Teresa Hubbard / Alexander Birchler in conversation with Andrea Karnes, Curator,
Modern Art Museum Fort Worth. Austin, Texas, April 11–12, 2008
Excerpt from the Exhibition Catalogue: *No Room to Answer*

Andrea Karnes: What is the theme of the project that you are currently working on titled *Grand Paris Texas*, which is debuting with this exhibition?

Teresa Hubbard: It is a video installation that depicts the interior and exterior of an abandoned cinema as the central theme. The cinema is called the Grand, and it's in Paris, Texas. It has been shut down for more than a decade and is now a home to pigeons and other wildlife. No one has been inside the building since the cinema was closed. We wanted to see what was inside the Grand, but we also wanted to use this structure of the old, abandoned cinema in a way, to examine obsolescence. The project has three basic parts. One part is that it follows a film crew while they film the interior rooms of the theater, illuminating what's inside. A second part incorporates interviews with Paris, Texas residents who offer reflections about cinema, filmmaking, and what movies mean for them in their specific lives, in their specific town. The third part explores a meta narrative about Paris, Texas, as a projection in our minds triggered by the city Paris, France and by the film *Paris, Texas* by Wim Wenders.

AK: So part of your initial intrigue with Paris was the Wenders film . . .

Alexander Birchler: Yes, we were curious about the real Paris, Texas. We wanted to see the town that is known because its name is the title of a famous movie. When we arrived there, we did what we do in pretty much every town, we went to see what the cinema looked like. When

we saw this cinema we were interested in it, but not to any extent more than in any other small town—it was not spectacular in any way. It had a grand name, but that was it.

AK: What was it about the movie *Paris, Texas* that interested you enough that you wanted to see the real town—even make a special trip there?

TH: Both of us were teenagers when we saw *Paris, Texas*, and what teenagers aren't consumed by a sense of desolate isolation? I think the Wenders film speaks to that. Even though we were growing up in different parts of the world, me in Australia, Alexander in Switzerland, Wenders' film impacted both of us.

AK: Did you decide instantly when you saw the real Paris, Texas, and this particular abandoned cinema, that it would be the location of your next work? Alexander, you mentioned that it was not special in any way.

AB: Initially we made some photographs of the facade and went on our way. But there was something about this location, the state of this cinema, the nature of projection and image due to Wenders' film, that kept us talking about it. Soon afterward, we researched the cinema more and found out that it belonged to the city and that it had been out of operation for quite a while. We speculated about it, but we still had no idea what the interior looked like. Since there were no images of the interior available, we were curious to go back and schedule a visit to go inside. When we went back, we were given a key and some masks to wear. We entered the building and basically entered a room that was dark; we carried flashlights because the building didn't have

electricity. I saw a couple of pigeons flying inside the main theater, and I could hear many more of them. So I just walked back to Teresa, who was standing at the entrance, and I said, "This is it." [laughter]

AK: Why was "this it?"

AB: It immediately reminded me of the analogy of a movie theater to a cave—of the primordial fear of encountering the unknown or a 'wild animal' in the dark. And then of course you can't not think of Hitchcock's *The Birds*.

TH: A lot has been written about the flickering of images and why movies 'move us.' There's something so primal that is tapped into when we sit in the dark and we receive illumination—there's something about the nature of the flicker, the on and the off, the light and the dark, and the shades or tones in between, that taps into something that is like a waking daydream. There's something that deeply taps into an emotional and psychological base. There's also pleasure derived from being so moved in a public space, that even though you don't have privacy, in that darkness you can be moved to laugh, to cry, to do so many things individually, yet collectively. The darkness, that the architecture of cinema is such a non-finite, rather slippery thing; it's a box, it's a cave, it's just darkness. There are few people who stick around once the lights are up to absorb that other atmosphere, particularly in contemporary cinemas. Historically cinemas have been these lush, glamorous places. But that's changed, for a number of reasons.

AB: Alexander Kluge, the German director and author, has pointed out that because of the mechanics of a film projector, whenever you are watching a film projection, you are actually spending one third of that time in complete darkness. To also pick up on what Teresa said, as soon as the movie ends and the house lights come on, you are aware that there's nothing there, except that you were fully immersed into a story, into someone's life, into emotion, engaged in something only moments ago. That's why the cinema as an image, or a metaphor, is fascinating.

TH: With this particular cinema, we were interested to see what happens once the life and light have gone out and to explore how illumination comes back. How is the theater lit now? What is its inner light? The city continues to illuminate the facade, so how does it look now that it's just a shell of what it was? How does it make a picture? We were treating the cinema as a picture.

AK: Why were you treating the cinema as a picture?

TH: Well, when the Grand theater closed in 1997 it was supposed to be a temporary closure. It was supposed to open back up, but it just never happened. In the offices, for example, with the cigarette packages, potted plants, and paperwork, it looks like people expected to come back the next day, but they didn't. The place is held, like a photograph, frozen in that moment and it's never moved beyond that moment in time. It's stuck in that moment, except that wildlife has now invaded.

AK: You often include a structure—in this case the theater itself—as a main focus. What is it about photographing and filming architecture in general that is attractive to you as artists?

TH: We've always been fascinated with the analogy of a camera as architecture/architecture as a camera and their proximity and relationship to each other.

AB: For example, Le Corbusier's proposition that a house is a system for taking pictures, or that the outside is the result of an inside, are implications that we've explored in a number of works. I think of a movie theater as the reverse architecture of a camera.

TH: We've also explored film itself for its architectural properties. For instance, on a strip of film, the black strips separating two frames can become a threshold that can be so many things—a temporal and spatial void; singularity separating togetherness; darkness separating light; death separating birth.

AK: And did this exploration of film lead to your fascination with cinemas as the place where films are shown? Even enough to visit them in every town?

AB: I think one reason we visit cinemas is because they represent a classic type of storytelling device, and the kind of storytelling that we're interested in. I think the way we started getting involved in art was out of a fascination for film and the cinema as a place where stories are told. Also, it is a place where the image and the space seem to come together.

TH: . . . slip together. . .

AK: . . . they need each other.

AB: Yes, traditional cinema is a darkened architecture. It's a dark place and through illumination, a story is told. That's really why we're interested in cinema as space. It speaks to projection, reflection, and interiority, which are central to our work. But we're not only interested in cinema as a concept and as an architecture, but also, even more so, in the idea of the dead cinema, the end of cinema.

AK: You mention the idea of projection, and it is a definite recurring over-layer in your work: psychological projection, literal projection, and in this case even projection equipment. What does this symbolize?

TH: Projection as psychology and form contain all the kinds of contradictions that intrigue me—it's ephemeral but physical; nothing and everything; fluid yet frozen; light and dark, carrier as well as vehicle.

AB: In *Grand Paris Texas* we try to approach several different layers of projection. As a house for movie projections, the theater functioned as a central downtown symbol and social center. Over the years, the Grand slowly slipped into redundancy, both as a symbol and as a destination. This is one of the kinds of layers we're interested in.

TH: Inside the Grand now is a projection system of a different kind that has happened because of the damage to the architecture. There are holes in the roof behind the main projection screen.

On a sunny day, these holes allow beams of light to project and hit a surface in the interior of the theater very close to the main screen that in the past was illuminated by very different means. There's definitely a nice kind of inversion of projection systems happening there now.

AB: It is a ruin when you think about it.

AK: Why do you show a film crew illuminating the Grand? Are they documenting this "ruin"?

AB: I think with this piece we're much closer to the genre of documentary than we were in any of our other pieces. We're using this language very consciously. For example, we had never interviewed people on camera, before doing it for this project. But to get back to the question about filming the film crew: Their purpose is to illuminate the theater and film it. In the same way we wanted to film the empty cinema, we wanted to film the film crew. It's about framing. The film crew, wearing protective glasses, respirators, gloves, and headlamps, carrying their equipment, look rather like archaeologists exploring some kind of tomb. And their function is also like that of archeologists, exploring a ruin and picking over items left behind by a previous generation. In this context, I like the idea of exploring the interior of this building and thinking about what one might actually be able to understand about cinema, about the nature of illumination and the power of cinema to transport us, just by exploring the defunct machinery, debris, and interior architecture.

TH: It also becomes a kind of reflection on a reflection about having a film crew film what it is that they actually produce. In this project I liked this sort of one-on-one relation of people

playing themselves, in a sense, and a cameraman who films frames of a film that have been strewn across the theater floor like any other kind of garbage—and that his act of filming this is done with care and compassion. I liked the contrast of the film crew's energy and dedication of producing images juxtaposed within this kind of film graveyard.

AK: Is the piece nostalgic?

AB: For me it asks questions about nostalgia, but it's not a nostalgic view; it's a view, a fact—an architecture that is in decay, or a concept that is disappearing.

AK: You literally see obsolescence, you see into an office space where there's a cup with a straw still in it, or a popcorn box overturned—you see that the rooms have been completely, abruptly abandoned. And you also see outmoded office equipment: a calculator, for example, and it conjures nostalgia for me. Not the sense of longing for the good old days, but it reminds me of how much technology has changed us and how we used to function—of how technology moves forward so quickly and we don't even notice. It's almost like you're looking at an analogue dialing phone. But in this case, the equipment was still in use ten years ago, when the place was a working cinema.

TH: I would describe what's inside as a dysfunction of how technology is always already redundant. It's about redundancy, rather than nostalgia, not only in terms of technology, but also in terms of economics.

AK: Why did you decide to interview some of the residents of Paris?

AB: While we were making trips up to Paris, spending time at the Grand, researching in the library and the city archives, we started meeting and talking to a lot of Parisians. As Teresa said, in this specific project, we felt compelled to have people "play themselves."

AK: How does this all fit together—the interviews, the film crew, the idea of what's inside the cinema now? The idea that it's no longer in operation . . . that it's called "the Grand" yet it's now a dead space for people, but it's taken on new life?

TH: All of the components are woven within the context of the theater. The theater is the main protagonist. For me, the cycle of life that happens there now is pretty grand, but not in the way that it was intended. It's impressive of a different order. There are these phases of activities that are happening inside. Several of the plywood pieces that were covering up part of the roof have fallen off, creating an aperture of the roof. The holes let light and life in. So pigeons and the odd rodents enter and exit, reproduce—they literally live and die inside. You see that layered physically because no one has cleaned it up. It's a life and death cycle, a struggle, operating side by side. For example, in the aisle of the downstairs theater, you might see a bird carcass that provides the bedding for a brand-new nest in which a fresh egg sits waiting to hatch. And that, juxtaposed with the function and dysfunction of the building, is pretty compelling.

AK: Given that description, symbolism is clearly a strength in this piece, but at the same time, it seems that the narrative is more cohesive here than in your other works, especially because you

have interviewed real people who offer their unscripted thoughts about film. Would you say there is more of a story in *Grand Paris Texas* than in your previous works?

AB: There's not one specific story told, rather, there are several narrative trajectories followed, interwoven, and implied. You are not given a conclusion about the destiny of cinema, the destiny of this cinema, the destiny of the residents of Paris, Texas, or anything like that. *Grand Paris Texas* presents layered scenarios, and it's important for us that the viewer engages and participates in the authorship of the work. In many of our previous video installations, the viewer also creates his or her narrative position by choosing an individual point of entry and exit in the work. Where does the story start for you, and where does it stop? In many of our looped works, we don't control that at all, which is why we like to refer to much of what we do as "video installations" rather than "short films." Over the years, we've explored the idea of the loop in different ways: as structure in the sense of linearity, for example in the work Eight, and as a cycle in the sense of historical return, for example in a recent project, *Johnny*. In *Johnny*, we worked with teenagers from a local high school marching band. The piece revolves around a trumpeter who repeatedly plays the civil war song, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home," while his band mates remain silent, refusing to join in. The marching band uniforms the teenagers wear are a contemporary derivative of historical military uniforms and the song, historically rooted, is still popular today- it continues to be played for dead soldiers returning from war, as well as for football fans at a football stadium. The project explores the loop through those kind of cyclical connections.

TH: In movies and films the structures compel and propel to keep you at the edge of your seat to find out what happens in the end, and our works do not operate that way. I really like the idea that people can exist with our works in their own time, in a similar way to how one lives with a painting. Some people stand in front of it for hours; some people walk past it and come back and visit the same painting for a few minutes or through the year, or whatever.

AB: But it does not stop; the painting is always there.

TH: Well, it's like approaching projection as though it's a kind of object

AK: Let's use *Grand Paris Texas* as an example. There are moments within the work that appear focused upon and even frozen, and in these instances, the objects being viewed seem to connect to still-life painting.

TH: That would make sense, given our ideas about of interiority, exteriority, and the drama of illumination. Often, we go back to Hopper. There is a sort of comfort to be found there. There's something about the populist appeal of his rendering of light as it pertains to narrative in his work that I think has been an important part of the language we've tried to use: You're given a layered scenario. You're not given a resolution.

AB: We will, in fact, deny you that.

TH: And we'll delight in denying you that. [laughter]

AK: Why do you deny us that and then delight in denying us that?

TH: I think because our investment lies in the ideas of proposition, and juxtapositions, and also in creating enough texture and mystery within a given work to make the viewer want to stay to interpret and reinterpret. A lot of that comes from being very conscious of what's in or out of the frame.

AB: "In or out of the frame" sounds very simplistic, but that has so much to do with the way we shoot these things. We very carefully compose whatever actually ends up in the frame because we think so much about what is outside of it. That's what is fascinating about the meta narratives in this project. There's always another frame beyond the frame. There's Paris in Texas; then there's another altogether different Paris in France. There's the film *Paris, Texas*, and so on. In the town of Paris, Texas, we found a single VHS copy of the film for rent, but because a previous renter accidentally taped over the ending of the film some years ago, it's not clear what happens to the hero, or if he ever makes it to Paris or not. The frame goes on and on. In some ways, no matter how much you expand the frame, it's still a frame and it can continue to expand endlessly.