

WHAT IS A FRENCH WESTERN? One Part Reality To Two Parts Fiction

Marie Losier in conversation with Kristine Marx

Marie Losier is a filmmaker whose films operate in a space between fantasy, camp, absurdity, identity swapping, and her embrace of community. Born in 1972 in Boulogne, France, she now lives in New York City. She has been working on a series of film portraits of directors, beginning with Mike and George Kuchar in 2003. Losier is presently working on three documentary portraits, with musician Genesis P-Orridge, filmmaker Albert Maysles, and filmmaker/musician Tony Conrad. In addition to the portraits, she has created fictional short films that develop from her actors' idiosyncrasies and are shot in campy, homemade theatrical sets. Losier's deep love of the silent film era reveals itself as an underlying structure for her works. Her films have been screened at the Tribeca Film Festival, the Seoul Film Festival, and the Rotterdam International Film Festival. Her film *The Ontological Cowboy*, a portrait of Richard Foreman, was included in the 2006 Whitney Biennial. This interview was taped in Losier's loft in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in June 2006.



Your film The Ontological Cowboy opens with Richard Foreman's statement "The theatre is about sex . . . there's always a huge erotic charge in the theatre." Does desire play a role in your films?

Yeah, always.

How so?

Well, first of all my desire to always be in the film in some way or another, and also because a lot of the work and the people I work with are very attached to the emotions of life. Their work is very theatrical in a way that plays with emotions. It's all about feelings and death and masquerade and humor. I think that relates right away to desire.

How did you begin working with Richard Foreman on The Ontological Cowboy?

That film took a long time for me to make, but I always wanted to make a film portrait about Richard Foreman since I worked with him eight years ago on the play called *Paradise Hotel* or *Hotel Fuck*. I made all the props. That was one experience that completely changed my life because of his aesthetic. Staying with the play every single day for eight months totally changed my aesthetic and it freed me from what I thought I should be doing. I met these actors who weren't actors; they came from different backgrounds and they were doing many other things at the same time.

How did Foreman influence your aesthetic?

Through the gesture, the theatricality and also the cheapness of how he makes props. He would use really cheap toys and tapes and painting and he didn't mind if it was crooked or slick, which totally goes with my aesthetic.

Richard frightened me to death because he is so shy and intense that I never dared to ask him to make a film. Years later I finally came up to him after making more film portraits and being more confident and I asked him if he would do it. He was very reticent in the beginning but then he said yes. So I started going to his house. I thought I would do an interview with him first so I could get an idea of the direction I wanted the film to go. The first interview I did I was so nervous that I put the microphone on the tape recorder and I only recorded the sound of the tape recorder. So in the middle of the night I realized that I didn't have the interview and I had to e-mail him, which was dreadfully painful. He accepted to do it again. It was intense. The interview lasted two hours. He answered all of my questions and I got what I wanted from him, which propelled the whole visual part of the film.

When we do see Richard Foreman in the film, is he in his library?

He's in his house. His house is just books.

Who made that decision? Did he elect to film it that way or did you?

I wanted to film him in a performance like in my other films where I put the character in the set in what I think is the most physical and visual, where they can be the most talkative about their own work and my relationship to them. But he didn't want to, so I had to film him straight in the theatre sitting in his set. He would just sit and stare into the camera. The same at his home. So I had to come up with a way to change the whole film. What I wanted to do with him, I did with the actors. I asked them to perform for me after their theatre performances at night to do certain scenes that I originally had wanted him to perform. I worked the editing in a way that Richard makes a play. Every sound is a change of gesture. Every sound is a change of dialogue. Every sound is a change of appearance, motion, and emotion. And that gives a rhythm to the whole dialogue that Richard is saying over the images.

So the way that you structured the film is based on the way that Foreman would structure a play?

Completely. I had all these pieces of film and I thought I couldn't do anything with them. Suddenly the rhythm came and it totally made sense that it had to be structured according to the sounds of his plays that I had recorded over the years, and his dialogue and action. That created a rhythm that made the film into exactly what I think Richard's world is and how I perceive him.

My experience of seeing Foreman's work is that you don't lose yourself in his plays, instead the audience is pushed back and becomes more self-conscious about being in the theatre as observers. But your film about Foreman allows the audience to enter his world, if only momentarily. What kind of experience do you want your viewers to have?

I wanted the audience to go more into the play. Richard uses lights that go into your face, so you're pushed away. He uses strings that push you away and make you aware of the space between you and the actor and the stage. And the sound just knocks your head off, so you are always aware that you are at the theatre. With the film I felt like spending time with Richard and seeing him and kind of analyzing his emotions and where he comes from. I felt that I could make the audience enter the film, because we were on the side of the actors. So we could get on the stage and see Richard from the stage, instead of being the audience in the seats. I was inverting the roles.

In your film, Foreman talks about his name, being adopted and the name that his birth mother gave—Eddie Friedman—and asks himself, what kind of plays would I have written if I were Eddie Friedman? This points to how much the circumstances that one is born into shape creative work. You were born and grew up in France and then moved to New York. How much does your background, or other circumstances that may not have been in your control, like your given name, shape your films?

Well, film comes from a long way back for me. I started watching film when I was four years old. I couldn't sleep so I used to sneak out and watch all these old films my parents were watching. I remember watching the film *M* by Fritz Lang, and I cried and I couldn't tell my parents why I was crying because I wasn't allowed to watch the films. That never stopped. I always wanted to be a filmmaker. I was not happy in France where I studied literature, theatre and writing and I did a Masters and PhD on Theatre. I got a huge grant and left for America, but never wrote my dissertation and kept the money to go into fine arts and study painting and sculpture. My first film came from a painting background and something theatrical and that's more art film. My portrait films are really close to *cinéma vérité* and between film and art. I think making a documentary can really bring you into that place.

Richard Foreman isn't the only director of whom you have made a film. You have also worked with Mike and George Kuchar and now Tony Conrad. How do you choose the people that you make films about?

They are people who inspire me. Sometimes they come along and I'm not aware of it, like the Kuchar brothers, and then they become my friends. Mike Kuchar made me do my first portrait film. He's the one because our friendship was so strong and hilarious that I just had no fear about making a portrait about him. That was the first one I ever made, so that triggered the one on George, on Richard, and the ones I'm working on now.

What are you working on now?

Three films—one is on Tony Conrad, which I filmed for a year, and now I'm going to start doing the editing. He's a mathematician by nature. His work is extremely minimal and yet his appearance and his being are totally extroverted and beyond theatrical and I love that part. We became friends because we were making fun of everything. So that became the beginning of making the film because we had a friendship.

I'm also making a documentary on Albert Maysles. David and Albert Maysles were brothers, and they made *Gimme Shelter* and *Grey Gardens*, which are some of my favorite films. I'm making a portrait on a documentary filmmaker, which is very interesting because he's not theatrical and yet his films are incredibly in your face. They're all based on psychology, that's his background. And it's his relationship and his psychology with the other people that gives the film what it has.

The third film is on a rock star who is an incredible performer . . . Genesis P-Orridge, who created the industrial music group Throbbing Gristle and then Psychic TV. It's a she/he, a double, a very complex person. She's someone who is so diverse and comes from such a diverse background. She's not just a rock star but also a *pandromine*, which is a term she invented to define what she is doing. She and her wife are becoming similar physically and in some way what they want is to be one.

On your Website, you have included many personal photos of your friends and people with whom you have worked. You have a photograph of yourself filming Tony Conrad cooking in his home—something that one would do in an intimate, private space among family and friends. I thought that was an interesting image that sums up a lot. It gets at the heart of your work, which not only is generated from community but it also generates community. Your art seems to be born out of personal relationships.

That's part of the work. I don't want to go into the studio alone and make things alone. The most important part is that trace of meeting these people and having adventures. That's what makes me feel alive. Art comes out of that; it's not just life.

How much does your work extend into this private world?

There is not much of a difference between my daily life and my work. They have to be together because my relationship to others is what makes the work that I'm making—the energy and the excitement that it gives me. I can't separate them. Everything that I want to do is connected to daily life. It's even more interesting to

me that my friends who are not actors end up in my films, because I don't really go for the perfection of the performance. I like the awkwardness and the theatricality in each of them. Each person that I put in the films has a very strange way of walking, or behaving, or way of saying words, or looks really awkward when I, for example, put a man in a woman's dress. That displacement is very important to me.

Are you living a film?

Sometimes, especially when you do documentaries because you are watching and following someone all the time. In some way you become part of their life and they become part of yours.

What for you is the difference between art and life?

They're not very far away from each other. They're kind of all one.

*I'll be watching one of your films, listening to the subject speaking, and then all of a sudden I hear you laugh at something that was said, as in the films *Electrocute Your Stars and Bird*, *Bath and Beyond*. At that moment I become aware that I'm not just listening to one person, but I am conscious that this person is being interviewed and is not alone and has been directed in some way. Why not edit the laughter out? Why is it important for you to have certain points in the film where the director's presence is made known?*

I laugh at moments where I love the story and I want to share this with the audience because that's my favorite part where I wanted to leave in that part of the story. And also because everything that I've been making is handcrafted or campy or has this quality that is not perfect. Just like Richard Foreman's sets that are not perfectly made. I'm leaving it in my films where it fits my personality and the person that I'm following to make a documentary.

The Kuchar brothers' films are the kings of camp films that I love along with John Waters, Russ Meyer, and so many others. Leaving my laugh in . . . well, the first time I heard it I was like, "Oh no, what do I do? I have to take off my voice, it's terrible." Then I thought, "Huh, actually it fits very well with the subject." I decided not to make it clean-edged because that's not how I work. The way I work with the camera is very sloppy.

*Hearing the director laugh suggests that the film is not a strict documentary, but there is so much of you in it. It reminds me of a scene in *The Ontological Cowboy* where the actors are all wearing cutout paper masks of Foreman, as if they were his props. The image asks, where is the line drawn between your own subjectivity and the film's subject? Especially with the documentaries.*

It starts with the person that I choose to make a portrait on. Each person in a funny way is related to the others. I have my heroes, like everyone. I know I want to get close to what they make, close to understanding their work better.



Top: A still from *The Ontological Cowboy*, featuring (l. to r.) Tom Ryder Smith, Jay Smith, and Juliana Francis; Left: Self-portrait; Bottom: *Flying Saucy!* Photo: Bernard Yenelouis. All photos courtesy Marie Losier.



In some ways they are not unattainable. They're people and that's the beauty of it. They become just like you. I treat them like they're part of my life and they treat me as I'm part of their life. It becomes life; it's not just a documentary. I have a love for them . . . a love relationship. I wouldn't want to make a documentary on someone I hate. That wouldn't work for me.

Are your documentary films collaborations?

They are complete collaborations. And that's what's so exciting about them. I wouldn't want any other approach. I make these portraits also because I want something from them and that something is what inspires me from their work or their world that helps me to move on in life and go further into my own filmmaking. It's not so much just about film but understanding certain things about me or my work or the people around me. It really works through relationships. That's what I discovered I was good at: relating to the other person and collaborating in a way that they are reassured, they trust me, so then we can start and something comes out of that.

You said that you are interested in famous directors and rock stars. You meet them, become friends with them, and they become a part of you. It reminds me of an earlier body of work of yours. You took photographs of celebrities and inserted yourself into the photograph. You're either the girlfriend of Jimi Hendrix, or with Warren Beatty.

It's exactly the same, except they're all dead.

I love cinema so much. And I've loved certain icons. I've always collected and cut out photographs of my favorite actors and put them on my wall creating an environment where I wished that I was. Film is so much linked to reality. I've watched so many films that I've become part of the screen.

Film is linked to reality?

In some ways, yes. By watching film, you put your emotion onto the screen, or the films—the actors, the stories—put them in you. You resolve things and you laugh at things, cry at parts, and you mix them up. For me it's liberating because I have no barrier. I can completely vanish into the movie. With the film stars, it's like okay I have no way to get to know them. They're dead. So the only way to get close to them was to insert myself in the photographs and create a character who knew them and to invent her life—Loula Nasaroff—and she could know them the way I would have loved to know them. So then I could exist in that time and I inserted myself in the films even more. These are some of my favorite films. I want to be in them.

There are so many references to early film in your work. Why do you love the silent film era?

It's the nostalgia. I'm nostalgic for a time that's past. In the joy and the humor there's a sadness. The sadness comes from these past moments of things that I never had, or things that I wish I had, this time I wish I were in. They are so beautifully

crafted and they are so crazy. Silent film is the only place where there can be craziness and a lack of self-awareness. The directors do the most simple, banal actions and it becomes incredible film. And it never fails. Silent film makes everyone laugh and cry. George Méliés, Jacques Tati, Buster Keaton will make anyone laugh. And these were made a hundred years ago.

You said that film is connected to reality, but you're describing it as fantasy, such as projecting yourself into a fantasy world and inventing a character that's from the silent film era. Fiction plays a large role in your work. Does the artist need to lose him/herself in fantasy in order to create good work? Or does art require that the artist always maintain a point of connection to reality?

I don't think too hard about the difference between reality and fantasy, and I don't fear that I will lose myself or not lose myself to be able to create. Any time you have the camera pointed at someone it becomes fiction. It's not only just reality, because they know you're filming them. I feel they mix, and I don't really care that they do because that's the world where I'm comfortable. That's where, well, ok my imagination goes wild sometimes, but it doesn't make me uncomfortable to mix it up. I'm never scared that I'll lose myself because I know myself pretty well.

By inserting yourself in someone else's film, there is an interchange of subject and filmmaker. I think this is especially true in your film Broken Blossom, where you appropriate footage from screen tests of D.W. Griffith's film Broken Blossoms, and insert yourself into the footage as an actress at an audition. You are not only the director, but you also play an actress, and that actress is playing a role in a silent film. How do you see these multiple roles playing off of each other? It seems to be about being on the inside and outside at the same time—being both the subject and the object.

That one came from my love of Lillian Gish. I just wanted to be her. I found her incredibly beautiful. She is a figure that could never exist anymore. She represents cinema to me. The only way I could meet her in person was to do an audition with her. Of course I lose the audition; she wins, but at least I spend a little time with her. I was getting in the film to know Griffith. Getting in the film to know Lillian Gish and to know myself. In some ways it made me assume all the roles that interest me in the cinema.

So you could play all the roles that you love yourself. The way you talk about film is that it's almost like a séance where you can go back . . .

. . . visit this time . . .

. . . and visit these people who aren't alive anymore and meet them.

For me they never die. It's a weird feeling. That's why I have them on my wall, and I have a huge collection of DVDs and VHS tapes. They're really part of my every day life and I relate a lot more to old films than new films. Very rarely do I see a film nowadays that's just like, wow, this was great. Of course there are some and that's

such a pleasure, but I really relate so much better to the old ones. It's an aesthetic that I grew up with. In France you grow up watching a lot of old American films. You watch Billy Wilder and Buster Keaton.

Are they playing on French TV?

Yes, a lot. I was obsessed with Westerns, silent films, all the American icons. It's only now that I live in America that I'm interested in French films. But the American films always made me dream. They're something beyond "big." There are no French Westerns.

Costumes are a large part of your work. You often have men dressed as women as in Flying Saucy! and Eat My Make-up, or in absurd outfits, like Mike Kuchar dressed as an overgrown stuffed animal in Bird, Bath and Beyond. How does this swapping of identity, either through gender-bending or human morphing into animal, play a role in your work? Why are the costumes so important?

They're the most visual element to add to any subject which I deal with. I don't feel like I can deal with a subject in a serious, straightforward way. They have to be costumed because it's a visual that I can play with and the person who is wearing the costume is already going to be different and awkward. It's that awkwardness that I like to work with because it puts me in a position and them in a position where something special comes through that I don't get if I'm just filming them with the dialogue and normal clothing. I don't get excited about that. I only get excited when I have these weird little moments where something else comes that I can work with.

Moments of disorientation, like a man wearing a dress and bathing cap on the roof of a New York City building . . .

There's something awkward about that. And it makes them move differently and it makes them think differently.

So it's a way for you to draw out of them idiosyncratic behavior.

Not everyone is interested. There are some people that don't even need to know how to act. They just put a costume on and they're ready and present on the screen. That's what I'm looking for.

Can you talk about the use of stop animation and environments in your films?

I always choose characters that fit that environment. I don't see people like Richard Foreman, Tony Conrad, or Genesis P-Orridge to be people in just jeans and a t-shirt. As soon as the camera is on Tony, he's running to get a wig and a dress. They are people who are already into being theatrical in their daily life.

The Kuchar brothers are performers. They play in their own films, they play in everybody's films. They're shooting as they're living, as they're eating—shooting constantly. Richard is constantly in the theatre and his actors are constantly Richard. He manipulates them completely. For me it totally makes sense.

I come from an art background and I want and love the feeling of costumes and decoration. That's why I'm so attracted to silent film. They're not so much about dialogue . . . there's no dialogue. They're about gestures and costumes. They are also wild. The silent film directors are the only directors that let themselves film whatever came through their head. If it's badly made and you see all the tricks in the films, it's fine. They still leave it in. And then they have this old, nostalgic quality, which is never clean, which is always a little fuzzy or blurred or hand-crafted, which has this mechanic feeling of the image. Everything I've always loved comes from that—the sound, the film, the painting, the costumes have to be handmade.

The subjects have to be on a painterly background. They can't just be sitting at a desk smoking or working. I want my subject to always be performing. A rock star is the biggest performer—always in costume, always in make-up, always playing another person. And then you see them in their home before the shoot eating mashed potatoes, and that's when you remember they're like you. Mixing that and their reality . . . for me it has to be theatrical. I don't think life is straight. I think that there are a lot of things to laugh with.

It seems that you are attracted to quirkiness.

And humor. I only make film in a way that I feel like I am having fun. I know it's the last thing you say in making an artwork. The cliché is that you have to suffer to make art. But for me it's the reverse. I need to have fun.

What role does humor play in art?

It's the most reachable thing and the hardest thing to make. It's easier to make something serious than making something funny, because what is funny? It's a very hard thing to define. Mine is more slapstick and absurd.

Like the pie fight in Eat My Makeup . . .

Yes, and 200 pounds of spaghetti flying in the sky. Or Tony Conrad, the person you think represents minimal music, dressed in a wig. I don't think too hard about the humor. It just comes.

Speaking of spaghetti, I wanted to ask you about Flying Saucy!, one of your more recent films. It's a spoofy sci-fi—the actors, covered in spaghetti, climb out of a spaceship-like cooking pot, which has landed on the roof of a NYC building. What was it like to make this film?

It was one of the happiest days of my life.

Did you shoot it in one afternoon?

Yes. It took three days to prepare—cooking spaghetti and getting costumes. It was a visual idea that I had. I didn't really know what the actors would be doing between each other. But then it all came together because each person is suddenly wearing a dress and bathing cap looking like a silent film actor.

Why are there so many references to food in your work, as with the spaghetti in Flying Saucy!, the pies in Eat My Makeup, and in an earlier work, Lunchbreak on the Xerox Machine?

Food is often in the film because it's an element that comes right from silent film; the most visual slapstick element where people have something to play with and it becomes painful and pleasurable right away because it's food, and it's physical, and it's organic, so people can smash it on each other's face, or eat it, or be disgusting with it. The spaghetti with tomato sauce looked like the inside of the body. It was very much like birth. Or death. Food is something that I have related to for a long time. There's an element of fear and joy.

The filmic devices, B-grade special effects as in an early work Butter-Fly, where you're flying but it's really obvious that you are on a stool, and the cooking pot that lands on the roof in Flying Saucy!, draw attention to themselves in a comical way. I see them as a kind of childlike belief in film as fantasy. It's interesting how you said earlier that film connects to reality.

It comes from the beginning when I discovered film. It was done by Méliés. It was painting and motion. And he was the first one.

I love magic tricks, because a magic trick is like inserting surreal, absurd moments into reality. To do that with film, where it becomes so visually beautiful but it's visible that you are overlaying two films in the camera or that you're standing on a black stool which disappears on a dark background by making tricks, is one of my favorite parts of making films, and that's why I relate so much to camp film. Camp keeps those effects, like the Kuchar brothers, John Waters, all the really bad camp images from the 50s with garish décor, and really bad blood, and really bad teeth, and other props are things that I really appreciate. You don't try to hide it. You just live with it and work around it and make it glorious. The magic trick is the closest thing to making art.

KRISTINE MARX is a video and installation artist. She exhibits her work at Plane Space, New York, and Herrmann & Wagner, Berlin. Her most recent exhibition was at the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh, PA.