

Interview with Susan Mogul  
at the Kunsthaus Graz, Graz, Austria

*Katrin Bucher-Trantow, the chief curator at the Kunsthaus, Graz in Graz Austria, interviewed artist/filmmaker Susan Mogul at the Kunsthaus Graz on May 1, 2024. The interview has been edited for accuracy and clarity.*

**KBT** Susan Mogul, I'm really pleased to have you here. We started our correspondence for the exhibition, *Where Art Might Happen* about the early years of CalArts, four years ago in 2019/2020. For that we were talking about your early work from the beginning of the seventies, specifically *Dressing Up*. And later on, I invited you to join us in a show called *Faking the Real* where the topic was the fake in optimization and promotion. And this is actually where I'm heading now.

For this exhibition we showed a work called *Mogul is Mobil*. There you're playing on your own name. And during that video, *Mogul is Mobil*, you sort of self-promote yourself. You even include Los Angeles billboards. The whole film is a pun on self-promotion. Now we have a situation where artists are the best self-promoters ever - they have to know how to do that. How did you end up doing that work? How did that happen? I know you just had had a shift from New York to Los Angeles. Was it the city of film that made you came up with this very interesting work?

**SM** The *Mogul is Mobil* postcard and the video/film of the same name?

**KBT** Yes, and the topic of self-promotion. The idea behind it. The concept.

**SM** I think there are a few layers of influences. The *Mogul is Mobil* (1974) postcard, which was my first and only art postcard, was inspired by the fact that I had learned to drive. And for me, learning to drive was a major accomplishment because I had failed driver's education in high school. They offered driver's education at that time in high school. And then a few years later when was in college, I was a passenger in a tragic auto accident. This all took place back east. As a result, I was determined to never learn to drive. Never be in the driver's seat.

So when I moved to Los Angeles, of all places, because you need to drive to get around there, my pals in the feminist art program at CalArts got tired of driving me. One of them said, "You're going to learn to drive and I'm going to give you driving lessons." That was part of the environment of the feminist art movement: you take control of your life. I arrived in Los Angeles January 1973 and in June 1973 I got my driver's license. It was a big accomplishment to get over my fear of driving.

Now let's add another layer. In fall of 1973, I was no longer at CalArts because I followed my mentor Judy Chicago, who left CalArts to start the Feminist Studio Workshop at the Woman's Building in Los Angeles. The Woman's Building was new, the Feminist Studio Workshop was new, it was all new. And the woman who became my mentor there, one of the three founders of the Woman's Building, was Sheila DeBretteville. Sheila is a graphic designer, and she was interested in artists making multiples. She was also interested in the idea of projecting women's

personal voices and experiences in public spaces. And Judy Chicago was also a big influence about putting yourself out in the public sphere and not waiting “to be discovered.”

On top of that, here I was in Los Angeles, a city filled with billboards. And on the Sunset Strip in Hollywood there were unique billboards for rock stars and films. They were terrific. They were bigger than the average billboard. I thought this is a great way to display your work. Not to mention bypassing the elite art gallery system which did not embrace feminist art or female artists. I wasn't thinking specifically about self-promotion. It was coming from a feminist point of view. It was about women making themselves visible.

There's one more layer that you are not familiar with. But she has made her way into my work in many ways, and that's my mother. My mother was an amateur photographer. I grew up with a darkroom in the basement. And over the course of sixteen years my mother had six children. I am the eldest. By the time she got to her fifth kid, Mom decided it's time to make a unique a birth announcement with a narrative. The first image was a photo of me with a caption that read, “More babysitting.” And that was followed by my brother Mark's response to a new sibling, etc. The birth announcement could be described as a storyboard. Mom sent it out. People loved it. And additionally, *Redbook*, a popular national magazine at the time, had a birth announcement contest. My mother submitted her birth announcement and guess what? It was published in *Redbook* magazine in 1964 and she was paid \$50.00. Her work about a personal experience was published in a mainstream periodical.

So there are multiple influences: personal, Mom promoting the birth of her newborn in a clever and creative way, geographical, the Los Angeles landscape, and political, the feminist art movement which emphasized, among other things, that everyday female experience had value.

I grew up with my last name being Mogul and it still is obviously. But you know growing up kids made fun of my name - kind of racist - they called me Mongol. And then there was this gasoline company, Mobil, and the kids called me Mobilgas. As a young adult I moved to Los Angeles. “You're a mogul!” The definition of mogul is a tycoon. Somebody who's the top dog.

**KBT** Suddenly it became very positive.

**SM** Yeah.

**KBT** That actually leads to something that I'm also very interested in. When I look at your work, there's a lot of personal in your work. There are artists that parallel what you have done, like Chris Burden who works on self-promotion at this same time. He positions himself out there on TV, buys time to promote his work, as being the best of course, while working on the concept of promoting art. And you do that differently, but also in a similar kind of way, you put yourself out there, as you say. But at the same time, you do that in a very feminist political way. I think we can speak about the personal becoming political in your work.

If we think of a recent work that might come out of *Mogul is Mobil*, it would be *Mogul Celebrates Mogul* (2011). This is also a work that comments on the development of the art scene and the development of promotion, and also the choice of who becomes history and who doesn't. And I think there's also a lot of politics in your work. Where would you see that most?

**SM** Well, I do like that piece by Chris Burden where he's promoting himself and he's listing all these great artists.

**KBT** Absolutely.

**SM** And then he includes himself in the list. But it's different when a woman does that. He was doing this in the seventies before he became super famous. *Mogul Celebrates Mogul*, a digital print, could be compared to that Chris Burden work (*Late Night Commercials*), but it's different.

First I should describe the context or the point of departure for *Mogul Celebrates Mogul*. The Getty Museum was doing a citywide series of exhibitions about the birth of Los Angeles as an art capital from 1945 to 1980, titled *Pacific Standard Time*. And the Getty did an incredible job. There were shows on black art, Chicano art, conceptual art, feminist art. It was a very inclusive series of exhibitions that were all over Los Angeles. But their *Pacific Standard Time* ad campaign did not reflect this inclusiveness. In their ad campaign Jonathan Schwartzman, an actor, celebrated John Baldessari, a famous conceptual artist. Then Keidis a male rock star, celebrated another famous artist, Ed Ruscha. So it was a series of posters of young white men, celebrating old white men. I was in several of these *Pacific Standard Time* shows, so I had a stake in the ad campaign. Why aren't any women being celebrated? Once again, we need to celebrate ourselves in order to get any recognition.

*Mogul Celebrates Mogul* was one of the quickest projects I have ever done in my life. I had recently had photographs taken of myself in my mother's 1970's orange suede pantsuit. I had planned to do a satire on people referring to me as "Susan Mogul from the seventies." So I had a relevant photograph already in place. Then the Getty ad campaign came out and I thought, "I got this!"

I don't start out asking, "How am I going to promote myself?" All my work responds to things that happen in an everyday interaction, like somebody exclaiming, "Susan Mogul, she's a legend." "Oh, my God, that's an idea for a new project." Or something in the public arena, like the Getty ad campaign. I tend to respond to something private, public or both. These projects could be called social satire.

**KBT** Yeah. You've been to the Vienna Film Museum now, where you were invited to show your films from over the years, up until 2008.

**SM** *Driving Men* is 2008, but the museum also screened *Mom's Move* from 2018.

**KBT** Yes. There is a narrative that goes all the way through your work. Your private life. There is Mom, your mother for instance, who has been very important from the beginning and onwards. Using photography or the camera as one of your means, obviously comes from your own upbringing, and from her influence. But in *Driving Men* I thought it was wonderful how the familiar context is filtered through the driving. This seems a way to watch yourself in your surroundings and in your context. What I am wondering is how did you come up with *Driving Men*? This is also a very, I would say private story. Is that so?

**SM** Oh yes. It's my first and only feature length film. It is also multi-layered. First, being a single woman I pose the question, "Why have I been single all my life?" And I also ask, "Why have I

been making work based in autobiography? What does the camera mean to me?" Additionally, I was never given the space to grieve the loss of my first boyfriend Larry in 1969. The film opens with my narration about the accident. It's the point of departure for the film.

**KBT** Which is this terrible motor accident.

**SM** The car accident. We were driving back east from Madison, Wisconsin, where we both went to school, to New York where our parents lived. A car jumped over the divider and killed Larry, who was driving. Also Larry was black. At that time being in an interracial relationship was taboo. So *Driving Men* was a way to address this loss head-on, if you will. The film was exploring my past and my present. The film was interweaving my personal life and my art life: my art works and my personal life and the way they bounce off one another.

Why did I film the men driving? I'm not quite sure specifically. Oh, actually, there was a documentary I had seen several years before. There was a scene with a man driving and being interviewed. And I remember in the Q & A the filmmaker said that how useful it was to have the subject driving. Because the subject had to concentrate on the road and subsequently he was more relaxed and open. And that stuck with me. And then there was my own experience with driving and being in the passenger seat. It all fit.

**KBT** Again in that film, there is something that I can see all through your work: you're questioning of the typical roles of women. Now, in the film *Mogul is Mobil*, you take over the steering wheel, you become this autonomous independent person that you want to be and that you also stand for. And in *Driving Men* there is also this aspect of caretaking that I see, which I think is an interesting aspect. It is a form of autonomy when you express it. You sort of put your finger on the fact that you are caring while you are also serving.

**SM** How do you mean that? Taking care?

**KBT** Well, when it comes to driving, it's usually the other way round. In stereotypical relationships, men usually drive their woman.

**SM** And they are all driving.

**KBT** And they are all driving.

**SM** I'm filming.

**KBT** You are. But you call it *Driving Men* and so I think there is a multiple play on the words and their meaning. And there is this way of – yes - taking care of the situation yourself.

**SM** (*What I realized when I was transcribing this interview is that Yes, the title indicates that I am driving the men, as well as the fact that the men are driving. It cuts both ways.*)

You know, I watched it in its entirety for the first time in ten years, a few nights ago in Vienna. It was emotional to watch it in a way that it hadn't been in the past. I was about sixty when I completed the film. And now I'm almost seventy-five. Some of the men said things to me that I don't think they would have ever said if I hadn't been filming. The guy with the white hair said, "I found you very exhausting. And maybe you should find someone that exhausts you more than you exhaust them." And I just let that sit. I don't have to counter what he said. I asked my

brother what he thinks of the fact that I'm not married and he doesn't want to respond. And I said, "Sometimes sharing things make people closer." And he is silent. A long silence. I let people reveal themselves.

**KBT** Well, you certainly point the finger at the stereotypes of what we expect women to be. One work is called *O' Barren Woman*. Is that correct?

**SM** Yes, *Sing O' Barren Woman* (2000), which is actually a quote from the Bible. That's where I got it.

**KB** You talk about not having children and what society thinks. I think you open up a subject that was hardly discussed in 2000. It's still a topic that's not often discussed and it's a difficult topic because it's very private. What are the reactions to this work? Is it cleansing? How do you feel about it? Is it something that your audiences respond to?

**SM** I showed it publicly the other night, but it was in the context of many films. When I showed it publicly for the first time, people responded very positively. The film opens up with the women stating the stereotypes of the barren woman: weird, strange, frustrated, selfish. Although it opens up with a list of the harsh stereotypes, it closes with women strutting down the streets of Los Angeles, with a boombox on their shoulders, singing joyfully about being childless. I think the humor makes the film very accessible.

**KBT** Very self-empowering.

**SM** Yeah, yeah, so I think it endeared people, it didn't put people off.

**KBT** Yes, I think that's often the case with your work. I was very fascinated by the way you use humor in a lot of your work. It makes a lot of your work very accessible. Do you feel that humor has also had its difficulties? Have people always taken you seriously?

**SM** Well, now you're talking about being a second wave feminist artist and having work that you made in the seventies become respected on a larger scale twenty years later. When it would have been more helpful to one's career if it had been embraced earlier. I just had my first solo museum exhibition two years ago at the age of seventy-three. And not even in my country of origin, it was in Warsaw, Poland. So you asked me if humor might have been a hindrance in the art world.

**KBT** I mean, you still have a lot of humor. Obviously, it's part of your work and personality. But it's also, I guess, two-sided.

**SM** I can tell you an anecdote about a former video curator at the Whitney Museum in New York, John Hanhardt. He was there for several decades. In 1976, I dropped my videotapes at the Whitney for him to view. There were so few video artists at the time, your work actually got viewed. You couldn't do that today, you know, drop your work off. I called up a week later, got Hanhardt on the phone, and asked him what he thought of my videotapes. All I remember him saying was one word, "Problematic." I don't know what the problem was. I was a very young artist, probably twenty-five years old. It was intimidating to make the call and be bold enough to ask him to evaluate the work. He was "The Guy" in video art at that moment. And, if he had wanted to show my work at the Whitney Museum that would have had a serious impact on my

career. I don't know if it was problematic because my videotapes were humorous. I don't know why it was problematic for him. But also feminist art wasn't taken seriously. So I don't know how the humor factor, factors into the reception of the work.

**KBT** Being seen or not seen.

**SM** Being respected or not respected. I really don't know.

**KBT** I know you had a bit of a career going towards comedy.

**SM** Oh I tried that in the eighties. I was doing a lot of performance art. I was doing stand-up cabaret. I did a performance over two years called *News From Home*, which started out being based on 20 years of correspondence from my mother. And then as I developed it, I incorporated a fashion show of her clothing. I also did another humorous performance called *The Last Jew in America*, which is about the conflicts and contradictions of Jewish American assimilation.

My early video art and performance art was humorous and satirical. There were comments made by several colleagues that I should consider stand-up comedy. In the mid-eighties, I went to the Comedy Store. The Comedy Store was on the Sunset Strip in Hollywood. It was a major showcase for comedians. And Monday night was amateur night. So you could go, line up, and if you were there early enough, you would be given a slot to go on stage. You had five minutes to do your routine. I got there early. I was the only woman. I did my bit and then afterwards I went to Barney's Beanery a popular bar that was close by. And a couple of young comics who were hanging out there said to me, "Nice set."

But my experience at the Comedy Store was negative. Not while I was on stage doing my routine. The staff at the club treated the amateur comedians before they went on stage like shit. "You, stand in the corner. Here's one ticket, you get one drink." This was not an atmosphere that I wanted to be in. It was so different from how I was treated in a non-profit art space, where I was treated with a certain degree of respect because I had already been working in the arts for ten years. In the comedy club I was a Nobody, which was okay. But I didn't like the atmosphere. It was very instructive for me to see the advantage of being in an art atmosphere versus a commercial cutthroat space.

**KBT** Well, you obviously took what Judy Chicago suggested, to put yourself out there, very seriously. You did a lot of things out there. I think that kind of blurring the lines between the art world and the non-art world was probably part of your artistic practice and still is. I can see that in different ways now. Let's say the self-promotion, going out there, sort of bringing your work into a public space unannounced. This is also the idea of blurring the boundaries.

**SM** Let me say something about that. The Zacheta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw, Poland used my project, *What becomes a Legend most?* (2022) for their promotion of my solo exhibition at their museum. They could have used any image. And when I got back to Los Angeles, they put posters up all over the city. There was even one billboard.

**KBT** They were taking your mechanism, your work, and, your tag line, and doing the same institutionally. I think that's beautiful, the way you sort of collaborated on that project.

If you could do anything, anything at all, Susan, yes, the last question is always - what would you like to do? What is an unfulfilled dream?

**SM** I know what I would like to do. I have the prototypes, but now it would be great to do a small mass production or a limited edition of my shopping bags. Maybe the Kunsthaus could think about it or collaborate. In 2019, I did a series of twelve shopping bag prototypes. They're 16" by 20" bags. Each bag has a different image and a different story printed on it. The images are of objects from my archive: a skirt my grandmother embroidered, a modernist chair my mother bought on sale, a mannequin my great aunt used to create her hats. And on the back of the bags are related anecdotes about a family member. I showed them in a gallery in Los Angeles and they were displayed again in Warsaw. And now the bags will be exhibited in a gallery in Tribeca in New York City in June 2024. So I would love to have the bags reproduced.

**KBT** And exhibited.

**SM** Sure. Or as somebody mentioned in Vienna, wouldn't it be great to have a performance with people walking with the bags in a public space?

**KBT** Absolutely. Bringing them out there again. The shopping bags, would they be like a pedestal for a person? What is the shopping bag in that sense? Is it a *boîte en valise*, or what is it exactly? Is it a museum case? Sort of referring to art historical predecessors, like the Duchampian suitcase where you have the – mobile - museum inside?

**SM** I don't know. I used to collect shopping bags. Bloomingdale's used to have these great shopping bags. They had one black and white shopping bag that had part of a man's collar and jacket printed on it. Very cool graphic design.

**KBT** If you wear them you're sort of become part of the bag.

**SM** Exactly. When I did the 1976 installation *Mogul's August Clearance*, I silkscreened one of my images on shopping bags for my discount "store". You're asking me what's the meaning behind the bag. Well, you know, my first video was about shopping.

**KBT** Yes. We come back to a circle that I think is probably also the constant circle of who we are, how we are defined, how we define ourselves, also as the feminists that we want to be.

**SM** That's good. Well, how do you see the shopping video?

**KBT** I see it as a humorous reflection on identity as a process in which I am constantly asking myself, what to be. It's basically about becoming. I guess, becoming independent of stereotypes *and* using them for me.

**SM** Tom Jimmerson, director of the as-is.la gallery in Los Angeles, was invited to curate a show at Ortuzar Projects in Tribeca. It's a group show of five feminists from Los Angeles of my generation. I didn't know which work of mine he was going to select. And when he decided to show the bags, I was so excited. Because first of all: New York and shopping bags. Perfect. I thought that's going to be more emblematic of my work than something that hangs on the wall. The shopping bags imply movement, they're performative. You go to a store, you buy

something, you get a bag, you bring it home. I think probably what I like about the bag is that it goes back to everything that I do. It's public. It's private.

**KBT** It's consumerism.

**SM** It's promotion that you like to talk about. And you can take things out of the bag, you can put things back in the bag, you can reuse the bag.

**KBT** This can be very private too.

**SM** Yeah, I like all your questions and comments.

**KBT** We could now follow up on a project you did very early on, the *Dressing Up* video, which links to the shopping bags.

**SM** I think some writers and artists have often said that you make one work and -

**KBT** -and then continue to reflect on it. You also reflect on what others do. For your work *Take Off* for instance, you mockingly hint at the well-known work of Vito Acconci, whose island is right next to the Kunsthaus Graz. A lot of your work reflects art history, and there is a lot of feminist commentary on what is happening. We should continue this discussion sometime.

**SM** This was great. Thank you.