

A Slow And Painful Crawl: The Videos Of Kent Anderson Butler

Video is to television as sound is to music. Each is the most basic component of its medium, and the art lies in how they are assembled. Television is designed to entertain as we watch passively, and in doing so, to sell us products. Video art, on the other hand, demands something from us, and if anything is sold, it is the artist's vision. And unlike music, art videos are not frequently downloaded onto iPhones for casual viewing. One of the many challenges for video artists is finding viewers who will take the time to watch, to listen, and to think about their work in our hyperkinetic world. Despite this difficulty, video has some advantages over more traditional media. Moving images are inherently compelling and technology has facilitated the ease of their creation and dissemination. Kent Anderson Butler's video work flaunts these distinctions, inviting the viewer's attention and then holding it there, almost as if the artist were observing us observe his work. This feeling arises from the slowed motion, deliberative pace, and static camera position. We feel we are as much the subject as he is; yet viewing these videos requires endurance, not just because they are mysterious and demand attention to understand, but also because they strike deeply personal chords. The action is muted, even mundane, but the implications are disturbing.

The history of video art, including its current dominant position in contemporary art, is an inspiration in DIY artmaking, which has clearly affected Anderson Butler. Early works by Laurie Anderson, Chris Burden, Bruce Nauman, and William Wegman are fascinating for their simplicity, audacity, and humor (and in Burden's case, extreme physicality and danger), and Anderson Butler has been paying attention. A strong element of this video work is its connection to the pioneers. In our time of high-definition (HD) video, high-tech editing, and sophisticated narrative, Anderson Butler's work seems from another time in its aching honesty and catharsis. Watching the seminal works of Nauman and Wegman, Anderson Butler learned the absurdity of the human body, as opposed to its classical beauty, and how repetition of the most mundane acts can transcend into profundity. Laurie Anderson and Eleanor Antin provided models for creating characters through which aspirations and associations live. Though Anderson Butler is a student of current practitioners, his work remains in the realm of the highly personal expression that is less fashionable today. Technology is a major issue for most artists; within the short time of recent memory, digital innovation has propelled us into what only a few generations ago would have seemed science fiction. Instant messaging, live video feeds from anywhere, and immediate access to gigabytes of information via handheld wireless gadgets are overwhelming and even challenging to our humanity. Entertainment and warfare are avid employers of the most advanced technology, and they successfully persuade consumers to keep up by buying the latest device. Those who resist are swept aside and considered hopelessly lost, anachronisms in contemporary society. Anderson Butler's videos are almost entirely single channel, have few (if any) camera movements, and display the noise of low-to-normal

definition that has been quickly overtaken by HD. They rely on the most basic of components: an idea, a few actors, and a well-defined set of actions.

Embodied Fusion (2010) is a six-minute video that opens with the artist laying on his stomach in a desert junkyard. He does one push-up and holds it, staring at the camera, his face quickly turning red. He is a short, rotund man, and the strain of holding himself up is evident as he struggles for about a minute. Two young women enter into the background from either side of the screen, cross paths, and finally embrace just as the artist flops back down into the dirt. Their salutation and embrace is reminiscent of the intimate familiarity seen in Bill Viola's *The Greeting* (1995), but here it is a private moment staged behind the back of the struggling man. Slowly the women approach the artist and turn him over onto his back as if he were disabled; each grabbing an ankle, they slowly drag him across the dirt. The artist is completely passive but clearly uncomfortable, lifting his bald head slightly to avoid some rocks. Eventually the women drag him off screen. Throughout, the audio consists of ambient sound—the ever-present desert wind, shuffling feet, and the body being dragged through the dirt.

This is a typical Anderson Butler video: he is the main or only player, a character whom we observe observing us. Watching him strain under his own weight and refusing to resist as he is dragged along the ground, we are reminded of the martyrdom and nonviolent resistance of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Saint Sebastian. But unlike an oppressed victim, principled citizen, or Christian Saint, for Anderson Butler there is only misery and no redemption. When the artist looks at us from the video, it is with a sense of futility. There is no reason for his persecution and no clue as to who the women are or why they drag him off. They are portrayed not as evil, but as simply doing their jobs, like hospital orderlies who might forcefully restrain a delirious patient. And yet, their warm embrace of one another is puzzling. Are they simply friends facing a tough task grateful for the camaraderie?



Lustration (2005), a five-minute black-and-white video, opens onto a blank wall with a narrow doorway. Slowed down to about half speed, two women appear in the next room, dragging the large body of the artist by the arms as if disposing of a corpse. Clumsily pulling him into the bathroom where the camera waits, they lift his head, dunk it into the toilet, and flush. The slowed flushing sound gurgles and swirls and one wonders how long Anderson Butler must hold his breath. After an indeterminately long time, the women lift his head out of the toilet and lay him on the floor, the body, toilet, tub slice diagonally across the frame, creating a strikingly beautiful image. His arms, splayed to one side of the toilet, are wet and lifeless, and the camera slowly pans up to the doorway, watching the two women as they leave.

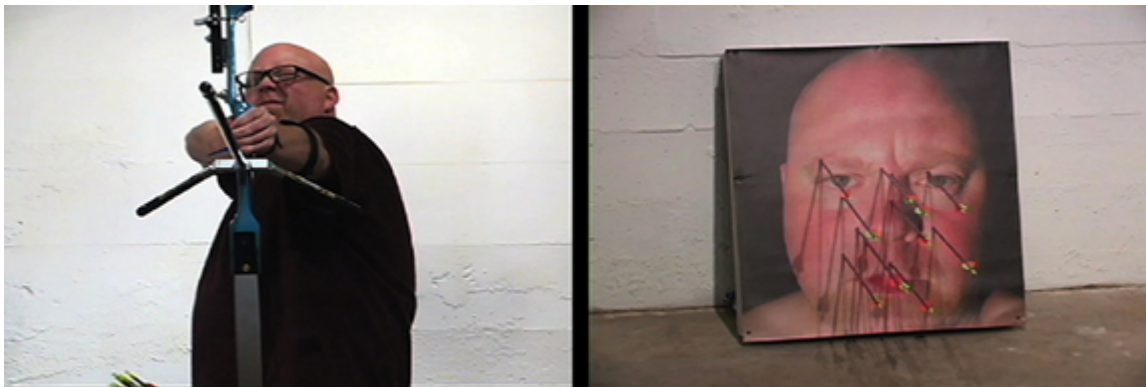
Staged as a pseudo-crime scene, the act is charged with a humiliation and self-deprecation that is uncomfortable to watch. Martyrdom, a recurring theme throughout Anderson Butler's oeuvre, is suggested; however, without any implication that it is necessary, spiritual, or redemptive, we are left with a nagging question about the artist's intention and the uncomfortable feeling we are somehow complicit in the degradation and helpless to stop it. We become aware of ourselves as the final component in the work, without whom the act is meaningless.

Anderson Butler references other video artists such as Marina Abramovic, Matthew Barney, and Viola, with whom he shares an intense physicality and spirituality. In a way, Anderson Butler is the opposite of Barney. Barney's striking good looks and impressive physique contrast with Anderson Butler's short, heavy plainness; the former's fantastic scenarios and outlandish characters with the latter's mundane scenes of himself; the grappling, assertive Barney with the passive, tormented Anderson Butler. Viola's influence on Anderson Butler is more direct as spiritual seeker whose videos are as much metaphysical as lyrical. Yet even Anderson Butler's spiritual concerns manifest as the fragile and imperfect body in an abusive and unloving world, in contrast to the ethereal, idealized body commonly found in Viola's work.

Offering, a five-minute video from 2007, is a complex assemblage of symbols and acts. Anderson Butler sits on the ground with his back to the camera as a man slowly mops the concrete around him, leaving behind a wet stain, an act reminiscent of Janine Antoni's 1992 performance *Loving Care*, in which her hair dipped in black dye stains the gallery floor. The water swirls around the artist's Buddha-like presence, and he is unaffected by the events around him. Eventually a large man enters, pushes Anderson Butler onto his back, throws the artist's legs over his shoulders, and lifts. The man struggles, shudders, and eventually raises Anderson Butler, who once again passively accepts his fate as his T-shirt falls over his head. The act is unnerving, and his large white belly quivers, a bit of comedic relief suggesting Wegman's *Stomach Song* (1970), which shows only a white belly and navel contorting while the artist sings. Just as it appears he will be dropped, a woman enters, removes his shirt, and gently kisses his cheek. Grabbing his arms, she helps carry him out of the scene. The kiss is part Judas betrayal, part Mary Magdalene loyalty and sympathy for his suffering.

Although it is not clear whether any of this is intended to be funny, Anderson Butler's knowledge of the history of video art would suggest so, albeit in an extremely understated way. His early videos were often humorous, and the artist has assembled a cast that seems comfortable with each other and with him as the director. The history of video and popular culture are full of absurdities that involve some level of violence and Anderson Butler exploits the fact that many of us simultaneously laugh and cringe at seeing someone get hurt. Slapstick comedies from Buster Keaton to MTV's *Jackass* are funny for their juvenile outrageousness. Anderson Butler is less overt but still painful moments are punctuated with his gaze toward the viewers that seems to confront that uncontrollable urge to laugh to another's pain.

In the two-channel video *Penetration* (2006), Anderson Butler takes on the role of oppressor as well as victim, shooting arrows into a large self-portrait. As the oppressor, his persona transforms into a determined and focused marksman, ruthlessly targeting himself over and over until his portrait is full of arrows. The portrait is of course passive, and is pulled down by the weight of the arrows. The contrast between these two personas is unnerving and like a doppelganger, suggests another reading of his work. Here, passivity may be seen as manipulation not unlike Bob Flanagan's masochistic video work. In each video, the victim requires our attention and response, a need that is insatiable. There may be a deeper connection between the two artists due to their medical and surgical histories. Flanagan had cystic fibrosis, a degenerative condition from which he found relief in hanging upside down and receiving beatings. Anderson Butler suffered through many childhood surgeries and is familiar with pain as a conduit for healing and even normalcy. It may be uncomfortable and unorthodox to think of pain as redemptive, but the connection between the two in many religions is not uncommon.



Both Anderson Butler's body and the collective body are ever-present in his work, a constant subtext to the acts of humiliation, aggression, and tenderness examined in each video. In *Embodied Fusion*, where the artist is discarded in the junkyard, the body may be read as representing the endangered environment. In *Lustration*, the body is nourished spiritually, baptized in the water. In *Offering*, the body is a burden

to society, one that must be cared for but also swept aside in the name of social progress; in *Penetration*, it represents self inflicted torment, both physical and mental. The body as a conduit for various readings leads Anderson Butler eventually to take charge and lead the viewers into a dark, and shared emotional space where pain and abuse lead to the divine state of ecstasy; a oneness with God achieved through transcending the physical for the purely spiritual.

In perhaps the most disturbing of his recent work, Anderson Butler obsessively picks at the skin on his thumb until he wounds himself and bleeds. *Virginal Wound* (2007), is an excruciating ten minutes of viewing as an extreme close-up reveals his thumb being scratched and peeled, its skin tearing away in bits and ribbons. His repetitive actions are obsessive, and even maniacal. The thumb becomes abstracted to the point that it is difficult to stay focused on the self-destructive act as cuticle, nail, and wrinkles transform into reasons to avoid the lonely torture Anderson Butler inflicts on himself. He knows we are watching and yet continues, creating the belief that he wants us to squirm while he unflinchingly hurts himself. Once again, we are aware that without us, this act would be a private obsession or psychological neurosis; with us present, it becomes a performance.

By eschewing HD video, professional actors, and dialogue, Anderson Butler's videos signal their authenticity. Their very simplicity is a political gesture of defiance and resistance to the demands of a technologically advancing world. Anderson Butler is a devout Christian and the themes he chooses and the manner in which they are acted out are influenced by his belief system. Instead of this being an impediment for those who do not share his faith, it becomes a bridge for shared psychological experiences. The works' audio is particularly adept at accomplishing this. Ambient sounds are produced through the artist's actions or those acted upon him- blowing wind, a body being dragged in the dirt, a toilet flushing, arrows striking their target, scratching skin. These are the soundtracks to our lives when the iPod is turned off, the subtext to what is really happening to us. When asked about these decisions, Anderson Butler is evasive and claims an inability to articulate the reasoned answers one would expect from an accomplished artist and art professor. Like his videos, he appears to be watching for our reaction and responses to his work, with the patience of one who is obsessed.

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Afterimage
Vol. 38 No. 3
November/December, 2010