Conversations between Artists, Writers, Performers, Directors, Musicians — Since 1981

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Joe Sola

by Stuart Horodner

Still from A SHORT FILM ABOUT LOOKING, 2010, HD video, 4 mins 30 secs. Images courtesy of Blackston, New York, and Tif Sigfrids, Los Angeles.

Joe Sola is known for hilariously aggressive and disarmingly tender art activities, often involving his own body and combinations of pencils, paint, video, and unlikely collaborators. High school football players, male porn stars, female escorts, and LA voice-over artists have all played parts in his live events and filmed productions. Add guppies, power tools, preppy clothing, and blood, and you get a decent sense of his palette.

Joe and I have known each other since 1999, and have worked together on several group exhibitions, one print project, and *Taking a Bullet*, a modest survey of his output in various media, presented at the Atlanta College of Art Gallery in 2006. Some of his most significant exhibitions in recent years include *Portraits: An Exhibition in Tif Sigfrids' Ear* and *Shakey's in "Der Hintern in Der Luft,"* both in Los Angeles in 2013; as well as *Damage Control: Art and Destruction Since 1950* at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, *The Studio Sessions* at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and *Hard Targets: Masculinity and Sport* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

To create this interview, we decided to meet in a city that neither of us had ever been to. We picked Denver. While I waited for my plane at Atlanta's Hartsfield–Jackson Airport, I opened the *New York Times* to find Martha Schwendener's terrific review of Sola's exhibition, *American Sex Room and other Works*, at Blackston on the Lower East Side. She uses the words: *dumb*, *funny*, *absurd*, and *authentically*. This was a great start to our weekend.

STUART HORODNER

DENVER, FRIDAY, APRIL 11,
RIALTO CAFÉ, EVENING

STUART HORODNER: *I'm nursing a margarita, waiting for Joe to drive in from the airport. I have put on at least 20 pounds living in Atlanta, and I'm not happy about it. I am taking some comfort in the fact that Joe is also a guy who has a tendency to be thick in the middle.*

Joe, you look great, really skinny. What happened?

JOE SOLA: I stopped eating cheese.

SATURDAY, APRIL 12,
COURTYARD MARRIOT HOTEL,
MORNING

JS: Are you ready for the big reveal?

SH: I'm not sure.

JS: Ta-daaah!!

SH: Oh no!

JS: This is where the doctor cut my toenail off to see what the black dot underneath was. And this toenail just grew back, I'm not kidding you, like two months ago. And last night in the middle of the night I stubbed my toe on the table at the end of the bed. And you did not hear me scream in pain, because you Stuart, were sleeping like an angel. My whole life I've broken things: legs, arms, fingers, nose, toes, toenails—almost monthly. Stuff happens.

SH: From playing sports, making art, just living?

JS: From everything. That toenail I lose all the time. It's like I have a problem with toenail retention. (*laughter*)

DENVER ART MUSEUM CAFÉ,
MIDDAY

SH: Do you like museums?

JS: I do. When I was younger I used to go to museums with my high school. We used to go to downtown Chicago and see the Art Institute. I remember seeing a David Hockney painting, I forget the California collector's . . .

SH:—The portrait? The Weismans?

JS: Yeah. And I had never seen anything so strange like that in my life. I was a suburban Chicago kid, who read lots of comic books. I'd never seen anything so bizarre that communicated some kind of alienation or discomfort with everything. It was really amazing. I got to spend last Thanksgiving with David Hockney and three other people. My friend rented a beach house just south of Santa Barbara, a teeny little beach house from the '50s, with a wood-burning fireplace. Hockney stayed for a couple days with us and I got to tell him how much I love that painting, which was really exciting.

SH: That's fabulous.

JS: Yeah, we got to talk about Chinese scrolls and perspective. But yeah, museums, when I was living in Spain teaching English—

SH: When was that?

JS: '90 to '92, in Madrid and Barcelona. I would go to museums all the time.

SH: In LA you have a slightly more inside track on museums given that your wife Erin [Wright] works at LACMA, but you are showing in museums more regularly now too. Are there museums of any particular significance to you?

JS: I always love to go see the shows at MoMA PS1. When I lived in New York, Patrick Killoran had his *Observation Deck* in a curator's office. You could go in there without anybody around, and lie on this plank that extended out through the open window. It was on wheels so you could lie down and push out maybe a foot further.

SH: I saw it too. But I didn't try it.

JS: It was terrifying! It was the weirdest experience to have in a museum, to be in someone's office, their personal space, dangling your head some forty feet in the air. Of course I went through their library of books and videos, seeing what kind of work they were interested in and learning something new.

SH: The curator was always absent.

JS: Yeah, no one was there! There was no security; it was really this free way, this unrestrained way to see art, which I always associate with PS1—that must have been in '97. Something of that ethos is still there, for me, when I go back to see shows.

SH: Do you think of museums as places

AMERICAN SEX ROOM (AN INTERROGATION), 2014, wall paper, feed guppies, can of Chef Boyardee beef ravioli, cardboard boxes, sound, dimensions variable.

where you inherently want to be alone?

JS: I have been alone at museums after hours—

SH: —No, I mean that part of the joy of going to them. I think of you in that PS1 office, looking at a pile of videos or considering whether you want to lay on that plank. And I realize that most of my greatest experiences in museums—many of them in New York where I grew up—were opportunities to be by myself with art objects.

JS: And to contemplate something.

SH: Yes. Now museums attract huge crowds and one is rarely alone, if ever. I am thinking about that a lot these days. Reminds me of that Yogi Berra line, "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded."

JS: When I think about the great artworks that I've seen in museums, I never recall other people being around. I only remember experiencing that artwork myself. I remember seeing the Mona Lisa, and there were crowds, but the crowds helped me experience what that artwork really was. It was about the spectacle of it.

SH: What are some other artworks that come to mind?

JS: In particular, there's the Mike Kelley—I think it was the "Catholic Tastes" exhibition at the Whitney. I can remember so clearly turning around a corner and hearing recorded voices. Then slowly seeing some stuffed animals on a crocheted carpet, and then a tape player sitting between them, and then BAM! Something happened. Something about language, youth, theory. I had just read *Powers of Horror*, and this artwork connected to my reading and my life, to what new art was for me and living on my own for the first time. It really inspired me in a lot of ways.

SH: So Kelley was an important figure for you?

JS: His work always gave me tons of inspiration—his performances and sculptures, and in particular his work with Paul McCarthy. When I lived in New York, I used to go to Electronic Arts Intermix a lot. I also did this in Chicago; I'd go to the Video Data Bank and look at all the tapes there that Paul McCarthy and John Baldessari made. I also worked at the Long Beach Museum in the video archive, which produced work for McCarthy and Kelley, and Bruce and Norman Yonemoto. And I saw a lot of tapes by Michael Smith too. Those were all really inspiring.

SH: There's a tendency to locate your reference points as decidedly male—for any number of reasons, some of them good reasons. What works by women have been influential or meaningful to you?

JS: Kathy Acker's books were very exciting to me, when I was in college. Barbara Kruger's works were important to me—like when she started to talk about shopping. Cindy Sherman's work, her film stills I thought were just fantastic. I never saw work that exploited the cinema language quite the way she did. When she started to do those vomit photos and those mannequin photos, too, I really responded to those.

SH: Sherman is one of those people who rarely tries to explain what she does, she's more willing and wants to let other people do that. I remember those vomit pictures coming after a period of unbelievable success, almost as if she was trying to make things that would be hard to buy. Hard to like. Hard to look at.

JS: Of course I enjoyed those. (*laughter*)

SH: You seem committed to pushing the audience into places that might be, not just uncomfortable, but *really* uncomfortable?

JS: I think the first time I truly experienced art—was when my mom took me to downtown Chicago to see a double billing of *Un Chien Andalou* and *The Blood of a Poet*. The shock of seeing that eye split open and all the subsequent scenarios was incredibly thrilling for me. I saw this Paul McCarthy video where the camera goes into a trailer and there's laughing and talking and women having cocktails in bikinis. The camera moves through the crowd, and you realize there's a man on the ground, and he's got an axe and he's hacking his own leg off. And then some of the women try to hack his leg off, too. I think about that a lot as a scenario or problem. I am always editing in my mind. In Hollywood movies, Mark Wahlberg and Harrison Ford are performing surgeries on themselves. Somehow they're repairing themselves; they're totally autonomous, they're such tough guys. They take the bullets out, sew themselves up and nurse themselves back to health with sugar, vodka, and water. Maybe there's some similarity between those actors and McCarthy's video.

SH: Let's talk about the squirrel.

JS: The dead squirrel?

SH: Yeah. We were walking in the park, and I noticed a squirrel had died and kind of merged with a tree. It was sad but there was also the pleasure of seeing it together with you. Us walking around and noticing things. Earlier, we witnessed a confluence of people on crutches on the street.

JS: And wheelchairs.

SH: I don't think the squirrel would have had as much resonance if I hadn't already been thinking about talking to you about violence and death, things you continue to examine in your work.

JS: That was a real animal that had died in an unusual place. It was wedged in the V of that tree. Its back legs and tail were still matted from the rain from the day before. You know, I try to create scenarios where a potential act of violence does happen, like when I've jumped through my glass window during studio visits, or "accidently" cut myself during a book-signing event. I set up a scenario where an accident will happen. I fall down in many of my works—I am physically pushed around in them.

SH: You often combine violence with humor, and that is what produces the real unease.

JS: I'm glad you said humor, because I find so many things funny. When I see the work by John Bock, the German sculptor, I think it's hilarious putting so many things together. I mean, it's so goofy and weird and wonderful. It's not laugh-out-loud funny, but it's funny. To see comedy in things is possibly my strongest critical tool. Before I see the sadness in things.

SH: What do you like about working in the studio and what do you like about working with other people?

JS: Working alone gives me a lot of pleasure because I can hear myself think. I work with people who are able to do things that I can't do alone. Working with people can be a lot of fun. It can be stressful, too, because you have to have—

SH: —Trust?

JS: Yeah, trust and a lot of time to pay attention. My collaboration with Michael Webster is fantastic because we just do things, and we both communicate with each other about what each of us is adding to this picture we're making together. Whatever we don't like doesn't make it into the performance.

SH: How does a piece like *Shakey's in "Der Hintern in Der Luft"* come about? And how was Laura Owens involved?

JS: Laura does a lot of the programming at 356 Mission Road; her studio is next door to the exhibition space. At lunch one day Laura was like, "Do you want to fuck up one of my paintings?" And I said, "Absolutely!" (*laughter*) And that was a great place to start creating a new performance, with an act of destruction.

SH: So then what happened?

JS: The collaboration starts with Michael coming over for lunch and we toss around ideas. We put them all out there and when we have a few good scenarios we start to work with props, movements, and sound. It's choreographed, but we have a lot of space to stray during the final work. The performances are usually around thirty to forty minutes.

SH: How do you judge the success of your various projects—paintings, videos, installations?

JS: With the *Shakey's* performances, people always scream with pleasure afterwards, so I know immediately that they respond to the work. At our last performance at 356 Mission Road, at the climax of the show, I hoisted myself up in the air by my own butt, floating four feet in the air, and an opera singer came out singing in German about how these artists have accomplished their goal, and the artist's ass is in the air—"der Hintern in der Luft." People were shouting, thinking this was the end of the show. Little did the audience know we were about to put Laura's painting and all my props and drawings I'd made through a massive wood-chipper. When Michael and I rehearsed these, we were cracking ourselves up over all the little bits in the show, we get so much pleasure from it. I studied Butoh dance and I hung around dancers for many years. This is a way for me to get in touch with a different kind of performance, where you have your body communicate certain things at certain times.

SH: I always think of Butoh as a form of unbelievable restraint and extreme gesture, which is something that you're clearly working with.

JS: The kind of Butoh that I studied with Min Tanaka allowed for the development of a psychological language. I've been able to bring that psychological language to a world of props and scenarios in the *Shakey's* performances. Making things on the stage, messing shit up, dribbling, drooling, slumping, kneading—these all combine to make an incredibly abstract and pleasurable work. I think we talked about this, running full speed into a wall that I'd traced pizza dough bits on. There's a lot of pleasure in doing that. Like, thank god for art, so you can find spaces to communicate this to other people and they can think about, "Why did this guy run into the wall? Why did a dinner party for two fall on his head? And before he was stuffing dollars in his pocket. And before that he pulled rabbits out of a hat." You build up this string of events with these physical acts that you can't do in other places in the world.

SH: Let's talk about the exhibition of paintings in Tif Sigfrids' ear. She's your LA gallerist. There is that phrase about collectors "looking with their ears"—being motivated by the buzz around certain artists. For a new gallerist to open a space and force a very intimate encounter with the audience is really beautiful. To make people look into her head involves people overcoming trepidation, risking something.

JS: Tif and I were in the "Made in L.A." show with my wife Erin, and we were standing in front of a big sculpture that wasn't that successful, and talking about all this art that we'd seen. And the idea just popped into my head, "Can I do a show in your ear?" And Tif said, "Oh yeah, sure that would be awesome!" We kind of let it go, but I couldn't stop thinking about it. I saw Tif again a couple weeks later, and I said, "I'm still thinking about that, we should really do this show." Another couple of weeks, and I'm still thinking about it. And when I saw Tif again, she said, "Absolutely." It took me months and months to figure out how to paint that small. I had to cast her ear to—

SH: —To figure out how small the pieces should be and how they'd sit in there?

JS: Yep. I thought it would take too much of Tif's time if I had to fit the gallery to her ear. So I just thought I'd cast it and work off this one model.

SH: Were you thinking of her ear as the gallery?

JS: As holding the gallery. I decided to make portraits, like head shots almost, painted from my imagination. Then I had to start to figure out how the hell I was going to do that. So I basically started experimenting with different brushes and all kinds of viewing devices—acupuncture needles, my own eyelashes, a shaved-down rosemary twig, dentist/jeweler glasses, and a stereomicroscope. I had to find a way to solve the problem I created. I really enjoy that about my work.

SH: It was just in one ear?

JS: Just in her right ear. And that was the show. Tif said, "The fewest number of people will see this show of all our exhibitions ever."

SH: Who bought the work?

JS: Ed Ruscha did, which was really awesome. He's informed a lot of my thinking about destruction, art, and the city of Los Angeles. The show had an

left:
SHAKEY'S IN "DER HINTERN IN DER LUFT," 2013, performance (with Michael Webster), 356 Mission Road, Los Angeles. Photo by Marshal Astor.

right:
Joe Sola in Denver, 2014. Photos by Stuart Horodner

MALE FASHION MODELS MAKE CONCEPTUAL ART, 2006, performance, Atlanta Collage of Art, Atlanta, Georgia. Photo by Mike Jensen.

So I had this idea to get an anesthesiologist to knock me out during an art fair, and I could just lie there, well dressed, as if I were out looking at art in this center of commerce, but having totally checked out.

PORTRAITS: AN EXHIBITION IN TIF SIGFRIDS' EAR, 2013, oil paint, styrene, wood, glue, 3/8×1/2×3/8 inches.

PEOPLE LOOKING AT SOMETHING ABSTRACT, 2014, oil on canvas, 29×38 1/2 inches.

unusual traction with different media groups—from newspapers, human-interest news shows, lifestyle shows, science shows, medical shows, ear art groups, acupuncture groups.

SH: Yeah, a lot of art isn't available to that kind of crossover. It's really special when it happens. I also love that the concept participates in the long history of exhibitions about the nature of the art gallery and the role of the dealer: Yves Klein presenting the empty Galerie Iris Clert in 1958, and Arman filling the same space up with garbage two years later. Martin Kersels wiring up soundtracks to all of the objects in Dan Bernier's office, so when the dealer did his daily business, various recordings played. Or Maurizio Cattelan duct-taping Massimo de Carlo to the wall.

JS: I think that one of the most important things art can do is to get people talking. One of my own great pleasures is talking about things that I see and experience. People would come in, look at the show in Tif's ear while sitting on the couch next to her desk, and they would just talk with her. There was no work on the walls, and it really reaffirmed one of the ways that art functions, people in a room talking to each other, especially at the opening.

SH: You like playing with the notion of "the opening." At the exhibition we did together in Atlanta, you had male models on a low plywood stage making sculptures throughout the reception. It was great to watch these handsome guys become artists for a few hours, confident in one way but inept in another. The gallery becoming a studio, the artist a spectator, and the audience not knowing what or whom to pay attention to! You clearly have an ongoing interest in upending expectations about how and where art operates.

JS: I think we all have these expectations when we go to see art, or go to the movies—

SH: Or go to do anything. Go be in love. Go have a kid. Go buy a house. Art and the discourse surrounding it, for me, is a situation where we share ourselves.

JS: Yeah. Who are you? And who are you?

SH: And who might we be later?

CLYFFORD STILL MUSEUM,
AFTERNOON

SH: We are sitting still at the Still museum. This seems like the perfect place to ask you about your desire to sleep through an art fair.

JS: That comes from the movies. In *Weekend at Bernie's* the character is dead for the whole film. That's just such an interesting and easy job to have—to just play dead. My friend Will Eno's play *Middletown* came out two years ago. In the second act, the main character dies slowly over maybe ten minutes, in a hospital bed on the right side of the stage. There's a spotlight on him and it's a very strong scene. Then, instead of taking him off stage, Will leaves him on stage, for the next half an hour, lying completely still on a hospital bed. Apart from the prolonged theatrical confrontation with death, I said, "Wow, that's his acting, he just gets to lie there. What an interesting role to have." So I had this idea to get an anesthesiologist to knock me out during an art fair, and I could just lie there, well dressed, as if I were out looking at art in this center of commerce, but having totally checked out.

SH: Art fairs are exhausting for all of us. But it's particularly relevant if an artist presents himself sleeping through the entire affair. Is that what you had in mind?

JS: I couldn't actually sleep through one of those without a sedative. So I imagine an anesthesiologist having me on an IV. It would be very clear that this was a medical procedure with intention. The artist knocked himself out for the art fair. I thought of doing that on the floor of the stock exchange too.

SH: I like the idea that the artist is the still moment in this unbelievable frenzy.

RIALTO CAFÉ,
LATE AFTERNOON

SH: You've said that you "fall down a lot, hurt myself, do magic tricks, and calisthenics." In prepping for our conversation I made notes on different pieces of paper and one was a neighborhood booklet with classifieds. People advertising themselves as, you know, "John the lawn guy," "Matthew's handyman service," and I thought, What would Joe's description of himself be if it were in a classified?

JS: That's a tough one. I can do funny walks from silent films, the voice from Chef Boyardee—

SH: Tell me about the Chef Boyardee voice. Seems like there is connection between him and the image of you on the billboard in Vancouver. The title is *Joe Sola is Making Art*, but it has a text that says, "Joe Sola is not making art." That mustachioed kind of immigrant-looking portrait of you could easily have been a relative of the Chef Boyardee guy.

JS: The mustachioed face allows me to pretend a lot. It's really great to talk about things from another perspective. Whether it's by putting a wig or a mustache on, or using different voices. Actors use their voice to communicate true characters or true nuances. In my voices there's nothing realistic about the characters—they're unreal-sounding and completely pathetic. This frees me up to say things in a new way. I am not interested in capturing an authentic Chicago or Milwaukee accent. I tried to learn an Australian accent, can't do it. A New Zealand accent, a Florida panhandle accent, can't do it. I have no real muscle control, but creating an imaginary voice for a can of Chef Boyardee beef ravioli is much easier for me.

SH: But you also seem interested in a generalized attitude rather than concerning yourself with particular subtleties. Like, "I'm going to do just enough for you to understand that it's Italian. It's going to be cartoon-Italian and it's going to be bad."

JS: And it's totally okay to do that because I'm not interested in a realistic representation. The characters are amalgamations of a lot of people and of things that I like. I turn to the sounds and just respond to them. In almost the same way that Min Tanaka taught about developing a movement language through your own visual vocabulary. Did you see my sculpture with the two snakes? It looked like they were—

SH: —Coming to deal with each other over some terrain. What was in between them?

JS: It was a painted cardboard box, and inside it had sound coming out—of me doing different British accents. "A cup of tea?" "A cup of tea?" I just did different British accents, male and female, old and young, only saying "a cup of tea." For the two snakes I had cut up flannel shirts and sewed them to armatures of snakes.

SH: You've used voice-over artists before in *More Cinematic Artforum Reviews*, where you hired film industry people to read your past reviews in dramatic ways. Art criticism goes Hollywood!

JS: I am surprised by my recent use of my voice in my art, I actually don't like listening to it when it's recorded. But to get back to your point about the classifieds of the handymen, whenever I see one of those, I think it's just this handyman, but there's also sex involved.

SH: Well, hopefully.

JS: Hopefully, "power's everything… ladders… cords… anti-aging water."

COURTYARD MARRIOTT HOTEL,
EVENING

SH: So tell me about the aquarium. Arguably we went there because you used guppies in your recent work.

JS: I haven't been to an aquarium for fifteen or twenty years. The technology has changed, and I was so excited to be in the glass tubes, surrounded by water and fish. They move so slowly, unlike other things in the world. One fish had very inquisitive eyes, it would look you up and down.

SH: I cut out a picture of a fish like that from a newspaper, and I pasted it into one of my collage journals because it had a Quasimodo quality, an ugly fish but so human in a way.

JS: The most human.

SH: There were several that seemed pathetic and sad, like a couple of old tired guys.

JS: There were some older big guys who were just hanging out in the corners, like mayors or retirees. One reminded me of Marlon Brando in *The Godfather*. You and I stopped talking after a while because we were so mesmerized.

SH: Then we got into this back and forth about existence.

JS: Another fine mess with Herr Horodner!

SH: But what were you trying to get at with the installation at Blackston?

JS: I wanted to make a voice for these really small fish that are at the bottom of the food chain, they're teeny-tiny, sperm-like. And, like many fish, they're alive to be eaten by other fish. I wanted them to talk to another thing that was to be consumed, which in this case was a can of Chef Boyardee beef ravioli.

SH: You provide both voices, you speak for the guppies and the chef. But the chef is also the spokesman for the product—his image declares the authenticity of the ravioli inside. He's establishing a voice to give credence to the taste, or Italian-ness of the product.

JS: Ad agencies have inanimate objects talk to each other: cars, candies, cleaners, etcetera. They talk to us and tell us to buy them, or tell us what it would be like to consume them. In my installation, the voices of the object and animals are cracking, they speak of violence and fear, about looking and reproducing.

SH: The exhibition as a whole is called *American Sex Room and Other Works*. Sex, violence, and humor. How do they all come together, so to speak?

JS: In this space, sex and consumption, eating, violence, and pleasure are all intertwined for me. In the *American Sex Room (an interrogation)*, the relationship is between guppies and food and text. I don't know if you've ever gotten emails from me where I just fill the whole email with one or two words. It's one way I communicate an idea in a very simplistic way—maybe a desperate way, to get my point across. Just filling a page with the same word over and over—like feed guppies who reproduce in huge numbers, for survival, taking over a tank. I covered the four walls of the back gallery with the words "American Sex," about fifteen thousand times. I think a lot about that scene from *The Shining* where Jack Nicholson's character types over and over: "All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy." That was, for me, a real breakdown in communication because that's where you recognize his character has slipped into sickness and dementia. I wanted this kind of breakdown to become the background or decoration on the walls for an interrogation to take place.

SUNDAY, APRIL 13, COURTYARD
MARRIOTT HOTEL,
MORNING

SH: *I am reading the Arts section of* The New York Times *and drinking coffee. Joe is in the bathroom brushing his teeth.*

Joe, there is a full-page ad for Will's new play, *The Realistic Joneses*, with rave reviews. You will not believe this. The main image is a dead squirrel on a mailbox.

JS: Two dead squirrels in one weekend!

SH: This is nuts! When things like this happen, what do you think?

JS: You see all of these things—they are your friends. As Ravi Gunewardena, the Buddhist architect says, "Only open eyes can see the world."