

Kramer vs. the FBI: Making Art of Politics

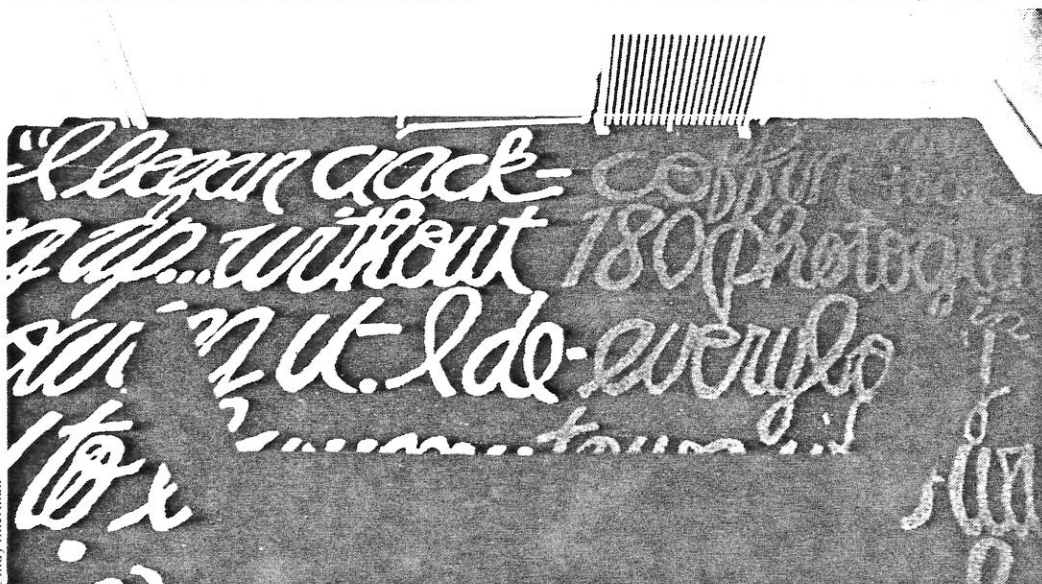
by Margia Kramer

□ Because of her support of the Black Panther Party, actress Jean Seberg became the object of FBI surveillance and harassment. In a May 1970 memo, the Los Angeles FBI field office requested authorization from FBI headquarters to plant a false letter with a gossip columnist that would "possibly cause her embarrassment and tarnish her image with the general public." Permission was granted, and a letter was subsequently sent to a Los Angeles Times columnist stating that Seberg had confided to the letter-writer that the father of her child was a member of the Black Panther Party. The story ran in the Los Angeles Times and later in Newsweek.

I began cracking up . . . without knowing it. I decided to bury my baby in my hometown. We opened the coffin and took 180 photographs, and everybody in Marshalltown who was curious what color the baby was got a chance to check it out. A lot of them came to look.

In order to see the entire inscription, it was necessary to climb a wooden ladder to a ten-foot-high viewing platform. In the January 21 *Village Voice*, Kay Larson described the effect in this way:

From a scary height near the ceiling, you look down on a carpet of black sand . . . The words, formed with red and yellow sand, recall the medicinal power of Navajo sand



Margia Kramer's 'Secret, Part I,' view from the top of the ladder

The following is artist Margia Kramer's account of how she became interested in Seberg's story and determined to explore the issues it raises through a series of installations and books.

In October, one month after Jean Seberg committed suicide in Paris, I petitioned the Department of Justice for her FBI file under the Freedom of Information Act. I received the file of approximately 300 pages on December 12, and the tale of surveillance and harassment that it contained became the theme of my FOIA cycle, "Secret."

The first two parts of "Secret," and the handbook "Essential Documents: The FBI File on Jean Seberg, Part I," were floor installations-with-book at Artists Space Gallery in New York City in January and Duke University in February. The book contained documents concerning the paternity and stillbirth of Jean Seberg's child in 1969. The remaining four parts will consist of documents regarding the connection between Jean Seberg and the Black Panther Party and between Seberg, the mass media (particularly film), and the FBI. They will be accompanied by two more handbooks of backup documents.

The high, windowless room that housed my installation at Artists Space was approached through a long corridor. To the right of the doorway was a small white table on which lay the book of essential FBI documents. The room was carpeted with colored gravel and slag that spelled out in large script a quotation from the deceased actress in an interview with her in a *New York Times* article of June 1974:

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paintings, but the visual and physical contortions necessary to lean over and read the inscription obliterate any sense of well-being and force you to stare uncomfortably into this black morass of nausea and self-disgust. You feel that you too could easily topple over the edge and fall into the nightmare.

To explore the issues involved in making this type of documentary art, I conducted the following self-interview:

You were asked by May Stevens to participate in a panel called "Art as Intervention" on March 18 at the School of Visual Arts. How do you interpret that title?

I think that the title of the panel could as easily have read "Intervention as Art," because the concept is one of exchange between art and public events. To me, it means art-making that proceeds from the explicit moral convictions of the artist. And this is one of the notions that differentiates my art from other contemporary art. The locus of the art work—its themes, materials, methods of communication, and setting—moves between private, internal reality and public, shared, external reality.

I want to begin this interview with a quotation from John Grierson, who started the documentary film movement in England in 1929. He invented the word "documentary," defining it as "the creative treatment of actuality." The quotation is the following: "a mirror held up to nature is not as important as . . . the hammer which shapes it."

The roots of documentary art are in the 19th century, in events and so-called art movements such as Romanticism and Realism. Mirror and hammer are metaphors for

esthetic and social concerns. With mirror and hammer the artist is not only "of one's time," reflecting it; the artist also shapes and participates in his or her time. Within a realist or documentary framework, the definition of personal (as observed by Linda Nochlin) is, by its nature, social. Meaning interactive instead of hermetic or avant-garde; meaning direct, concrete, specific, grounded in the contemporary and commonplace. The documentary visual artist, like the Realist before, makes a "drama from the ordinary."

How do you go about making this "documentary drama"?

My primary source of public observation is the daily newspapers, which I read for news of actual events and sources, fashions in public opinion, and intimations of media propaganda. I clip articles relating to my interests: primarily, at present, about the FBI, CIA, FOIA, constitutional rights, visual propaganda in Iran, American reaction to the hostage situation, the treatment of Eastern-bloc and Soviet artists, writers, and dissidents, Amnesty International, International PEN, and so on.

Sometimes I retype a particularly compelling excerpt or quotation and hang it on my bathroom wall. As I look at it each day, if the material seems more and more urgent, I may isolate it, write it out in my own handwriting thereby appropriating it to myself, and stat it up. The more compelling it becomes over time, the larger I stat it up again and again. The most urgent stats—the ones that speak to my personal, moral convictions most clearly and passionately—are then used in more extended pieces, such as the room installation and book at Artists Space.

Requesting documents and sources under the FOIA is a technique of investigative reporting and historical research that I have pre-empted for my art. This technique seems logical and appropriate to the work, because my primary concern is the free press and freedom of information.

Is this documentary art different from other contemporary art?

Because the nature of the observed events, news, and sources is flexible and unpredictable, documentary art has a living openendedness that is lacking in less socially engaged art. In documentary art, there is no esthetic resolution of posited problems *per se*, because the participant/viewer must provide part of every resolution by actively constructing meaning from the thematic materials presented by the artist. This constructed meaning may alter old choices and patterns of thought.

This is not art propaganda. Rather, in my own work, a familiar media story is reformed, investigated, placed in a dramatic, human context, blown up, slowed down, appropriately framed, and personalized by identification with a famous person, so that its almost unbelievable, outrageous, frightening reality is comprehensible.

But isn't what you have just described propaganda?

A crucial distinction must be made between a work of documentary visual art and art propaganda. Propaganda must lull the viewer by short-circuiting all thought and decision-making, by utilizing true or false persuasion and manipulation with veiled intent, with the purpose of making the viewer serve some cause, ideal, prevailing collective myth, or collective dream. Propaganda operates on an unconscious level. Documentary art, however, does not mask the artist's position and should inspire and stimulate individual thought and decision-making.

How did you come to do the installation at Artists Space last January?

The constructed space developed from my moral convictions regarding constitutional rights and the FBI surveillance of Jean Seberg. In a similar sense, religious architecture follows liturgical imperatives. Lacking a common liturgy, I relied on simple references and familiar objects: a ladder, platform, book, large-scale words, primary colors, and tactile surfaces in order to separate each viewer from the mass of viewers, to provoke fear, and to hammer a bit at memories, expectations, and conceptions of art viewing in relation to events of the late 1960s and early 1970s in America. ■

Part III of "Secret" can be seen May 3 to 31 at Printed Matter, 7-9 Lispenard Street in New York City. Part IV will be installed at the Franklin Furnace, 112 Franklin Street in New York City from May 13 to 31.

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR
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TO : Mr. C. D. Brennan *hls* Date: 8/25/70

FROM : C. C. Moore *hls*

SUBJECT: JEAN SEBERG *JUNE*
 RACIAL MATTERS

1 - Mr. Sullivan
 1 - Mr. C. D. Brennan
 1 - Mr. Bishop
 1 - Mr. G. C. Moore
 1 - [redacted] *hls*

To advise of premature birth and death of child of actress Jean Seberg, immoderate supporter of extremist Black Panther Party (BPP), as reported in attached newspaper article.

You were previously advised that Jean Seberg, the alleged promiscuous and the rumored white mistress was reportedly pregnant by [redacted] *hls*

On 8/21/70 our Special Agent in San Francisco picked up a conversation between Seberg and [redacted] in which she told him she was pregnant by him and had decided to have the baby. Seberg is a heavy financial contributor and supporter of the BPP.

Attached article reports premature birth and death of her baby in France. Seberg and her now reconciled former husband attributed death to recent "Newsweek" magazine article read by Seberg which, like other recent publicity, alleges that the father of her expected child was a black activist.

ACTION:
 For information.

Enclosure

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 ASB:bjr
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 EX-100 10 JUN 1970
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ALL INFORMATION CONTAINED HEREIN IS UNCLASSIFIED
 DATE 10-15-99 BY 447

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Document from FBI file on Jean Seberg

Women Artists News

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