

The impulse behind the work on display was perhaps best illustrated by *Writing Nothing*, 2010, a wall drawing of childish block letters, conspicuously situated just opposite the gallery entrance and reading WRITING NOTHING IN A LITTLE BOOK IS THE WAY TO USE THE PAPER AND NOTHING IS THEN LOST AND THAT IS SUCH A COLLECTION. Distributed among several vitrines were pages neatly removed from a notebook and filled with diaristic handwritten annotations that included, among other things, excerpts from both well-known and obscure texts and lectures, hasty train-of-thought diagrams, lists, drawings, and images extracted from newspapers and magazines. The script is tiny and barely legible and often sprawls out into organic forms whose formal qualities overwhelm any textual meanings. To the attentive observer willing to comply with the demands of this oddly

[illegible]

Ayreen Anastas
and Rene Gabri,
*One Step Forward,
Two Steps Back*
(detail), 2009–10,
color photograph,
31 1/2 x 39 3/8".

deserted platform for a train” or “going to a dinner party.”

A sound track to what was an already strenuous viewing experience emerged from a video monitor showing *Kindred Spirits*, 2010, a sequence of banal images of family life taken from a hugely successful Hong Kong television drama of the 1990s called *A Kindred Spirit*. Extracted from a VHS tape found on a New York sidewalk, its audio was reduced to a faint hum against which the artists engage in an incongruous dialogue that borrows heavily from Slavoj Žižek but also includes passages from Spinoza, Alain Badiou, and the Dziga Vertov Group, the late-'60s/early-'70s filmmaking collective that included Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin. There is something compelling about the incompatibility between the images and the narration—as Anastas herself observes toward the end of the video after she and Gabri abruptly go out of character to become spectators of their own performance. Neither contrasting nor consistent, the images and narration cancel each other out so that a conscious choice must be made between deafly watching and blindly listening.

This is not just a question of form versus content but hints at a broader problem of justifying an artistic approach to the problems of everyday life when war, economic meltdown, and mass ecological destruction show them to be irreducibly political. With its economy of means, this exhibition, conceived more as a script for future projects than as a set of completed works, suggested a provocative if tentative paradigm for the production of art through the life it desires.

Artforum, May 2010