

Chuck Close
December 1, 2007
2:30 p.m.
The Philoctetes Center

Levy: **Francis Levy**
Close: **Chuck Close**
Katz: **Vincent Katz**
Von Unwerth: **Matthew von Unwerth**

Levy: Welcome to this preview screening of *Chuck Close*. I want to thank the Film Forum for allowing us to show and preview this film. I'd like to introduce Matthew von Unwerth, who is the Media Coordinator of the Philoctetes Center. He's the author of a wonderful book called *Freud's Requiem* and he is in training at the Institute for Psychoanalytic Training and Research. Matthew will introduce our distinguished guests and moderate the discussion. Thank you.

Von Unwerth: Thank you all for coming. I'll just briefly introduce our participants. First, Vincent Katz, who previously brought us his wonderful film, *Squatting the Palace*, which was a work about Kiki Smith that really got us going with this film series about the work of artists. We're also going to do a film from that same production company on Ellsworth Kelly in February. Vincent came and talked with Kiki Smith and we had a wonderful conversation. He was a natural to have back because that film, much like this film, is really a hard look at an artist's process and all that goes on in it.

A little background about Vincent: he's a poet, translator, art critic, editor, and curator. He's done documentary films on Alex Katz and Kiki Smith and also the art of Rudy Burckhardt, as well as the nine books of poetry he wrote, including *Cabal of Zealots*, *Understanding Objects*, and *Rapid Departures*. He won the 2005 Natural Translation Award given by the American Literary Translator's Association for his book of translations from Latin, *The Complete Elegies of Sextus Propertius*, and was awarded a Rome Prize Fellowship in Literature from the American Academy in Rome for 2001-2002.

Our other guest, of course, is Chuck Close, who is the subject of this afternoon's film. I think he's probably been introduced many, many times. I will simply introduce him as the film's promotional materials do, because we're going to get to see a lot about him over the next several hours. Since 1969, when his work was first shown at the Bykert Gallery in Soho, Close has been known as the re-inventor of portraiture. As we hear this articulate and affable man discuss his personal journey and as we watch him create a self-portrait from Polaroid to final stroke after 82 days, and as we hear numerous interviews with his subjects—friends, artists, and family, who discuss their own work and life in relation to his—we come to understand how far Close has transcended categories like realism and abstraction, and what a profound influence he has had on his generation of artists.

The film you're about to see is pretty unusual in this genre because, in addition to being a film about Mr. Close and his work, it's also about his circle of friends and their work. Actually, throughout the film, there are almost mini-documentaries that take you into other people's

studios. These are all people who are in one way or another contemporaries or antecedents of Mr. Close. I think that's an important choice for the director of the film, because it's also a subject of the artist's work.

In the film, Mr. Close is asked how he picks the colors for the squares and the circles that he paints, and his response is that it's like musical chords, that there are certain combinations of colors that evoke senses, like music. In watching the film, I had a similar reaction to the way that the film itself progresses—that its theme, its subject, and its method were all very much in consonance and that that seems also to be a theme, if you will, in Mr. Close's work and life. Any reactions to that idea?

Close: Well, the reason that I use the analogy of music is that people wonder how I can sit at arm's length from the painting and make these decisions and put four or five or six colors into a square and know how it's going to read from a distance. The paintings take four months as it is. If I went back to see how it's going after every stroke or two, I'd never get the things finished. People had a hard time understanding how it's possible to know, when you're so close to what you're doing, how it's going to read at a distance. The analogy I used was a composer going into a room by him or herself, with no musical instruments and no musicians, and just from years of experience scoring the piece and assigning this note to the oboe and that note to the bassoon and that note to the French horn. From years of experience the composer would know what that resultant sound would be when all those musical instruments played their notes at the same time. What I'm doing is something very similar to a musical chord and it's in essence a kind of color chord. I just know from years of experience that if I put this color and that color and this color and sneak up on what I want, I can find what I want, which is very different from presupposing what it is or conceptualizing what it is and then just executing it. It's all found in place. It's found in context in the rectangles. Sometimes I use analogies from other fields so that people will be able to understand the process. Most people don't understand how art happens. To them it just sort of looks like it blew onto the canvas somehow. It's really just a series of decisions and putting yourself in the position to make the decisions.

Von Unwerth: That was one of your starting principles, was it not, to make art a process, to emphasize the process of how art is made as much as the resulting image?

Close: Yes, I never wanted to deny the magic qualities of painting, which I consider to be the most magical of the mediums. I mean, as much as I love sculpture, it occupies real space like you or I. I could roll around you or roll around a piece of sculpture and I'll understand it by doing that. But a painting is this magic window, this rectangle on the wall, with just colored dirt smeared on a flat surface. It's the most transcendent because it transcends its physical reality and makes space where there is no space. It allows you to make associations with life experiences you've had. A painting can make you cry and the thing is still just colored dirt on a flat surface. The reason I never liked the word "realist" was because I was always as interested in artificiality as I was in reality. It's ripping back and forth between the artificial—that is, the distribution of color on a flat surface—and then it warps into an image and then it flattens back out and becomes paint again. It's that ripping back and forth that really interests me.

Katz: When someone makes art, presumably there is the desire to have it seen by a public. Then, when that happens, one hopes for the possibility that people will comment on that work. So I'm interested in this phenomenon of being observed. As an artist, you're making your work and you get observed and commented on by critics. But increasingly, in your case, you also get observed more directly while you're working in your studio, or interviewed in your studio, or in this case actually filmed while working.

Close: It seems like I've been involved in Chuck-o-rama for a very long time. Even I'm tired of me. I can't imagine how tired everybody else is. But it is true that there's a nauseating amount of stuff out there on me. But, you know, this was really what it was all about: I wanted to get stuff out in front of people. It's a narcissistic kind of business. I feel like I have something to say and I'm narcissistic enough to think other people might want to actually look at it. I really mean this sincerely: I make art for myself, but I really do think it's a form of communication and I'm interested in putting it out. I would not be that artist on a desert island, poking his hand with a stick and getting blood and drawing on the back of a leaf—this is not me. If there is no audience there, I'm not making art. I'll wait until someone shows up and then I'll make something. I'm not driven to make stuff just because I need to. Marcel Duchamp said that the artist only had 50% of the responsibility, and that's to get the work out, but the work is not complete until it's returned by the viewer. I really do believe that it is this cycle that interests me.

Katz: How do you work with what comes back. Does it ever surprise you? Does it bother you and, if so, how do you mediate that? How do you deal with what you're getting back?

Close: Well, one of the really surprising things—I used to be 6'3"—well, I still am 6'3", but now I'm like 3'4" or something. I used to sort of tower over most people and I think I was sort of loud and aggressive and I think people didn't approach me. I never got any comments from anybody. And then I went into a wheelchair. You know the thing where Barbara Walters asks people if they were a tree, what tree would they be? It's the dumbest of all journalistic questions that you can ask. I wanted so much to be on her show so she could ask me and then I would say, when she asked what kind of tree I would, "I'm a stump." Because being in a wheelchair really cut me down to size. The benefit to that—and there's always a benefit; no matter how screwed up it is, there's always something that you get out of almost anything that happens to you—is that it made me much more approachable. People felt like they could come up and talk to me. People are stopping me all the time and telling me about works of mine that mattered to them and relationships they've had to the work and what it meant to them and when they first saw it. One of the things that's scary is when someone comes up to me and I think they're older than I am and they say, "I remember when my mom took me to the museum when I was this high." I have been around a long time. But I do think it's one of the really strange benefits of being in a wheelchair; it made me so much more accessible.

Von Unwerth: I have a question about the subject of your art, which is very frequently your friends and family, and in particular your friends who are artists. In listening to people like Philip Glass, the whole group of you, it seems, were committed to the process of making art as a way of life from an early age. I'm sure you've thought about this many times.

Close: I got out of graduate school at Yale in '64, and my classmates were Richard Serra, Nancy Graves, Brice Marden, Bob and Sylvia Mangold, Janet Fish, Newton Harrison, Jennifer Bartlett. We all moved to New York together, and we helped each other. I helped Richard Serra build all his early lead prop pieces. So when I was looking for anonymous people to paint, I just used all the people who were helping Richard make his sculpture and moving furniture so that Phil Glass could do a concert in someone's studio or someone's loft, or Yvonne Rainer or Trish Brown could dance there. We just all were anonymous, regular folks. Warhol owned superstars. The other person besides Warhol who was a real hero to me, amongst others, was your father—

Von Unwerth: Alex Katz.

Close: Alex Katz. He and Andy and Phillip Pearlstein were almost alone in trying to make a forward-looking, truly modernist kind of figurative painting in the early '60s, when nothing could have been dumber than doing that. I mean, it was really dumb. Painting was dead. Figurative painting was even dead. The portrait was the most moribund and absolutely over. So they were real heroes. They kicked open the door for me and I've always felt a real kinship with them. I forget what the question was.

Von Unwerth: Well, you're not a portraitist like Lucian Freud, working with a model. His models are sometimes related to his life, but your subject matter is very much the people of your life. The people of your life are very much, by and large, also involved with the process of art. So it almost seems like the subject of your work is the work of making art—

Close: The subject of the work is the portrait—I hope they're paintings and I hope they make sense as paintings first. But in a sense, if you think about that particular period, the late '60s, when all of us sort of burst onto the scene, it was a period of tremendous upheaval. There were assassinations, the war, the Kent State killings, and every institution was up for grabs or up for reassessment. Every artist was doing the same thing: questioning the rules, questioning the conventions and traditions, looking for some way to find something that wasn't connected to the past, wasn't shop-worn, wasn't contaminated. Minimalism and pop were the two big issues at the moment. Reductiveness and belief in process and self-imposed limitations—these were the rules of the day. We were all nurtured in the same primordial ooze—the composers, the dancers, the choreographers, the filmmakers, the writers, the poets, everybody. We were all influenced by the same thing and we were all nurtured by the same primordial ooze and then we kind of crawled ashore and went our separate ways. But it all came out of that same rich stew of ideas. Not only were painters trying to purge their work—I was trying to purge my work of de Kooning and abstract expressionism. I limited myself to one color and Philip Glass limited himself to six notes and so many things really came out of that sense of how you put yourself in the position to make something. Richard Serra didn't want to use bronze or wax or wood or clay because you brought too much baggage with you to the studio. So how do you get rid of that? How do you get the other people out of your studio? How do I get all the people who influenced me out of there? He did it by using materials that he could find on Canal Street, instead of materials that you find in an art supply store.

So there was this period of real reassessment and purging, as opposed to the prime *modus operandi* since about 1989 or '90, which has been appropriation. We were antithetical to the

notion of appropriation. We wanted to purge our work of every possible reference to any other artist you could possibly think of. You didn't want anybody in front of your work thinking about another artist's work, which is really very different from appropriating and sort of raiding the cultural icebox and picking from the past and putting it together in a new way. So that was really, I think, what the nature of that moment was really like.

Katz: Well, I think that was a great description of a lot of the important issues of that period. But I also think that some people at that time, some artists and thinkers, really advocated a Hegelian, radical approach to the world in the sense that progress was always being made and the past had to be cast off.

Close: We still believed in progress, though, I think. Not necessarily up, but movement. That you could keep from being stuck. You could move. You program change, in a way. Nobody believed in masterpieces. You were supposed to work in a serial way and just keep working. I remember one artist I knew—every painting he made was a masterpiece. I said, "You've managed to make masterpieces a serial idea by having every one turn out to be a masterpiece." But it was a belief in process, a belief that process would set you free. You could be protected from the buffeting winds of change, as styles come and styles go, and things are hot and then they're not, if you just set your trajectory, your own personal trajectory, and go wherever it leads you. Then you don't have to be influenced by the change in the weather in the art world.

Katz: Well, you've had a lot of very memorable quotes through the years. We don't have time for me to just say all of them. But one of them was, "I painted more de Koonings than de Kooning."

Close: When I met him, I said, "It was really nice to meet someone who'd made a few more de Koonings than I had."

Katz: Okay. Sorry. It was in the ballpark. But another one, on a more serious note, is in the book you did with John Guare that deals with the event, as you call it, that led to your being partially paralyzed. It's an amazing, fascinating book, if you haven't read it and seen it, because the visual component is very powerful. But one of the things you talked about was having these visions that you likened to Anselm Kiefer rooms or Albert Speer architecture—these kind of long passages—and then you started to think, "Well, maybe I should sign up for some religion." Then you thought twice and you said, "Any religion that would have me at this point isn't worth belonging to."

Close: Right.

Katz: That's always stayed with me as sort of a model. But I was wondering if you could just talk a little bit—because this must come up in the film—about that period in your life and how you really overcame that and got to paint again.

Close: I was jealous of the people in the beds around me, who had personal faith. It seemed to sustain them so much and it seemed to make them feel so much better. You can't fake that shit.

You can't pretend to have it if you don't. You can't make yourself have it if it seems ludicrous, and it always seemed ludicrous to me.

I had tremendous support from my family and friends. I was blessed with—it seems “blessed” is a religious term—but I was lucky enough to have a positive personality. There's a lot of blame-the-victim stuff in the hospital, and in rehabilitation—if you don't get better it's because you have the wrong attitude. But it just doesn't work that way. I watched people with the worst attitudes, who didn't do anything, but who just laid around and whined and wouldn't do physical therapy—they'd get better and they'd walk out of the joint. And someone else who was busting their butt and worked really hard at staying positive, they never got better at all. They rolled them out of there on a stretcher in exactly the same condition they came into the place. So you really don't know what hand you're going to be dealt. The interesting thing about that is you can take a losing hand and by bluffing—you know, if you play poker, you bluff and you have to have a lot of guts or whatever—you can take that losing hand and make it a winning hand. Someone else can be dealt a winning hand and find a way to lose. I was lucky enough to be a glass that's half-full, and that just made my life in the hospital a lot easier. I shouldn't get any credit for being, by nature, positive. At the same time, someone should not be blamed for being, by nature, pessimistic and not optimistic. Because they're doing the best they can. That's all they can do. They aren't wired to do anything else. I was wired to do what I do and they were wired to not be able to do much. It's just sort of the way it is. I don't think there's much you can do about it.

Katz: How about emotionally, when you were painting again?

Close: Well, it was interesting. I was down in this really depressing art room. What do they call it when you have art in the hospital? I was in the art therapy room, with half-finished baskets and stuff hanging from the ceiling. They actually had handicapped people doing wood burning. Was that a good idea? I mean, come on. What are these people thinking? Anyway, I'm down there and the first time I tried to paint, I had this piece of cardboard in a vice and drew a grid on it and my assistant would mix some paint and put it in a brush holder and I sort of fell onto the thing. I immediately broke down and started crying. I said, “You see? I can't do it. It can't be done.” I'm getting all the sympathy I can possibly get. Tears are streaming—“You see, I can't do it.” I was thinking at the same time, “Well, you know, it's not that bad. I might be able to do something with this.”

So after I milked it for all it was worth—I have no memory of this at all—my assistant came to help me and I'd say, “A little green, a little yellow, a little white, a little more of this,” and he would load the brush up and then I would sort of fall on the painting. But my memory of it was totally positive. I thought I was just so celebratory—“I'm so happy, I'm back to work!” But my assistant reminded me—and I don't remember this at all—that I cried every single day that I painted. Every single day. Luckily—or unluckily, I suppose, in terms of understanding myself better—I don't remember any of that.

Von Unwerth: As a follow-up to that, here's an important quote in the film from the late Kirk Varnedoe, and I'm curious about your reaction to it. I've heard it a few times, but for the audience's benefit, he sort of draws a bright line in your career and says, “Everything about the

early portraits have this extreme minimalism. They have a toughness, a rawness, and a grittiness. They seemed, I think, at the time, colossally dumb. It was an extremely rote task to paint this giant, seemingly inexpressive mug shot on this scale. It was something inexplicable. Why would one want to give over so much time to create this much raw information? And now when we look at the lush, brilliantly-colored canvases of the later work, there is something incredibly released about this work. Having sucked what seemed to be all the life out of his art, this new art is the miraculous repetition of the promise of what twentieth-century art can deliver.” I guess I’m curious about your reaction to that and the implied narrative that comes up. Brice Marden also suggests that there is a reinterpretation of your work coming down the road that draws this bright line. I’m curious about your reaction.

Close: Well, Rob Storr did something when he did the retrospective at the Modern, which I really appreciated, because people are really invested in seeing a major change, a seismic change, between my work prior to going to the hospital and afterwards. Rob took the last show I did before I went into the hospital and the first show after I got out of the hospital and he mixed them together in one large room, essentially defying the viewer to determine which ones were done before and which ones were done after. I don’t think most people can tell. I can’t remember which ones were done before and which ones were done after.

To me, all of these things bracket periods of time in your life. As artists, we think of what we do as a continuum. Every time you have a show it brackets a chunk of work and sets it apart. But it’s not that. It’s all part of this ongoing dialogue you have with the art world and the viewer. I think the work did become brighter and a little more celebratory, perhaps, after I got out of the hospital, because I was just so damn happy to be back to work.

Anyhow, I’d just like to say one thing about Marion, who worked on this film for twelve years or something. I had hair at the beginning of this movie. There was enough film to make three or four more movies and the last time I saw it, it was three and a half hours long, so I don’t know what got cut out. But the thing that I love most about the film and I loved about working with Marion was that she was as interested as I was in this not being just about me, but that this be the threads of the art world woven together—the fabric of the art world that’s made out of my relationship with all these other people that I painted, and other friends of mine and my family. It’s a portrait, I think, more of the art world, or at least my chunk of the art world, the art world that matters to me. Thinking about being in the hospital, the other family besides my real family was the way the art world turned out for me and came to the hospital, visited me, rooted me on and cheered me up and was pulling for me. So it celebrates, in my mind, not only my own work, but this complex series of relationships.