

## Jill Magid CLOSET DRAMA

Jill Magid seeks platforms for acting inside and outside of institutions, responding to their imposition, negotiation, and, at times, capitulation of power. For Magid, this power isn't a remote condition to contest, but rather something to manipulate, by drawing it closer, exploiting its loopholes, engaging it in dialogue, seducing its agents, infiltrating its structure, repeating its logic, pushing the limits of revelation. She creates these exchanges with power by attaching to it on an individual scale, finding her way in personally through introduction or invitation, or more abstractly through intensive research, assuming the noncontradictory but differentiated roles of woman, artist, professional, scholar, journalist, writer, and subject.

Magid has engaged in collaborations with police officers in New York, Liverpool, and Amsterdam to intervene in their systems of surveillance and security, by reversing, highlighting, or replacing their own scrutiny with her own. Most visibly, in 2005 the Dutch Secret Service (AIVD) hired Magid as an artist-in-residence, ironically charged with showing the human face of an institution of secrecy, invisibility, private information, and public fictions. Over the course of four years, Magid embedded herself in the institution—interviewing agents, undergoing training, and researching its policies—to understand the institution from the inside out, resulting in a years-long process of generation, negotiation, redaction, and ultimately the confiscation of related artworks.

In each iteration of the AIVD project, Magid used the ongoing process of revelation and censorship through official channels as fodder for the work itself. Images would convey the facts of identity too clearly, so Magid was left to rely on language, in all its contradictions—its capacity to describe without identifying, to specify without revealing, to suggest without defining, to abstract the real and embody the fictional. Magid's interest in working with the AIVD was not only to reveal its institutional character through text, but to perform within its institutional structures to generate her own narrative.

Beyond her training by the agency itself, Magid found an unlikely guide in the form of the character Tarden in Jerzy Kosinski's 1975 novel *Cockpit*. Tarden

speaks of becoming invisible, completely subsumed under the fictions of lives he has picked to enter, truths he has chosen to alter, notice he has endeavored to evade. He refers to himself as a “hummingbird,” a spy under the deepest cover, whose real activities are obscured by his public performance as a cultural official, artist, or professional, much as Magid's identity as an artist can be obscured by her assumption of other roles. Ultimately Magid turned to the form of the novel herself with *Becoming Tarden* (2009), using the only tool remaining to her to convey her experiences at AIVD through fact and anecdote—her own words in their presence and their redaction.

This engagement with systems, institutions, and power has led to Magid's more recent work, which examines the written word and its use as an agent of control, manipulation, and distortion. *A Reasonable Man in a Box* (2010) concerns the Bybee Memo (more commonly known as the Torture Memos), a controversial set of documents outlining legal methods of “enhanced interrogation,” produced by the Attorney General's office in 2002 and declassified in 2009. Despite the specificity of its legal terminology, the memo illustrates the instability of language, its malleability evidenced by the multivalence of interpretation and the gaps in translating word into action.

Magid's commission for MATRIX likewise has its roots in present-day events as they intersect with governmental power. While on trip to research the history of snipers in Austin, Texas, Magid witnessed a mysterious shooting on the steps of the State Capitol by a young man named Fausto Cardenas. After attempting to speak with a Senator's female aide, he exited the building and fired six shots into the Texas sky, in full view of security, offering not a word about his motive or the context of his actions before or since. In this case fate inserted Magid into Fausto Cardenas's narrative—in the press, she offers the eyewitness account of his actions and their aftermath. Much as in *Becoming Tarden*, she speaks to her personal experience as part of a larger story, using text to occupy a position and imagine herself a character in the midst of a drama. Fausto's actions make him the perfect protagonist-as-cipher—the symbolic gesture of six shots into the sky, the fateful setting, the silence that refuses to ground him in political rhetoric or personal instability.

Magid herself is the line that traces inside and outside of each project, weaving a Möbius-like relation between lived experience and its representation, text and action, presence and absence. And so she returns here to Kosinski as a means to engender the transposition of these events from the realm of the real to the realm of fiction—as Kosinski writes in *The Painted Bird*, “I began to reexamine my past and decided to turn from my studies of social science to fiction. Unlike politics, which offered only extravagant promises of a utopian future, I knew fiction could present lives as they were truly lived.” Kosinski could be narrating Magid herself along this line, and leads her to further connect the facts of Fausto's shooting to the drama of *Faust*, a simple mimetic connection that



Jill Magid: *Exit*, 2011; archival digital print, diptych, edition 1/8; 2 parts, 42 x 28 in. each; courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Gallery, Paris/New York.

nevertheless provides a fruitful foil, as Goethe's eponymous nineteenth-century protagonist traffics similarly in themes of tragedy, psychology, and futility.

Goethe originally wrote *Faust* as a “closet drama,” which Magid has adopted as the title for the exhibition, specifying a kind of intimate theatricality while complicating the narrative dominance of either the facts or the fictions, as Magid's drama aims to reside in the liminal space between them. In *Faust* Magid finds both a narrative and a form, the closet drama being an unadorned theatrical idiom, performed intimately, stripped of artifice, using the simple act of the spoken word to conjure a kind of theater of the mind. The exhibition itself serves as a stage for the reading of a drama scripted between *Faust* and Fausto, as Magid isolates symbolic references from each narrative through text and image, weaving the stories in and around each other, and in the process collapsing, conflating, and condensing them.

In the installation, Magid stages two scenes, not as separate dramas but as intertwined evocations. The darkened interior of the front gallery brings us in close contact with *Faust*, one of the most widely published and translated works of theater, whose protagonist has infiltrated our collective consciousness so much as to take up residence as an adjective. Faustian refers to a kind of moral surrender, a deal with the devil exchanging integrity for power. Faust's story is introduced as a

# [Shots fired skyward.]

man delivers this closet drama to us in a simplified library or personal study setting, through a monitor and headphones, an intimate performance for one. As we move through the space we enter the scene of Fausto's action in the back gallery; a live feed of the sky above the Texas Capitol envelops us, and as we gaze at the floor the spent shell casings bear witness to the acts that have just transpired. Inside these larger experiential frames, Magid inserts triggers that lead us to piece the multivalent narratives together. In the room with *Faust*, the news accounts from Texas appear on the wall, and photographs mark the six shots into the sky like frames of a film. And in the room with Fausto, a six-channel sound installation layers translations of *Faust* like so many scripts for so many acts. The bullets on the floor cut through the wall to form an aperture for the narrative to pass, and Magid scripts Fausto's stage directions on the wall to imply his movement through the space with us.

As in her earlier work, in *Closet Drama* Magid is working from the inside (in this case as a witness) to engage a subject by drawing it closer to her, using strategies of isolation and repetition, co-opting and corrupting narratives. Through close reading, Magid extracts the elements of *Faust* that engender her scripting of Fausto. One piece in the show superimposes six translations of a passage from *Faust*, obscuring all but the first and last lines: "In the beginning was the Word . . . so goes the text. And right off I am given pause . . . that my translation must be changed again. The spirit helps me. Now it is exact. I write: In the beginning was the *Act*." And with this Magid finds the means to occupy Fausto by scripting him and his action. In Magid's closet drama, Fausto's action is his language, his words the gunshots into the sky. Like the casings that fell from the heavens to which he reached, Fausto falls, not just to earth where he started, but further, to jail where he remains. In her drama Magid refuses to translate Fausto's actions; he remains an archetypal character within a drama of tragic and symbolic gesture. In *Closet Drama* Magid interrogates the translation of word into action and action into word, considering text and its many translations and transpositions, engaging larger themes of truth and fiction, language and translation, history and legend, gesture and performance, revelation and redaction, individual and institution.

Elizabeth Thomas

PHYLLIS WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR



Jill Magid's solo exhibitions include those at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Tate Modern, London; Stroom and the AIVD (Dutch Secret Service), Amsterdam; Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam; and upcoming at Arthouse at the Jones Center, Austin. Her work has been included in group exhibitions at *The Singapore Biennial*; The New Museum, New York; Museo Tamayo, Mexico City; Center for Contemporary Art Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw; Townhouse Gallery, Cairo; Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York; Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York; Museum of Contemporary Arts, Taipei; and Tate Museum, Liverpool, among others. She has performed at venues including Location One, New York; Museo Tamayo, Mexico City; Eyebeam, New York; and Museum of Modern Art, New York. She was a resident at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten in Amsterdam and received her M.S. in Visual Studies from Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Magid currently lives and works in New York.

## PUBLIC PROGRAM

### Artist's Talk

Sunday, March 20, 3 p.m.  
Museum Theater

Reception follows in  
the Bancroft Lobby

The MATRIX Program at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive is made possible by a generous endowment gift from Phyllis C. Wattis, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, and the continued support of the BAM/PFA Trustees.

Magid's MATRIX exhibition is a co-commission with Arthouse at the Jones Center in Austin, Texas.

FRONT Jill Magid: *The DEED*, 2011; silkscreen on paper, edition 1/6; 43 1/2 x 30 in.; courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Gallery, Paris/New York. ABOVE Jill Magid: *The Sky from the Capitol Steps*; 2010; digital photograph; courtesy of the artist and Yvon Lambert Gallery, Paris/New York.

**BAM/PFA**

BAM/PFA GALLERIES 2626 BANCROFT WAY, BERKELEY, CA  
(510) 642-0808 | bampfa.berkeley.edu | facebook.com/bampfa

"In the beginning was the Word"—so goes 1250

The text. And right off I am given pause!

A little help, please, some word I wantable

It is written: "In the beginning was the Word!"<sup>112</sup>

To see the world's meaning after the value;

Is then the world's secret and truth a mind?

If I am filled with this word, what ought

I'll find a better way to translate I must find.

Spoken the spirit's name was *Word*—

Before I read it, I was in a dark

And I know what the spirit's name was *Mind*;

Good the word does not deserve the highest prize,

RE: Does it not translate the spirit's name?

Is it not the spirit's name that is the *Word*?

So it should be, but I shall try this too.

Once I read it, I was in a dark *Mind*.

The spirit's name is the first thing I read:

Yet the spirit's name was *DEED*.

Yet what you should be, I see, the *Deed*!

Something tells me it is not the *Deed*!

Something tells me it is not the *Deed*!

The spirit speaks, I see, the *Light*!

The spirit's name is the first thing I read:

Oh, now I see, the spirit's name was *Force*.

I write, assured, "In the beginning was the *Deed*!"

That my translation must be changed again.

The spirit helps me. Now it is exact.

I write: In the beginning was the *Act*.



1230

1230

1260

1240

1240

1240

1270

1250

1250

1250

1250

1250

1250

1250

1280