

Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz

(Lausanne, Switzerland, 1972, and Bonn, Germany, 1963)

Toxic, 2012, a video installation consisting of a video and some photographic reproductions, leads the research of these two artists in a new direction in the field of queer culture. Like their earlier works, it emerges from the filming of a performance created not for a live audience, but for the lens of the movie camera, the presence of which in the space is never hidden, but rather obviously at hand, in a Brechtian manner. The actors on stage do not pretend to be the characters they are playing, but instead declare that they are actors playing a role, inseparable from their true identity. The role of the performers—Werner Hirsch and Ginger Brooks Takahashi in *Toxic*—is to link the present time of actor and spectator to images, events, and cultural signs of the past. Through their speaking of the transsexual dimension, they open up possible scenarios for understanding queer culture in the present and future.

Toxic is an open homage to the *Theater of the Ridiculous* staged by Jack Smith in the late 1960s, where he exposed to ridicule the capitalistic development of society and the compulsive normalization of bodies it required and programmed.

In not dissimilar fashion, the two artists point out how the concept of detoxification—through a healthy life and environment (so present in the dictates of today's commercial communications)—also passes through the exposition of bodies with standardized and rigid sexuality and ethnic identity.

Today everything that does not fall within preordained schemes of normality is considered toxic for society. And this is best seen in the film through the framing of dust made up of small gold, fuchsia and purple diamonds that is swept up on the pavement by a broom, along with pills and cigarette butts.

There is a second level of toxicity, tied to processes of cultural classification, that comes into play in the video through the presence of nineteenth-century photographic reproductions of pederasts, shot when photographic documentation by the police did not yet have a fully formulated methodology. In order to document the homosexuals we see standing still in the images, police brought them to photographic studios, where they were portrayed posing like actors or middle-class people in masks, like a side show at some fair of old. Boudry and Lorenz reveal the curious coincidence that demands that photography—and, later, film—be a nascent mechanism of expulsion of social toxicity by way of cataloguing, but also a chemical process that is one of the most toxic to manipulate during the phase of development and the preparation of the plate. At the end of the video Werner Hirsch addresses his complaints to the director, for having exposed him to the lens, stressing how the toxic element is an unavoidable part of every shot and every frame, and, in the final analysis, of every glance that, in the portrayal, judges and classifies. (EV)