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## THE BOX

June 1–30, 2014

### Jean-Paul Kelly

*Service of the Goods* (2013)

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Image courtesy of Jean-Paul Kelly

To introduce this month's program, Associate Curator of Film/Video Chris Stults discussed *Service of the Goods* with artist Jean-Paul Kelly.

*Before talking about Service of the Goods, can you talk about your larger practice, which encompasses drawing, video, and other media?*

I have always used found photographic and cinematic material as a source for my work, whether I am making a drawing, photographs, or a video. I collect images and clips that attract me in some way—some are seductive or arousing, others are grotesque and hold my attention through disgust. I use these materials as a reference in research and production and as an appropriated physical component, often at the same time.

*How did your interest in using documentarian Frederick Wiseman's films as raw material develop?*

Several summers ago I streamed a copy of Wiseman's *Welfare* (1975) that was posted online with Spanish subtitles. My studio was really hot and I slipped in and out of wakefulness while I watched. I find that the most intriguing things happen in these hypnagogic states. During a waiting-room scene in *Welfare* where a Vietnam veteran rifles through various identification papers and intake forms, I began to imagine him as a ghost. Ghosts have been a central motif throughout my practice. At first they appeared as shorthand for anxiety. As a young queer man coming of age in the late 1990s and trying to figure out a world where HIV/AIDS was no longer a guarantee of certain death, after having been inoculated by the message that it was, the metaphor became important.

The ghost really is a metaphor—specifically this figure of the ghost with a white sheet with holes cut out for eyes. Like all metaphors, it is the vertical replacement of something known for something unknown: a way of making sense, a basic foundation of signification. Put the sheet on it, give it a form. In the tradition of this comical trope, the only reason we know it is a ghost is that the feet are missing. If you can see the feet, we know it's fakery; if you can't see the feet, it's real. In the latter case, if you pull the sheet off nothing will be there. That's the most terrifying thing. By giving this figure a human form, it softens the blow of a horrific rupture in the world. It is the most prosaic and intimate of items: the thing that you wrap yourself in bed and often the thing that bodies are covered with when they first die. *Service of the Goods* is structured to parallel this extended metaphor or allegorical double-reading of the ghost. It is at once a critique of the social safety net that haunts and is haunted by its users and a reflexive analysis of documentary as an institution—specifically Frederick Wiseman's body of work.

*As you say, Wiseman is known for his portraits of institutions as they are (as populated by "types" as much as they are by unique personalities) but you, unsettlingly, have erased any recognizable personal identifiers for your subjects. What does the emptied out palette—both visually and aurally—shift the video's focus to?*

The decisions to empty out the visual and aural palette come directly from the complexities of reading the source material. As film critic Bill Nichols points out, Wiseman's subjects are employed as functionaries within each film. They fill a role—doctor, patient, bureaucrat, applicant—and that role is crucial to describing the institution, but they are never featured more than is necessary to describe that role. There is no main subject to follow, only repeated roles. Though subjects often exceed this structure—as they bleed, cry, sweat, and puke—these physical manifestations are often imperatives that force conflict and consequently enable the functioning of their role. Beneath the ghost, I wanted to maintain this conflict. By making my actor's arms, legs, and eyes visible, the flattening of specificity, through the screen of the ghost's sheet, is contradicted and questions of ethics related to gender, race, and class that are so crucial to the institution of the documentary, and to Wiseman, are foregrounded for their own institutional analysis. A reading of the figure as "ghost" is also eroded and its identity becomes even more slippery and troublesome—some read them as Klan-like figures, some as veiled women, and for others their identity shifts throughout. The missing voice and its replacement with ambient sound functions in much the same way: combined with the subtitle of Wiseman's subject's words, the silence of the speakers has a strange, present echo.

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**Jean-Paul Kelly**

*Service of the Goods*, 2013  
29 mins., video

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