

# NICOLE-ANTONIA SPAGNOLA

By Patrick Gray

and separates her three stories with scenes of a woman inflating a balloon numbered one, two, and three. These brief title cards act as visual borders that effectively break the film up into three separate narratives. Division, here and elsewhere in the film, is only a stage in the process of definition.

Likewise, Spagnola flips Wilder's *The Apartment* into apartment galleries in and around here-and-now Los Angeles. The actors and spaces are pulled from this insular gallery scene, which adds to the New Wave mythos of it all—if you're in on it, cool, but if you're totally unfamiliar with that crowd, it doesn't really affect your engagement with the film. Spagnola's real interest in "apartment-galleries" is to suggest another confusion of boundaries; art is no longer a special kind of object, confined to a special kind of space, supported by a special kind of institution, but instead has become an integral part of everyday life. In Wilder's comedy, our insurance-clerk/patsy hero compromises the separation between his work and his life by lending out his apartment to his higher ups with the hopes of getting ahead at the office. This routinely puts him out in the cold and gives neighbors a gallant idea of his private life. Something similar happens to Spagnola's artists and their apartment-galleries—art, narrative and commerce get mixed up with life.

Returning to Hollywood formula, and films like Wilder's, is a way of getting back to clearly defined roles for space and character. By setting her characters up in a strictly visual eye-world, they're unable to verbally negotiate their definitions the way Wilder's ear-world heroes can.

A nebbish cop wouldn't be able to pass himself off for an English Lord as easily as Jack Lemmon does in *Irma La Douce*. Instead, *1-2-3: Apartment Gallery* collapses these boundaries by ceaseless looping and turning into something of a self-consuming artifact. While Spagnola does break up the film into numbered scenes, the film isn't exactly designed to be viewed in that order. The film really "begins" whenever you walk up and give it your attention, which may be anywhere in any of the three narratives. Looping has an amplifying effect on the familiar Wilder films—borrowed narratives and clichéd tropes approach mechanism through repetition, and images emerge from their situational narratives. The film's most provocative images leave a strong mnemonic structure; an ape strapped with a Glock, *Irma la Douce*'s green stockings blending into skin, and a coin fixed to a woman's navel. These are some of Spagnola's most direct symbolist gestures and offer the characters an escape hatch from their sharply assigned roles and definitions.

The Hammer has programmed the film environmentally: it's playing on the screens above the box-office for the Billy Wilder Theater, it's playing in the lobby of the Billy Wilder Theater, and there's been at least two full feature-length screenings inside the Billy Wilder Theater. Along with a few other screens tucked away around the museum, viewers can really tune in and tune out of the film on their own whim depending on where they are standing. This gives *1-2-3: Apartment Gallery* the effect of a happening, always in the present tense, without a real sense of time, and repeated over and over.

Billy Wilder has always been the odd-man-out of the sixties American auteur Pantheon. Films like *The Apartment*, *The Foreign Affair*, and *The Fortune Cookie* were against the grain in a decade when Hollywood was going mod and young filmmakers were turning to New Wave visual styles. Wilder's characters, usually opportunist schlemiels, come from an ear-world of the American idiom that demands a dialogue driven and basically anti-visual mode. *1-2-3: Apartment Gallery*, a silent triptych by Nicole Antonia-Spagnola looping on at least five screens (to my count) around the Hammer disorients these characters and Wilder-isms in a new and highly visual narrative field. Spagnola practically muzzles Wilder by eschewing his dialogue, appropriating his images and substituting his stars with "artists and curators who operate apartment-based galleries across Los Angeles"—essentially, friends and colleagues of hers. The accompanying placard gives a brief synopsis for Spagnola's three stories—one, "A pregnant woman runs into her lover, uncertain whether he intends to kill another man- or himself..." two, "A John discovers a mysterious currency to pay his favorite girl..." and three, "A composer struggles to keep his fidelity in check." Spagnola directs and produces these brief Wilder inspired stories with the Godard-ish sensibility that Wilder never seemed to get hip to.

Spagnola takes part of her title from the 1961 film *One, Two, Three*—a fast-paced comedy about a Coca Cola executive in West Berlin trying to halt a marriage between his boss's daughter and a Communist. Wilder was shooting *One, Two, Three* while the Berlin Wall was going up and its real-world presence kind of hangs over the whole drama. Spagnola takes visual cue from *One, Two, Three*'s poster