

Vidéo



High-Definition
video installation
18:11 min. (loop)
Six musical variations

Douglas's most recent work is set in the Parisian banlieue, specifically in La Courneuve, whose tower blocks already served Godard as a backdrop in his film *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (1967). Godard's film centers on Juliette, a young woman of Russian descent, who prostitutes herself to maintain the standard of living for her family of four. In a sober, declamatory style, addressing the camera face-on, she reflects on her entanglement in a capitalist system that only permits subjectivity in the mode of consuming and of being consumed. Douglas's protagonist K, in contrast, is silent—at least in so far as the silent film form he has chosen here rules out any direct verbal utterance. Similar to Juliette, she is split between her role as an object of social arbitrariness and an acting subject opposing this system. The first shot of *Vidéo* shows the red pilot lamp of a panning surveillance camera. Afterwards we see K, a young woman of African descent, on her way home at night. We see her—as in the further course of the piece—only from behind, followed by the eye of the

camera. Arriving at her apartment, she goes to bed but is woken soon afterwards by three civilian policemen, has to show identification, and is questioned. She is subsequently arrested and must defend herself before a tribunal. Initially mocked by those present, she makes her own plea, in which she also incriminates the policemen who arrested her, and proceeds to leave the courtroom. After a hearing, an attorney gains her access to an archive, despite an almost endless line of other people waiting, where she receives a file with photos—pictures of her as a child and presumably photos of her family. Sitting outside the building, she looks at the photos and tears them up. Immediately afterwards, she is once again taken into custody and taken to a deserted building site. In a slapstick-style scene, the policemen repeatedly fail to release the safety catch on their gun until K finally grabs the pistol, releases the safety, and holds it to her temple. With the camera focusing on the forecourt of her apartment house, a shot sounds—the sole sound audible in *Vidéo*. The final shot shows the wander-

ing red pilot lamp of the surveillance camera from the beginning. Music starts to play until the loop starts over. While the plot, actors, and gloomy, claustrophobic sets of *Vidéo* refer directly to Franz Kafka's *The Trial* and its screen adaptation by Orson Welles (1962), the title of the work also invokes Samuel Beckett's film *Film* (1965) as a reference. Like O (Object) in *Film*, K is the object of a camera eye that follows her. Just as in *Film*, we gain access, imparted through the camera and seemingly unnoticed, to K's own four walls and are witness to her every movement. Unlike O, however, K does not appear to be driven by any paranoia whatsoever. O veils his face whenever he goes into public and gradually removes everything from his apartment that makes him visible or that could see him—by covering up windows and mirrors, removing his pets from the apartment, covering up their cages, taking down portraits, and tearing up sentimental photos. Only once these imaginary viewing subjects have been conquered does he fall asleep, reassured,



in his rocking chair—only to be surprised by E (Eye), the eye of the camera that has been following him, quite literally, behind his back the whole time. For the first time, E emerges from O's shadow and focuses on him face-on. Defenseless, O suddenly finds himself standing face-to-face with himself: E = Eye = I. The close-up of an eye, which frames the plot of *Film*—at the beginning we see the closed eyelid, at the end a rigid pupil looking into the camera—is metaphorically embodied in Douglas's film by the "eye" of the surveillance camera that opens and closes the loop. In *Vidéo*, it is thus not the unexpected reciprocation of an individualized view that becomes a trauma for K but rather social reality as a panopticon that creates and, at the same time, negotiates subjectivity. *Film* and *Vidéo* are silent (each with the exception of one sound), because, in them, the subject is constituted not by language but by an economy of gazes. The "I see" of *Vidéo* is always linked to an "I am seen." In Kafka's (and Welles's) *Trial*,

this relationship is personified in Josef K.: while the law itself eludes visibility, his own visibility before the law is not negotiable. In Welles's black-and-white screen adaptation, Josef K. is framed by an expressionistically staged architecture, whose light and shadow sometimes emphasize him, sometimes cause him to disappear, and sometimes completely dismember him visually. Douglas's film, in contrast, reduces all film noir drama: *Vidéo* is shot in color and yet almost appears to be in black-and-white. In the low-contrast, austere darkness of the set, only punctuated by color at certain points, the dark-skinned protagonist practically disappears in the picture. Although, similar to Josef K., she may be invisible before the law, she is not invisible for the law. In the end, K herself seizes the gun with which she is to be executed. Here, the unresolved question—as to at whom the gun is aimed when the shot is heard—is symbolic for the unresolved status of the subject in view of a state machine of legislation and enforcement in which *trials* are not nego-

tiated but are rather assimilated in an endlessly circulating system of administrative processes.

KATRIN MUNDT