now you just spend your life connecting the space between commands. Is that all you know? Haven't you ever wondered what it would be like to act without someone else's motives? I really don't need to accept every job some loser happens to offer... Why should I?*

HERMAN (*insulted*): *Because, you will get paid. Why else.*

NANA: *Tell you what. Let's reverse it for once. I'll hire you to give something back to your client.*

HERMAN: *You definitely haven't got the same money... unless you are thinking of going back to... "bartering" some of your other skills?*

For a second, the two maintain hard, clear expressions directed towards each other. Each one knows what the other is, and has named it.

NANA: *Ok. I want some time.*

HERMAN (no longer so interested – he got what he wanted): *Whatever. You have all the information there. Enjoy your sale.*

### *X Love Scenes / Pearls Without a String (2006)*

*O'Hara got a better impression of Flynn when they starred in Against All Flags. "He was wonderful to work with," she said. "He came to work prepared, he knew his lines, he knew what he was supposed to do. Only one bad thing he did. By 4:30, 5 o'clock, his drinking would catch up with him. I did all my love scenes to a white chalk mark on a black flag, with the script woman reciting Errol's lines in a monotone."*<sup>3</sup>

*X Love Scenes* (2006) reconfigures new character "variations" around a situation in



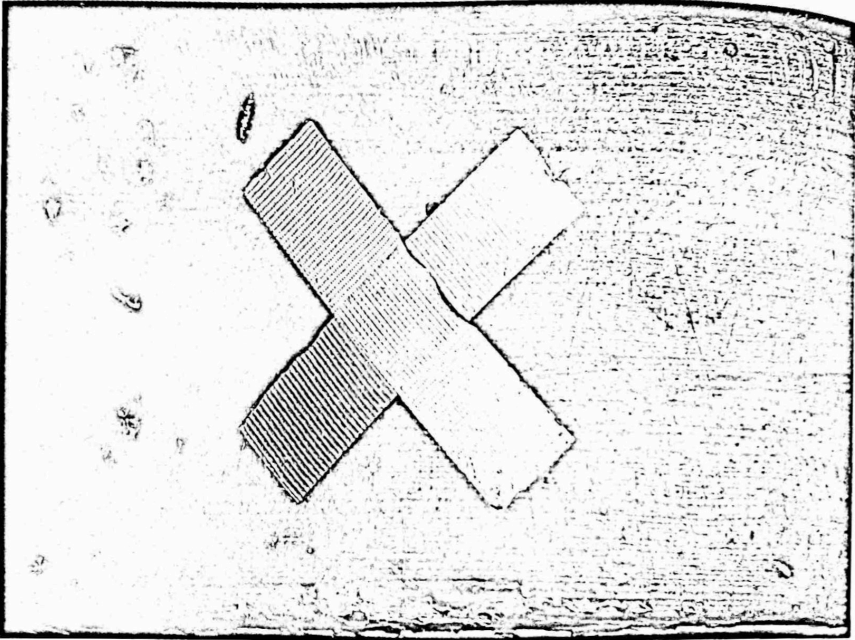


Fig. 6 - "X" / Position mark. Photo by Marijan Murat.

which an actress has to do a love scene without her "Other", as described above by actress Maureen O'Hara in her memoirs. The character has to perform to a "white chalk mark", an "X" as position mark, an empty sign that refers to some absent, missing identity (Fig. 6). The character of *X Love Scenes* is based on Giuliana from *Deserto rosso*. Like all the characters from the ongoing project *X Characters*, Giuliana is in constant development from several points of origin, which get charted out anew whenever a "work" is formulated with her as the narrative agent.

Since her initial rendering in the first stage of the chat room, Giuliana has divided into a number of sub-characters. Their unity is retained through being rooted in a past of modernist cinematic female representation. This "root" is called into play as the work recognizes its own rhizomatic nature, allowing the character to function as both "router" and "splitter". Giuliana conveys a "splitting signal" that the new work as a medium attempts to channel.

*X Love Scenes* as medium is asked to convey messages back from the *comédie humaine*, at the closest point of contact the cinema allows to the audience: the moment of lie and truth revealed in one, where the other side of a lovers gaze, or at least, the reverse shot of the passions ordered in the cinematic love scene, become visible.

### The Love Scene

Utilizing the convention of the confessional love scene, where one actor speaks towards the camera to the off-screen lover, the sub-characters comprising "Giuliana" each in turn, are shooting the reverse-shots required to complete the naturalism of the love scene. The

common method as illustrated in Maureen O'Hara's quote above is to shoot these as a special construction: the actress alone, speaking to a less-expensive functionary giving lines which will never be recorded, only for the actor as cues to emote by. The "X" has now marked off two spots inside of the psyche and eros of media, identity, and desire.

The homogenous but already troubled and transforming "unity" of the signal/character of Giuliana is divided and split into three sub-signals, crossing and intersecting at the figure of an "X" – a marker signifying the position of the actress, the location of the performance, as well as a representation of some kind of unresolved identity: X – the blank, the void, the character missing, the desire unfulfilled, the tale of the story unfinished. The position marks that already appeared in *X Characters / RE(hers)AL* at the beginning of the shoot are being "picked up" on – as positions only, not as characters; as the marks on the floor orienting the actress. Here, they become signs as well: of being in the "zone", of fulfilling the character's duty to re-create a unity long lost to her.

This new work follows the sub-characters who take the audience to the edge of the cinematic construction. At the same time it records the moment when the character aspires to be human, to embody passion itself. However, the sub-characters are illicit subjects, as they are bad witnesses to their own selves. They render a perspective onto the edge of the media as character, longing to be pure passion and thus human: ghosts uttering memories inside the mass-media technology machine of the 'past'; constructions always on the verge of resolving in "passion", "love", "eros".

#### *X Love Scenes / Pearls Without a String (2005/06) / Script Excerptiv*

##### Phase 4 / Scene 1

The set, empty and dark. Everyone has left. The ACTRESS enters, hesitates, stops. In her hand, she is holding a garbage bag. Suddenly, a light flares up. Blinded, she remains in the center of the spot for a moment. She looks around, then turns toward the "X" mark, another spot flares up: the "X" is lit brightly now as well.

A lot of stuff, remnants from the shoot, is strewn over the floor: costumes she has worn; props, scripts and cables; a tray with food leftovers; the DIRECTOR'S sleeping mask; wilted flowers. She turns towards the "X" mark and starts walking towards it. While she walks, she picks up things from the floor and throws them into the garbage bag. As if speaking to herself:

ACTRESS: *I remember the moments of joy which had to become sadness... and the sadness after a moment of joyfulness...*

She picks up something from the floor.

ACTRESS (cont'd): *The sparks of hatred in the eyes of lovers...*

Picks up another thing...

ACTRESS (cont'd): *...the coming of despair quickly stifled in the gestures of someone who wants to be thought of as satisfied,*

...and another thing, looks at it for a moment, then throws it. She interrupts her monologue and closes her eyes as she gets to the difficult part of her explanation:

*... the gap, sometimes enormous, between apparent sincere words and actual behaviour.*

She opens her eyes again, turns her head towards the "X":

*And all emotions are just unpredictable vectors in space - forces of desire that pass through it constantly.*

CUT

The ACTRESS with her back turned towards the camera, facing the "X". Now when she speaks, she always addresses the "X" directly; she puts her hands on both sides of the figure, as if to firmly take it by the shoulders and confront it, with a smile...

*I remember you once told me...*

Her expression softens, more confidential; one of her hands runs down the board / figure, running down the side as a caress.

*...that my passion*

Her hand moves back up, palm on the "heart" of the figure.

*...was passion.*

She rests her head now, not against the board, but against her hand laying on the figure's "heart". She closes her eyes for a second, as if to imagine.

*And I only embrace you because the world remains uncertain...*

She opens her eyes, expression pensive, as if having to admit something. She takes a deep breath, then looking away a bit from the figure...

*No, that's not true.*

*I am uncertain only because you embraced the world.*

Her expression sadder, she turns and raises up a bit more, to face the figure of the "X", then embraces the board passionately, erotically. She holds it against her, and sighs... then pulls away from embracing the board, and turns around to the camera. The "X" now a chalk mark on her shirt, firmly and clearly visible. She is resigned now; moving away from the board, towards the camera; then interrupts and stands, motionless for a moment.

CUT

The ACTRESS now addressing the camera / audience directly. While she speaks her monologue, camera pans backwards.

ACTRESS: *Every life is many days, day after day.*

*We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, giants, old women, young women, wives, widows, lovers.*

*But always do we meet ourselves.*

As she speaks, she places her hands on herself in a kind of autoerotic embrace.

*Love is the best, most insidious, most effective instrument of social repression.*

ACTRESS (cont'd, blocking the view of the flag with her body, then turning around, towards the "X"): *I will miss you.*

(starts to walk away, turning once more)

*As soon as I arrive, I will call you.*

She walks out of the scene, leaves the set.

The camera remains in its position, fixed. As she leaves, the board behind her is revealed again.

CUT

- 1 P. Melchiori, "Un sentimento senza oggetto," *Lapis*, no. 19 (September 1993), p. 22, quoted in G. Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion* (New York: Verso, 2002).
- 2 "Subroutine", *Wikipedia. The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subprogram> (June 18, 2006).
- 3 M. O'Hara, J. Nicoletti, *'Tis Herself. A Memoir* (New York: Simon&Schuster, 2004).
- 4 This script contains quotes from texts by Sam Rohdie, Colin McCabe, James Joyce and Rainer Werner Fassbinder.