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## Women Filmmakers at Ostranenie

### Katy Deepwell

While there were many films presented at Ostranenie, these pages are dedicated to profiling the women film-makers whose work was show there. A part of the festival was dedicated to examining the legacy and achievements of media pioneers, Moholy-Nagy, Tesla, Schriabin, Oscar Sala, Lev Theremin; this was a section from which women innovators were notable by their absence.

This is the third Ostranenie festival designed to exhibit work and bring together artists from Eastern European countries who work in film, video, multi-media, electronic music and electronic arts in installation, internet and CD-Rom forms.

This year's Ostranenie was organised by Stephen Kovats and Nina Czegledy and took place in five main sites in Dessau. Most of the video screenings were at the former Bauhaus building in Dessau with an internet cafe at K.I.E.Z e.V, an arts centre in the city. There were exhibitions installed on both sites and in the Marienkirche.

A special programme 'Women at the End of the Millennium' was introduced by curator Bojana Pejic.

- \* Milla Moilanen *Scale* (8.25 mins, Finland, 1996)
- \* Dragana Zarevac *Ocaj-Le Deuil / The Despair* (5.20 mins Yugoslavia, 1996)
- \* Olga Tobreluts *Game or 2 Love Stories* (10.00mins, Russia, 1997)
- \* Natalia Borisova *Tri Verlibra/Three Verlibrs* (3.30 mins, Russia, 1996)
- \* Infiniti Evil (3.30 mins, Russia, 1996)
- \* Anna Kucynska/Katarzyna Radkowska *Nazarieff* (11 mins, Poland, 1993/1994)
- \* Elena Patoprsta *Love on the End of the Millenium/ Liebe am Ende des Milenium* (3.00 mins Slovakia, Germany, 1996)

- \* Elena Patoprsta *Attention, Love! / Vosicht, Liebe!*(3.00 mins Slovakia, Germany, 1996)
- \* Biba Vickovic *Demokrata / The Democrat* (5 mins Yugoslavia, 1994)
- \* Perry Bard *My Little Box of Nazis* (3.36 mins, USA, 1997)

Also in the programme, but not screened on the day, Rotraut Pape *Nicht nur Wasser/Not Just Water* (25.47 mins Deutschland,1995)

Women videomakers featured strongly in the Crossing Over programme which arose from a series of workshops sponsored by the Soros foundation in Sofia.

The 'Crossing Over' programme included:-

- \* Darij Kreuh *Blind Wish* (3 mins, Slovenia,1997)
- \* Odiliya Yankova *I,RNG*(00.53 mins, Bulgaria, 1997) (see interview below)
- \* Kassimir Terziev *In Search of.....* (3.30 mins , Bulgaria, 1997)
- \* Elena Belova *Impressions of a Mirror* (2.50mins, Bulgaria, 1997)
- \* Ivan Mudov *Simon Says....* (2.00mins, Bulgaria, 1997)
- \* Tsvetelina Gancheva *The Virgin* (3.26 mins Bulgaria,1997)
- \* Branka Milicic-Davic *Dream* (3 mins Yugoslavia, 1997) (see interview below)
- \* Denis Neimand *Here* (3.43 mins Russia,1997)
- \* Collaborative Documentary *Terra Nova* (7.21mins Bulgaria, 1997)

A programme of Video Documentaries by women film-makers was also shown.

In addition to these special events, women also featured in the general programme which highlighted work from former Eastern European countries and for the first time included work from Albania, Moldova and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

This included a new videowork by a young Albanian woman, Erjona Daka, 'Kotesi / Vanity' (15 mins, 1997). This video shot in a storage shed, featured only one actor. A young man who typed on a typewriter with no paper a series of reflections as he slowly picked up and considered the objects around him ; a child's shoe, a woman's shoe, a boot. The objects seemed to cover a spectrum of life events. At the end of the film, he covers up the typewriter with plastic, hides it away. The film alludes to hidden and secret thoughts but it also suggests that storing information for the self - as an unproductive activity - can be a vain and selfish act.



Above: videostill from Erjona Daka, 'Kotesi / Vanity' (15 mins, 1997)

Below: Anna Henckel-Donnersmarck's 'Busby' (3.18 mins, 1997, Germany)



On a lighter note, a very cleverly crafted and ironic film shown in another programme was Anna Henckel-Donnersmarck's 'Busby' (3.18 mins, 1997, Germany). A parody of Busby Berkeley's routines in an almost Bauhaus-manner using the abstract qualities of hands to form the shapes and movement of dancing. . Ulrike Ettinger's film *Elena Stanciuc: Verusch eine Portrait Germany, 1997 (17 mins)* formed part of the Video Documentary Programme shown in the Ostranenie Festival, November 1997.

The other films in the same programme were:-

- \* Russian Umarov/ Natalya Petrova *Chechentsey Drevnyaya Zemlya/ The Chechens Ancient Land* (25 mins, Russia, 1997)
- \* Iurie Suiu *Labyrintul/The Labyrinth* (24.30 mins, Moldova, 1992)
- \* Olivera Milos-Toderovic: *S Puta u Nemoguće/ From the Road to Impossible* (14.50 mins, Yugoslavia, 1996)
- \* Ema Kugler *Postaja 25/Station 25* (30 mins, Slovenia, 1997)
- \* Marina Preda Sanc *Zidul Din Turn/The Wall in the Tower* (34 mins. Romania, 1997)
- \* Julja Loginova *Vegetatio(n) uber die Russische Kunst* (22mins Russia, 1997)
- \* Marina Grznic/Aina Smid *Postsocialism + Retroavantgarda + Irwin* (22.05 mins, Slovenia, 1997)
- \* FIA ART : *Made in Serbia* (26.51mins. Yugoslavia, 1997)

**Extracts from an Interview with the Dragana Zarevac on her film *Ocaj- Le Deuil / The Despair*, Yugoslavia, 1996 (05.20) at Ostranenie, November 1997.**

**Dragana Zarevac:** I came across the material in this film accidentally. It was meant to be training material for the Yugoslav army and it was about the war in Croatia. My husband was asked to make some copies of it by some friends. He came home and told me he had seen a terrible thing and that I must see it. When I saw it, I couldn't sleep for weeks and I wanted to make some work about it. It is connected to my previous work in some ways and on the other hand it is not. I started as a performer of electronic music and with video about eleven years ago. I mostly deal with traditions. What I like are the common points between different cultures and traditions and I really am enchanted to see the same or similar cultural traces in different cultural traditions and that is mostly what I deal with and study. I also have an education as a singer but I have never been an opera singer or a traditional or classic performer. I always do the music for everything I do as a performer or on video. I make music, do the singing, record it etc.

The topics I have usually dealt with have been the topics of traditions as well and this is why this piece is rather different as well. It deals with a contemporary topic but it is also connected to the tradition because I use this traditional way of singing/ mourning there and I use the lyrics of medieval Serbian poetry. The

lyrics are about the woman who saw her nine sons dead in the war with the Turks. It's a very powerful sad epic song. So I put these different elements together and cut out all the elements that would show the present moment or national belonging or particularity in the sense of situating it in this time and space. I just took elements which would show suffering – looking over the dead, mourning the dead. It's not just something I feel, it is a fact that mourning the dead is common to all traditions. We have always had two groups of people fighting over one piece of land and that is what wars are all about. That is what I also felt at this time. On the other hand, in our war, there was a terrible suffering. I could not be in all the spots at the same moment, but I know Serbians were also killing Serbians, Muslims killing Muslims, Croatians killing Croatians, not only other nationalities. Everybody suffered and everybody committed crimes and that was terrible and too many people were in this situation. So this is the suffering and pain I wanted to express – it goes through the centuries but is found in the present day. The training film last 45 minutes and shows different pieces of film of people being terrorised, tortured and killed. Different people in different places but also it shows different funeral in totally another context and with another text accompanying it. So I took parts from this 45-minute documentary and took one scene from 1941-1942 of people from a concentration camp at Yasanitzza in Croatia. This is the only image from the past. This is not to highlight the suffering of Croatia but a general historical image of suffering. It is a link across time, not a link with a place. You see the image vanishing and it is like any piece of land people fighting over a piece of land. I wanted more to make that connection through history so to say we have the same suffering repeated over the centuries. You would not know where it was from, except that it was not from Africa.

The film emphasises the mourners but I wouldn't like to put a different value onto the different sexes but I do see the differences especially the different roles in the tradition. Men fight the wars, women mourn and bury the men. It is another sort of general view of death, but in this film there is also a man mourning, a father. That is another archetype alongside the old women dressed in black and mourning.

**Odiliya Yankova interview about her film *I,RNG Bulgaria*, 1997 (00.53 mins)**

**Odilya Yankova:** My experience of video before the *Crossing Over* workshop was limited. My approach to modern art started with a short course in conceptual art at the Art Akademie in Budapest in 1993 where I was studying sculpture. This was only a short period after the big change which we all had to get through. It was a time of confusion for me because my point of view was completely disordered and my values were changing fast. Before this period we had a very

defined area of art and were able act within it and then everything changed. And it was very strange because there were many things existing simultaneously which we didn't know about - a very big area of artistic life - and at once this came to us and we had to learn to live with it and to make our art with it and to learn new terms, and a new way of living. Conceptual art was very comfortable for me because its essence really closed the philosophy which is basic human knowledge so it could be transformed into any situation. I think it was a good start. I always had this desire to come closer to the moving image, the moving reality. So to me the cinema was something very close to me and at once I understood that I could stay an artist and make movies at the same time. So video art was a saving. I was happy that I changed to explore these things more.

The first thing I made was a video documentation as this was more clear to me as it was based on facts just transformed into the moving media. After that I started thinking how I could express a concept using these ways of expression. So the second thing I made was a ten minute video without sound, a performance in video. That was how I first appeared in front of the camera.

After that I dared to take the camera in my own hands and tried to advance the other point of view, the point of the viewer. The world consists not only of two sides but even more. Making video gave me more possibility to change my place. When you can easily move your point of view it can be moving to any topic, you learn to be flexible. *I, RNG* is based on a concept. The world goes on about the problem of identity which is a very basic problem for me. An internal problem. Every person born in Eastern Europe has to cope with this change and this is well known. I've never been into the political side of things so to me the problem of identity was always very personal and I tried somehow to enlarge it and this is how I came to the philosophical understanding of identity. The title is an abbreviation of the computer term, random number generation and this film puts the question of difference between our desire to be something that we wish and the facts of outer reality, the facts of our bodies and our minds as the medium of our person because actually we live first inside our bodies and our brains and then we live inside the world. These are two spheres in communication all the time but it is not a simple process.

I chose about 20-25 people I know and shot their faces turning around and at the end of the sequence I shot my own face because you always have to find a point to stop. It's easy for everyone to find the end point inside themselves. There is the area where you put all your questions inside your head. The possibility that others are within you is implied but the sequence tells you I might be anyone and everyone but I'm not a separate different thing, why do I have to be?



Branka Milicic-Davic *Dream Yugoslavia*, 1997  
(3.53mins)

**Branka Milicic-Davic interview  
about her film *Dream Yugoslavia*,  
1997 (3.53mins)**

**Branka Milicic-Davic:** This was my first video and I made it from film I shot with my performance group, Group Baza. I actually planned to make a long documentary of the performance we did last year which dealt with the situation in Yugoslavia on two levels : 1) how a person meets their own limits in work and in communication and 2) how a person feels about the borders around the

country or society in which they live. As you realised in the video we are dealing with the body, no words are spoken, neither in the video nor in the performance. I used the sound of my own breathing as the only possible sound. I had quite a lot of material but I just decided to make a short film, partly because of time and partly because I wanted to make a dream/nightmare where you cannot realise quite what is going on. **Katy Deepwell: The people appear as if they are asleep because of the breathing sound but as the camera slowly moves around the images turn into what they are dreaming about and the piece takes on a very dark atmosphere of a nightmare.**

**Branka Milicic-Davic :** The conception is done in such a way that you cannot realise whether this is a dream or a reality. My personal experience in the last few years living in Yugoslavia is that you cannot realise it as a bad dream or as a reality. You just cannot understand why just simple things cannot be realised and you cannot find any reason for this. Everything is just somehow surrealistic. The film captures this and is also surrealistic. There is nothing happening in the film, but everything is happening at the same time. You never see the whole body. Sometimes you do not even recognise parts of the body. It's just a kind of colour. You cannot see which is male or which is female. There is also an attempt to show what you see or realise in a performance - in the performance I shot, I am on the floor and I see it from another perspective to the audience. I see things which the audience cannot see -sweating - small pieces of the body which maybe do not tell much to the audience but it's like when you see your friends or someone in front of you, you realise small things which tell you something about the person and that's what I like.

**Katy Deepwell:** There is a poignant moment in the film where a bandaged arm drops against a larger mass of body. The images appear like an adult and child.

**Branka Milicic-Davic :** No, there is no child but its interesting you see it. Maybe its unconscious but I never planned it that way. The performance '4', which is what was filmed, played at several international festivals. 4 is a symbol of women's energy and at the same time the four walls of a cage/room. The fifth wall which you cannot see is the ceiling - it is that which you are trying to reach your whole life, reaching higher and higher.



Ulrike Ettinger *Elena Stanciucu: Verusch eine Portrait Germany, 1997 (17 mins).*

**Ulrike Ettinger Elena Stanciucu: Verusch eine Portrait Germany, 1997 (17 mins). Extracts from an interview with Katy Deepwell at Ostranenie after viewing the film**

**Ulrike Ettinger:** This is my first work in video where I tried to make a documentary. My other videos have been completely different in that I knew what I wanted to do before I made them. This video has the subtitle 'An Attempt of a Portrait' and during the making of the work I tried to find out what would be my vision and how I could realise it.

I was impressed by Elena Stanciucu as a subject because of her work as a weaver, and her attempt to use techniques and ideas of folk art which were starting to disappear. It seemed to me she lived a good life with this passion. She made a lot of work and she found a way to combine this with her family and her work in the village where she lived in Romania. The work became part of her life.

Elena Stanciucu died three years before I decided to make the film but I didn't know this when I went to the village to make the film. I decided to try and show the situation as it is and the things which are still there in the way they are. I grew up in a big town in Romania and there are a lot of things about life in the village which are closed to me and I look at them with completely different eyes. What I tried to do was to find a way to get the people watching this film to gain an approach but always with the question: is it possible to know this person and place by film and by images like this with a video camera? So I decided to show the places in the village where she would have been, some of her house, photos which offer information about her and a context for her growing up. The comments on the back of photos are the only language offered in the film. There

are a lot of details about her life and what was important to her.

Part of her family in the village keeps all her things in boxes and they brought them out specially for me and for the camera. There are no museums or collections for this work. People don't trust the collections of the Romanian state and have had bad experiences with them so they want to keep these pieces even though they have no possibility to show them. They know they are valuable. In their everyday life, they have so completely different problems but they keep the work with care.

My other work has been different to this kind of documentary. In my next project, I want to put a monitor in a shop window of a travel agent. I am asking a lot of people through the net to describe in words their place of birth and will add a text naming the town, place, country. It will be just text passing on the monitor, no sound. This could be said to be another approach to autobiography. The place of birth is always something very connected with your sense of self. I am again exploring whether or not it is possible to show meaning fully using a different method of presentation, the texts on a monitor.

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## Cyberknitting event at Ostranenie

### **Katy Deepwell**

The Cyberknitting event, which took place at Ostranenie film festival in Dessau on Saturday 8 November, was initiated by Nina Czegledy. The idea for the event arose from discussions amongst some of the participants at the Crossing Over workshop in Sofia last year.

CYBERKNITTING (for men and women) is an attempt to build upon the convergence and/or discrepancy of:

1. Knitting: as an ancient activity, usually practised by women and lately by men (ref. to primary meaning of : to weave/ purl/ crochet/ hook/ knot/ intertwine/ braid/ sew yarn into fabric, with needles)

2. Cyberknitting: as a recent activity of networking within the Internet, usually practiced by men and lately by women (ref. to the metaphorical meaning of : to draw together and join closely, to spin a story.

Prior to the event, the invited Cyberknitters were encouraged to send in pages for the website:

1. to explore the Cyber knitting metaphor and present their research at the festival. Presentations were asked to be informal in style with the aim of provoking discussion.

2. to propose a favourite knitting pattern for their own page background. Their text will be set against this background on the web-space. The two streams of input from: virtual cyber knitters and on-site participants will be processed on the web-site after Ostranenie .

The first Cyberknitting Show contained the following stitches:

A public discussion, slightly moderated by the cyberknitters in charge, with the crucial contribution of the invited cyberknitters + subtle performance (physical theater, video and web images & texts, sound environment).

On stage at the beginning of the event were a number of participants attempting to define the problems and meanings of cyber-knitting: Nina Czegledy, Iliyana Nedkova, Calin Dan, Katy Deepwell (who chaired the event), Erika Pastor, Tapio Makela, Inke Arns, and Edi Muka

The event began with Tapio Makela's electronic recounting of an imaginary history of cyberknitting where genders and technologies were remixed to analyse precisely the limitations of gender stereotyping and the power of histories in controlling illusionary destinies. Iliyana Nedkova began by offering a brief history of the generation of the term cyberknitting from discussions in Sofia. Cyberknitting could be a different metaphor for the 'information super-highway' ; one which emphasised relationships and connection between people rather than technological development. Erika Pastor raised the importance of narrative as a means of changing understanding and it was the potential in this which interested her. Inke Arns, sceptically suggested that her dislike of knitting as a girl, meant she was reluctant to take up the metaphor. She immediately proposed as an alternative: human-netting. (She had brought with her the only jumper she ever knitted). Katy Deepwell responded with the idea that a reinvestment in seemingly negative terms, including craft and knitting, had offered a radical potential to redefine a field in the past, most notably amongst feminist artists. Edi Muka suggested that the metaphor could address the problems of Eastern European countries by its emphasis on connecting the individual to the state through civil society. Could cyberknitting allow for the net activity to be seen in more complex terminology and with greater social and political awareness than has been the pattern to date? Would it enable, as Nina Czegledy had hoped, that greater attention would now be paid to social and gender relations in the context of a larger political framework? Would the increasing involvement of women in net-activities act as a means to redefine both gender relations and East/West relations in media art?

As those on stage struggled to define the project, the simultaneous performance by GROUP BAZA: Vladimir Barbul, Vera Midic & Branka Milicic-Davic had already started. Inspired by the ideas behind cyberknitting and the atmosphere of the event , the performance actions of Group Baza were intended to question the wide-spread practice of conference-making and test the conventional roles employed in conferences between moderators, key speakers, participants, audience. While one performer knitted the audience together with wool, climbing under the chairs and wrapping their ankles, in the hope of linking them closer together, another member of the group intervened on the stage, mimicking the mechanical repetitive actions needed in mechanical production. As the performance continued, those assembled on the stage were gradually knitted to members of the audience by the red wool and

then several were steadily lifted from the stage, even as they spoke, by members of Group Baza.

As the performers were slowly one-by-one removed from the stage. Katy Deepwell and Erika Pastor were left on the stage to try to continue their enquiry into politics and relations behind the metaphor of cyberknitting. They too then voluntarily left the stage and went into the audience to enquire about their views. Meanwhile, the sound by Denis Neimand was installed as an environment in the background. Group Baza intervened at one moment, even in this sphere, replacing at one point his more calculated mixing of two tapes of Russian singers imitating birds and the powerful roll of a drumbeat generated on top of a waterholder at a former nuclear power station with Serbian folk music!

Irony and contradiction seemed to be the order of the day yet without a collapse



Above: Andrea Otero *Der Glaserne Bauch* (1997)

into anarchy. Instead what was created had all the qualities of simulacra, with those on stage attempting to grasp or develop a notion like cyberknitting, and to bring together different realities, different perspectives in the middle of an excessive overload of actions, events, noise and visual imagery was the point of the hour.

Meanwhile, the audience, made increasingly aware of their passivity as they

Right: Francesca da Rimini & Josephine Starrs *White* (1996)

Far right: Zoran Solomun & Helga Reidemeister *Frauen in Schwarz* (1997)

Below: Susan Hinum *Woman's Gotta Have It* (1996)

Below, right: Monika Wenczel *Turn Around*



were tied to each other, was bombarded with images from the selected video works, screened on two large projections. The video selection by Nina Czegledy for the event included :- the films of Lisette Stalenhoeft *Zonder Titel* (1996), Caterina Borelli *Page 1, Page 2*; Constance Westhofen *My Body is My Castle* (1996) .

### **Interview with Branka Milicic-Davic after the Ostranenie event**

**Branka Milicic-Davic:** My video in *Crossing Over* is connected to the performance of group Baza in Cyberknitting. At the *Crossing Over* workshop we were talking about the bad feeling of sitting at conferences for hours and hearing nothing interesting. We started to joke and laugh about it but it turned into a more serious project. Knitting always fascinated me - it is just one line. Yet there is a lot you can make out of it. With simple knitting you are creating something but if you pull about your pullover you would see it was just one line. My work is very minimalist. I don't use a lot of props or set designs - the same is true in knitting. This was the first idea/impulse. The second that conferences should be ruined in order to bring people together more. If someone is attacking you, you would look around for someone who could help you. That's what I realised people did. We somehow simulated a chaotic situation in which people were communicating in a strange way. At the conference we had participation from the conference speakers and the performers who helped us bring the chairs from the stage. We went under the audience's chairs to make an experience of how it will be in another world - knitted & out of sight. To see what's underneath at a deeper level and secondly to see how people will react.

**Katy Deepwell:** **There were whoops of laughter and others in the audience who were distressed at being locked in by the red wool you used to tie them together.**

**Branka Milicic-Davic :** We connected a lot of people with the wool but no one can tell it was not possible to move with the wool. It's more a mental blockade - you are connected with someone else in the room. In the end, the wool on stage connected with most of the audience. People, performers formed not a proper net but a strange one. That's what cyber-knitting should be.

**Katy Deepwell:** **So, do you think in this chaotic performance we somehow managed to reproduce or demonstrate the limits of the net - which was also the idea of cyberknitting.**

**Branka Milicic-Davic :** I hope people realise this because it's really limited by the simple fact that many people are not using the net - because of money and access,

it's like an expensive hobby for a few. In Yugoslavia, we have just one commercial provider. It is limited in many ways, but it is also a great possibility. Sometimes you do not have enough money or time to travel somewhere but through the internet you can be in many places in a way. You can collect information, a lot of impressions. That's why I like some mailing lists, the East Syndicate for exchange of information, Nettime for contemplation or more serious thinking, Faces as a female list - a lot of different lists. I run a local list, local by language, but it has subscribers from 10 European and non-European countries, people who have left Yugoslavia. Different connections can be made.

**Katy Deepwell : Many people in the audience commented that they were in and out of the conversation because the images of the films projected were so distracting. This it seems also happens with the net, endless graphics and very little information but much visual stimulation. The films however were full of content.**

**Branka Milicic-Davic:** More information chaos, people are bombed by information, usually that selected by authorities and institutions, and then they are trying to select their own way. And in this search they are going everywhere across the net, pornography, real-audio, music, quick-time video. Sometimes I find myself downloading more and more and I ask myself what do I need it for? I don't need it at all. It's just an expensive toy. For people who are serious in their work, they can always make a limit. Everything is useful if you know how to use it. Just a small extent of people in our society are addicts - it's up to you how to use it for yourself.

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## Irina Aktuganova of Gallery 21 & the Cyber-Femin-Club, St Petersburg, interview at Ostranenie

**Katy Deepwell**

*Gallery 21 is a non-profit gallery of experimental arts and media projects, under the umbrella organisation of Tecno-Art-Center. Since 1994, Gallery 21, headed by Irina Aktuganova and Sergei Busov, has organised more than 200 projects, exhibitions, seminars, lectures on contemporary art in St Petersburg including participation in ElectronicPage Programme at the 4th St Petersburg Biennale and the first Russian Art CD-Rom 'Free-for-All'(1997). Events outside St Peterburg include: Stubnitz: Art in Transit (1994); 'New Technology based art in St Petersburg' Vienna,WUK(1995); participation at V2 East network events, Next 5 Minutes (Rotterdam, 1996), Postinformation Utopia (1997); 'St Petersburg media art' ISEA-Deaf, Rotterdam(1996) ; Beauty and the Beast Nettime meeting, Ljubljana (1997); Documenta X, Hybrid Workspace (1997). Irina Aktuganova also runs the Cyber-Femin-Club whose purpose is to provide women's access to information, communication, and media technology, as well as a network for women.*

**Katy Deepwell : Could you tell me something about the situation of women and media art in St Peterburg?**

**Irina Aktuganova:** The situation of women and media art in St Petersburg is an interesting question and one we have discussed a lot. When we opened our gallery in 1994 for multi-media and as a space for contemporary art we quickly began to understand that the avantgarde field in St Petersburg is occupied by women. Nobody thought about it because it seemed like something normal but when we began to think about it we realised that the main media curators and media philosophers in

St Petersburg were women e.g. Alla Mitrofanova. She brought the idea of media art and media communication to St Petersburg in the early nineties. Gallery 21 was founded by myself - not so old, I'm only 31 years old. The best and most important media artist was also a woman Olga Tobreluts not even a woman, a girl, aged 25.

**Katy Deepwell : What made you interested in media art as opposed to other forms of fine art and then led you to set up Gallery 21?**

**Irina Aktuganova:** I worked in different exhibition halls for 15 years and in museums and I made exhibitions of contemporary art. My last interest before media art was in posters, advertisements which I wrote articles about. The next step in my interest was video art, different kinds of electronic art, installation and internet art. I am developing things to my desire. Desire pulls me towards newer and newer fields of culture, not just contemporary art and new fields of social activity. I feel here is the principal point of difference between men and women. I , as a woman, do not conceptualise my social steps and actions. I organise the 'competitio of desires' inside myself. I realise and conquer these desires. If I want to have a gallery, I'll try to set it up. And I don't need to explain why. New fields are always attractive for women. Women are often altruistic about their fields of activity. Women, as we understood it, are interested in content and in new fields. But later the men come and begin to make money and careers there. Men are not so interested in culture but in new technologies, in design.

**Katy Deepwell: Do you think the women who are innovators in this field also found a way to get money for their work?**

**Irina Aktuganova:** Sometimes. Three to four years ago when we began to advertise internet activity in St Petersburg, only the women supposed that it was promising, the men were laughing and they were so ironic about it. And now three years have passed and now everybody, including men are excited about the internet because they feel it is now possible to make business in this field. But as for me or Alla Mitrofanova, I could not say that the internet or media culture has made us rich.

**Katy Deepwell : Are there still strong differences between men's approaches and women's approaches in the field of media arts in St Petersburg?**

**Irina Aktuganova:** I don't think so. This is the problem of situation. I prefer to leave a space for others to have their profit. I don't want to spend my life in the struggle for a 'place under the sun'. As I understand it, women produce desire by other tools, by other organs, than men. Women always very exactly identify the promising field or , for

example, any talented man, the artist or musician, who can perform. The men around could be ironical, sceptical about this guy, but the women, and girls especially, they indicate exactly the talented person and they feel it by their body, by their sexuality, almost as if they want to have a child from this guy - occasionally, just for 5 minutes, but they have the desire and they understand this is a promising person, he's really talented, really has passion and personality. And women by the same organ or tool, they feel a new or promising field in the same way - a kind of eroticism about this field. This feeling means it is a promising field.

**Katy Deepwell: I understand what you are trying to say as an approach to technology and why someone would be motivated to get involved. There is also however the desire within the work. The few films I've seen from Russia by women seem to really be focusing on women's sexuality in a bold, overt way. Is this typical?**

**Irina Aktuganova:** It's not typical. It's the choice of curators who go to Russia and choose films. Natalia Borisova *Infinite Evil* in the programme is very rare in Russia where work does not generally focus on sexuality.

**Katy Deepwell: Can you say what the other topics are in Electronic media or video?**

**Irina Aktuganova:** It is impossible to generalise on topics and kinds of form. Russian art is more an atmosphere. Women create a special kind of atmosphere and men create another kind of atmosphere and it's difficult to describe, even in Russian, because it's something spiritual not sophisticated, but spiritual like air or sunshine.

**Katy Deepwell: Do you think Bojana Pejic in her introduction came close to describing this in her introduction to the 'Women at the End of the Millennium' programme when she talked about close-ups in women's film and the emphasis upon touch, feeling and sound in the work over sight.**

**Irina Aktuganova:** Yes of course, and not only for Russia. Women are more interested in details, in atmosphere in small things, looking carefully and closely. Now we are thinking in St Petersburg that the time of male civilisation has passed. It's funny to say this, as everyone will laugh at us, as it is so ambitious, but it really has passed. Now is not a time of great ideology, it is not an extension of the time of Genghis Khan and Alexander Makedonsky. It's a time of very personal things, of the very consciousness of life and it's very different for men to live in such a way, very carefully, with love in their heart to details. Life in these details is a kind of religious life. It's a kind of monk-like existence.

**Katy Deepwell :** A friend of mine has recently described women in the creative arts as like the new nuns working with this passion in extremely difficult circumstances. Nuns not in the sense of being without sexuality but in the sense that their creativity comes first.

**Irina Aktuganova:** It's not just a question of sexuality, but one of energy. You have a strong energy and you need to use it in different ways - not just to fuck - as this time has also passed. You keep it, accumulate this energy. This energy helps you to feel, to act and to create. This is women's priority.

**Katy Deepwell:** Could you tell me about some of the projects that have come out of the work in St Petersburg? *Virtual Anatomy*, for example.

**Irina Aktuganova:** *Virtual Anatomy* is not really a magazine as it is not a periodical. It's an art philosophical project by Alla Mitrofanova and Olga Suslova. They attracted women and men also to discuss the topic of the body, sexuality in the context of contemporary philosophy and life. They illustrate this project by the projects of different artists and different images which they collect. They discuss different ideas which provoke them in philosophical discourse for example Lacan, Deleuze etc

**Katy Deepwell :** And Gallery 21?

**Irina Aktuganova:** Gallery 21 is my baby. We had no idea when we organised this gallery, we had only desire. When we understood women in St Petersburg occupied the new media field we decided to conceptualise it and so we established the Cyber-Femin-Club. One year after Gallery 21 opened we involved women who wanted to deal with new technologies - artists, journalists, philosophers and other women. We organised workshops and showed videos and demonstrations of the internet. Some of the women learnt HTML and now make their own websites. We invited women artists and theoreticians to St Petersburg. Sanja Ivecovich, a Croatian videomaker, co-editor of a Croatian feminist magazine; Ann Hamilton, USA and Germany; and Francesca de Rimini from Australia to present work in Gallery 21. Women shared their experiences and idea. It was very interesting. Cyber-Femin-club is a project, it is not an organisation. We participated in Kathy Hoffman's Face Settings and mailing list and at the Documenta Cyberfeminist days in the Hybrid Workspace. Some of the other women I have not mentioned who we have invited to run workshops in the New Media Program include: Marietica Potaje (Slovenia); Ewa Wolgemuth (Austria); Katja Liberovskaja (Canada) and Olga Kisseliova (France). Earlier this year we organised a teleconference on Cyberfeminism with New York, NY-SPb. This new media space is an opportunity for women to communicate

independently and exchange their skills, self-articulations and creativity. It is a place to provide access to the internet and technologies, where men cannot interrupt us, where we can be really equal and promote our ideas.

Did you know women in Russia began organising in 1812? We have 200 years of feminism but little research has been written on Russian feminism. There is only one book by an American guy who created a history of Russian Feminism from 1812-1930. We have no history or researchers here in Russia who go deeply into these questions. They generally write about not even middle-class women but aristocrats and intellectuals who think about feminism. No one researches women's ideas, women's consciousness in the proletariat and the peasants. We don't know about our own history in Russia. Pushkin wrote in the early 19th Century in his book of poems how every educated man in Russia always discussed the women's problem. It was thought a good topic of conversation in the salons to discuss the position of women and every educated person he encouraged to think about this. We do have a lot of articles but no in-depth research. It would be interesting to have a history of women's ideas. There is a gender studies group in St Petersburg who make conferences, and have published readers in Russian however, their work tends to be more biographical than analytical.

**Katy Deepwell: What do you hope for the Cyber-Femin-club and Gallery 21 in the future?**

**Irina Aktuganova:** The future is unclear. I hope to continue our activity and to spend a long and happy life.

Galler y21 was situated at Pushkinsja Street 10, 191040, St Petersburg, Russia.

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# The Pursuit of the Personal in British Video Art

**Catherine Elwes**

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When one's gaze is ignored and the other person looks instead at one's eyes as objects, one's sense of being in a world in which one is recognised as a person disappears and one begins to feel that one cannot continue to be a person (John Shotter, 1983)

In 1976 the psychologist E. Carpenter unleashed the forces of mechanical reproduction into the Sepik tribe of Papua, New Guinea by taking photographs of them. At first the people were fearful, convinced that he had stolen their souls, but they later lost their terror and began photographing each other enthusiastically, some even wearing the results on their foreheads. Returning some months later Carpenter found the tribe had changed dramatically: the Sepik had become Europeanised. Tribesmen were migrating to government settlements and discontent circulated among the people who were now 'torn from their tribal existence and transformed into detached individuals, lonely, frustrated, no longer at home anywhere'.<sup>1</sup>

The ability of representation to isolate and objectify individuals is as powerful in the Western world as it was within the 'virgin' culture of the Sepik. Like Carpenter's camera, video technology can cut the subject off from the social interactions that make cultural agency possible. But like the Sepik tribesmen, artists have wanted to appropriate the instruments of their own alienation. In the context of contemporary

video art practice this has meant an attempt to re-establish the autonomy of the individual ; and in the context of women's video, the reinstatement of the personal becomes a feminist strategy as well as an individual act of reclamation.

Although female and male artists alike have endeavoured to address the personal in their video work, both in fact frequently demonstrate the influence of feminist politics. Of course, men and women have different experiences of the world and their motivation will not always be the same. Nor will their art be identical either formally or at the level of content. Some male artists have gone so far as to interpret the personal as a license to make unprovoked attacks on the audience. However, I am concerned here with work which draws on the personal as it was articulated within feminist politics. In order to fully understand how British artists interpreted this initiative through the medium of video, it is first necessary to map out the broad political ideas that led women to proclaim the personal as political.

### **The Feminist Project**

The experience of the Sepik mirrors the sense of rootlessness, of non-existence within the languages of representation that characterizes Western femininity. The difference is that we have lived with it since birth, since our fathers first snapped *their* little girls and we learned that we existed as an image, as property. as a performance to camera whose prime objective was the excitation and satisfaction of men's desire. Within this scenario, the female gaze is denied and one does indeed lose one's most fundamental sense of self.

In the seventies feminist theorists argued that this loss of *personhood* also involves the loss of the right to an autonomous, independent existence with a recognised and valued role in the cultural and economic life of our Western tribe. Although the political struggles of feminism in law, education, ecology and the wider arena of party politics have played a crucial role in retrieving that right, the field of art - the battleground of representation - has played an equally important role by somewhat paradoxically drawing on the personal.

Throughout the history of Western art, the exclusion of the personal and the domestic from the subject matter of 'high' art has reinforced the marginalisation of both women themselves and women's art. Within the wider social formation women have traditionally been relegated to the private worlds of the personal, the domestic and child-rearing, while men and their cultural practices have tended to occupy the public arena. And this process of segregation has been supported by the notion that women, by virtue of their reproductive role, are 'naturally' suited to domestic life. Feminist art historians such as Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker have observed that characteristic 'women's concerns' rarely qualified to be subjects of paintings executed by men in the 'grand' manner. At the same time, only the more 'minor' practices of flower painting, small-scale portraiture, observations of domestic scenes and the like were deemed a suitable province for women artists. Indeed, it was these

forms of marginalisation that helped identify the themes of 'high' art - religion, politics, military occasions, civic events etc. - as *masculine* and therefore the exclusive domain of men.<sup>2</sup>

Given the way in which biological determinism had polluted the personal, it is no great surprise to find artists like Mary Kelly and Lis Rhodes concentrating on the more academic task of analysing and deconstructing the structures of language and representation. However, the personal was in fact central to the strategies of early *radical* feminist art anti, like the more pragmatic political initiatives, drew directly on the process of consciousness-raising. Broadly speaking, this involved small groups of women exchanging personal experiences which they had been led to believe were the result of individual pathology or innate weakness. The remarkable similarity of such testaments indicated that such experiences were the product of a common oppression under patriarchy. As Sally Potter stressed: 'ideology is not merely reflected but produced in the context of the family and in personal relationships ... political structures are not just *out there* but are manifest in the most seemingly insignificant actions, words and conditions.<sup>3</sup> The slogan 'The Personal is Political' became firmly rooted in feminism and feminist art on both sides of the Atlantic. The personal was no longer relegated to the private world of domesticity, but was raised to the level of 'objective significance'. Within the context of art it challenged the hegemony of masculine signification which at the time was locked into an impersonal' formalism as exemplified by the colour fields of Mark Rothko or the hard sculptural edges of Donald Judd. Furthermore, the interests of a white male minority were disguised under claims to universality, visual purity or truth to materials.

While most men were busy attempting to drain images of any meaning beyond the sign, early feminist artists excavated the stories of their own lives in an attempt to develop a new feminist aesthetic of the personal. In some cases this meant creating images that reclaimed the body as both personal territory and expressive medium. Although later works sought alternative representations, early initiatives took a diagnostic or deconstructive approach in which the colonization of women's bodies was exposed. Martha Rosler demonstrated the experience of the body as medical fodder in her video *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977). Every dimension of her body is noted by white-coated medical personnel- including the length of her vagina. Sexuality and the sexual objectification of women's bodies were also deconstructed as in Eleanor Antin's photographic work *Carving, A Traditional Sculpture* (1973). The artist documented the gradual reduction of her body contours through dieting until the 'ideal' shape was achieved. The brutal frontality of the images and the artist's refusal to take up a seductive feminine pose both highlights and denies the male expectations which drive women to undergo dramatic physical alterations to maintain their heterosexual appeal.

Other artists explored the body as the site of reproduction in its physical, cultural and religious aspects. The subject of myth and taboo for centuries, menstruation

and parturition, the womb and its mysteries were now portrayed from the other side - from the perspective of the woman who inhabits the body. Monica Sjöo painted her *God Giving Birth* (1969) as a monumental standing mother releasing a child from her vulva. In her slide tape work *Water into Wine* (1980), Judith Higginbottom linked menstruation to the power of dreams and creativity and the inspirational symbolism of ancient matriarchies.

The personal was also understood as an effect of interpersonal relationships. Artists examined their experiences of fathers, lovers and mothers and often revived women's oral traditions to do so. In Tina Keane's video installation *Playpen* (1979) generations of mothers and daughters passed on their stories, creating an alternative cultural history. Women also observed their own children, the complexities of family life and the processes of early socialization. Kate Meynell's *Hannah's Song* (1986), for example, recorded her daughter's first encounter with her mirror image, while my own allegorical sequences in *Winter* (1984) charted my son's journey into the wintry landscape of a male world. The all too-common experiences of abortion, rape, poverty or death within the family also became the subject of women's art. In 1976, for instance, Linda Montana made a video tape called *Mitchell's Death* in which the artist's face was hung with acupuncture needles, like a contemporary *mater dolorosa*. She chanted the story of her husband's suicide, combining the emotive power of plain chant with a banal, literal description of his death. At the same time, other artists examined the relationship of individual women to the history of art. The muse got up and spoke most famously in Hannah O'Shea's *A Litany for Women Artists* (1977). In performances lasting several hours, O'Shea chanted the names of every known woman artist, most of whom had been excluded from dominant histories of art.

From this brief synopsis of how the personal was addressed in feminist art it is apparent that the urgency of the feminist project and the need for effective communication led to a preference for more immediate forms of expression. Painting tended to be figurative; indeed Monica Sjöo once commented that she was at a loss to describe the pangs of childbirth in terms of the stripes and abstract daubs of her male colleagues.<sup>4</sup> Speech was direct and subjective. Drawing on the personal testaments at the root of consciousness-raising, diaristic narratives appeared in book form, as adjuncts to graphic or photographic images, and most frequently in performances and installations. But it was in the form of audio, film and video recording that the personal found its most natural vehicle.

### **Women and the Video Image**

Video had a particular appeal since it offered an immediate image, either as live feedback relayed to a monitor or as instant replay of a pre-recorded performance to camera. As a result it could act as a mirror in which the artist could enter into a dialogue with the self she encountered everyday, and the potential selves she was seeking to uncover. It was possible to commit personal testaments to tape in any

environment, however intimate, and in complete privacy. Furthermore, video recording equipment has always been relatively simple to operate and it is possible to work alone without the intrusive presence of the crews demanded by 16mm filmmaking. It was also easy and relatively cheap to record long monologues on tape, in contrast to the three-minute limitation of super 8 film. Artists had total control over what they chose to preserve or erase. But video was not only an introspective medium. It had the capacity to open up direct channels of communication between artist and spectator (video performance) and between spectator and spectator (interactive video systems).

However, once the image of woman was on the screen, there was some controversy as to how it was read by an audience. Work predicated on the personal as political assumed a one-to-one, woman-to-woman mode of address in an attempt to build a sense of community and locate individual experience within the complex social, political and economic realities of contemporary society. But the seventies also gave rise to an area of feminist film theory which appeared to challenge the feasibility of this project. In particular, film-maker Laura Mulvey developed an analysis of the viewer's relationship to the image which characterized the female spectator as necessarily occupying the position of a homogenised male voyeur, regardless of actual gender, race or class. Furthermore, drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey suggested that the image of woman, like language itself, was 'fixed', over-determined and incapable of representing anything other than male desire. Narrative was tarred with the same brush and was effectively rejected on account of its mainstream function as a vehicle for the dissemination of dominant ideologies.<sup>5</sup> Although Mulvey's arguments were based on an analysis of classical Hollywood cinema, they nevertheless seemed to cast doubt upon the work of many radical feminists for whom the body and personal narrative were of fundamental importance. Many of them felt that the disappearance of the image of woman from women's art was counterproductive and only added to existing forms of censorship. However subsequent theoretical work has acknowledged that Mulvey's model of spectatorship was a methodological construct and that real audiences are made up of individuals with multiple histories and cultural experiences. No single effect can be attributed to an image, and the viewing context is all-important in the creation of meaning. It therefore becomes possible to reassert the ability of women's art to communicate within a flexible visual culture and address a heterogeneous audience with a significant proportion of spectators reading the work from the position of female subjectivity.

To this end, the direct address facilitated by video was deliberately harnessed to speak to specified female audiences, sometimes through women's groups or as in the Women's Arts Alliance in London, in the context of a women's gallery. Some works were directed at specific groups, such as young women, mature women, lesbians, mothers or daughters, black women, and working-class women. Difference

was embraced as well as commonality, and an attempt was made to establish a non-hierarchical relationship with the viewer. In the same way that a contribution from an individual within a consciousness-raising group constituted an invitation to others to tell their own tale, feminist video contained an implied invitation to the viewer to reciprocate with an examination of her own experience. Indeed the personal as political was founded on reciprocity. It attempted a bi-directional mode of address that came as close to John Shotter's notion of handshake as an artefact can. He tells us that within a live encounter, and the mutual grasping of hands 'we do not simply constitute another person as an object of our own perception, but a social institution is established between us in which we both share, and in which self and other are operative as mutually constitutive polarities and experienced by one another as such.'<sup>6</sup> It is possible to achieve this in the physical space of live performance or in the imaginative space of a video tape but such works should not be confused with the supposed interactivity of much contemporary computer art which simply gives the spectator more of the same choices of entertainment and rarely challenges the cultural hegemony of mainstream media.

There is a deeper significance to the feminist insistence on redefining communication between women - all too often dismissed as gossip - as cultural and political practice. Nancy Chodorow has demonstrated at a psychological level, women's identification with each other negates the Oedipal process by which women are supposed to transfer their desires from their mother to their father, henceforth characterizing their mother, and any other woman, as a rival for his affections. From this moment, a woman's sense of self, of personal worth, is determined by her ability to inspire and hold a man's desire.<sup>7</sup> Many women videomakers have denied this process and returned to images of their mothers as a source of warmth, creative energy and pre-oedipal desire. Jayne Parker's tape *Almost Out* (1984) can be read as a symbolic re-birth through a return to the mother. Through verbal questioning and an unblinking scrutiny of her mother's nakedness, she moves closer to her mother and her own libidinal desire for the feminine. The generosity with which her mother gives of herself to facilitate her daughter's creativity - as she says in the tape, 'to help you with your work' - is a testament to the lived relationship behind the work and a refusal of any competition for the attention of a masculine presence.

*Almost Out* is an important tape for another reason. Martha Rosler once remarked that the formal concerns in women's art are obscured by the fact that we cannot get past the content.<sup>8</sup> Yet Jayne Parker's tape uses a formal device which, although not original in the context of experimental video, when coupled with her chosen subject matter, highlights and subverts conventional readings of the female body. *Almost Out* is very long, almost 90 minutes when viewed in its entirety. At first, the juxtaposition of the aged body of Jayne's mother with her own youthful nakedness strikes us as grotesque and cruel. The cultural value attached to each degrades the mother and confirms the artist in her sexual desirability - her value as a woman at a

premium. If the tape were to end there, it could hardly have been more retrogressive. But it does not. Jayne does not cut off her mother's words, she allows her to speak, at length. Duration becomes the key to a fundamental shift in our reading of woman's body. As her words accumulate, we forget her wasted body, and her qualities as a human being override any degraded sexual reading. She is warm, intelligent, generous and dignified. Meanwhile, her daughter loses her initial sexual appeal as her own words reveal her to be petulant, manipulative and hostile. There is very little to arouse our lust by the end of the tape although our desire for the image of the mother stirs up ancient and deeply sensual longings that only a woman's body can evoke. This tape should always be seen in its entirety.

Superficially *Almost Out* might appear to resemble BBC's recent use of television with a video diary format, yet it is necessary to make a distinction between this new programming trend and the work of artists in the realm of the personal. The BBC's television diary packages the person into digestible chunks staged for the camera and the putative 30 second attention span of the *average* viewer. Video diarists are sent on brief training courses which they are taught to shoot picturesque cutaways that will later be used disrupt the flow of their speech and atomise their individuality. The pressure produce television entertainment is so great that diarists are often unrecognisable to those who know them personally. As Chris Turnbull recently said to me of his friend, tele-diarist Benedict Allen: 'He's such a quiet chap, he would never have said all those things in normal conversation'. The pressure of entertainment thus destroys video's potential as a 'safe' space in which to say and do things that would normally be inhibited by an audience.

A further distinction between the personal as political and television representation can be identified in Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance* (1988) which focuses on her relationship to her mother. Photographs of the middle-aged Mrs Hatoum in the shower are overlaid with Lebanese writing, letters written to Mona throughout turbulent period in her country's history. The artist reads the letters in English as a voice-over, never once interrupting to comment or interpret the text for us. We hear of Mona's father whose wishes her mother defied in sending her daughter intimate images of the body he presumably considers to be his property. The familial conflict is located in the wider political realities of a war which is raging all around her as she writes. All this is described through the mother's subjective account and we never lose the sense of relationship, of connectedness between mother and daughter. Within a documentary format Mona's mother would never have been allowed to speak uninterrupted for so long. Instead we would have had fragmented interviews with mother, father, daughter and other satellite characters. The power of the testaments would have been lost in the resulting mosaic of speech and we would have had trouble remembering who was who. More likely we would have absorbed the undeclared prejudices of the programme-maker(s), whose relationship to the subject would remain obscure. But by knowing who Mona is in

relation to her subject we are left to reflect on our own maternal relationships and the oppressive social definitions of femininity that so often cause a rift where sustenance and creative energy once flowed.

This insistence on relationship, on the artist's lived experience as daughter of / or mother to a specified individual, offered a solution to a problem which dogged both artist and theoretician in the early days of feminist art. Film theory had not only presented the viewer's position as fundamentally male, but the eye of the camera the objectifying gaze of the lens was also deemed to be masculine. According to this analysis, the camera assumed the subjectivity of the white, middle-class heterosexual man while women and other *minority* groups who appeared acted an *other* to the central male subject. Many women film-makers attempted to *castrate* the implied male gaze by looking back into the camera and so denying the viewer the cloak of invisibility behind which he could voyeuristically consume the image without himself being observed. An example of this technique appears in Louise Forshaw's video tape *Hammer and Knife* (1987). The artist stands in a field and addresses the male viewer: 'Because of you I've learnt a martial art. You sit opposite me on trains and try to make polite conversation and when I answer, you think I want to fuck.' Louise's diatribe and her unflinching gaze shift the focus of the work from female victim to male aggressor and her refusal to pose, pout or in any way fulfil male expectations inhibits the usual process of objectification which, as John Shotter asserts above, prevents the woman in view from continuing to be a person.

Other artists, notably film-makers, solved the problem of objectification by simply moving out of the camera's field of vision. Susan Hiller, Mary Kelly, Lis Rhodes and Tamara Krikorian are examples of artists who found alternative means of establishing their presence and their authorship. They used metaphor, reflection and deflection, psychoanalytic and linguistic theory and, in the case of Susan Hiller, the abstraction of the body into landscape. But many video-makers continued to pursue the notion of the personal as a strategy for combatting the processes of objectification embedded in the structures of representation.

The return to the maternal relationship was widespread. Sometimes a fusion of identities would occur as in Breda Beban and Hvorje Horvatic's *All Her Secrets Contained in an Image* (1987). This moving depiction of loss and retrieval, situates the artist in the role of daughter *dolorosa*. She stands before the camera, her face streaked with tears as her mother approaches wrapped in a heavy coat against the ravages of a winter landscape. We soon realise that Breda's mother is not there. She is a back-projection against which the artist weeps. Not only is the mother absent as flesh, but she is herself a filmic image of the daughter dressed in her mother's clothes. The maternal image is thus internalized and the continuity of the maternal inheritance is reinforced displacing the male referent, the *third term* in the family configuration. In this work the viewer is positioned not so much as voyeur but as a witness to an event, to a lived relationship. This becomes information with which s/he

may re-interpret her/his own identity within the social relations of the family.

The video artist as an internalization or a reincarnation of the mother offers one interpretation of the personal. The artist as mother takes the matrilineal line forward into the next generation as she explores her relationship with a child of her own body. Here we see a now familiar attempt to block conventional voyeuristic responses but this time by substituting adult heterosexual formations with the oceanic delights of the polymorphous and perverse eroticism of infancy. Kate Meynell's work with her daughter Hannah Morgan speaks of the overwhelming emotional and sensual experience that is motherhood. French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray characterizes touch as a major element in the erotic life of a woman, and in *Hannah's Song* (1986) the ecstatic sensuality of the infant girl teases out her mother's pleasure as she responds to the maternal hands. In grainy black and white, the child eagerly reaches for her mother's touch and together they perform a dance of daily ablutions returning us to pre-linguistic bonding broken only by the introduction of colour and by the child now rising to meet her own image in a mirror. But the disruption of the mirror phase does not destroy the physical links between mother and daughter and the baby continues to satisfy her mother's appetite for touching, for non-penetrative physical contact. Hannah is both the object of her mother's gaze and a mirror to Kate's own sensuality. Here again the identification from mother to daughter is uninterrupted by phallic symbolization and reiterates the primary matrixial relationship. In the same way that women's pleasure might constitute the other as herself, as the sexual organ that Luce Irigaray describes as retouching itself, indefinitely,<sup>9</sup> Kate and Hannah symbolically fuse in a union that knows no boundaries. They are other to each other and as one. Without the centralizing, defining power of the phallus, they are free to reinvent themselves and embark on vertiginous journeys whilst remaining 'the source, the locus for the other'.<sup>10</sup>

The denial of conventional eroticism and a return to the perversity of infantile sensuality takes on another dimension if the child in question is male. Between 1983 and 1990 I made a number of works with my son Bruno Muellbauer. Every male child was once not culturally male but an extension of the maternal body and unable to differentiate between his own desires and the source of their gratification. Within this configuration the adult power relations between male and female are reversed and that experience underpins adult fascination with murderers, witches, seductresses and all other women of power including politicians. My work during this period recreates the oceanic, symbiotic union of the male child with the maternal object, not as symbolic ogress, but as a living and relatively normal individual. In *Myth* (1984) the mother's breast returns to its original function as a source of food, thus subverting its narrow adult reading as object of heterosexual desire. A single breast fills the screen and is repeatedly pummelled by the infant's hand. These brutal caresses soon produce the desired effect and milk oozes from the swollen nipple. The viewer, deprived of any conventionally sexual reading, is left to confront or

repress pre-lingual memories of the physical and psychological pleasures of lactation. These arise with the concomitant anxieties attached to the presence and absence, to the potential loss of what was to the infant self a monumental, but at times unstable source of comfort and sustenance.

The social implications of lactation were more directly tackled by Shirley Cameron who, in a series of performances in the mid seventies, breastfed her twin daughters whilst sitting in a cage located in public places. She was drawing attention to the fact that nowhere in popular culture was the breast bared for anything other than the gratification of male desire although its actual uses may have been highly diverse. Shirley Cameron was also commenting on the fact that breast feeding is actively discouraged in public places. From where I am writing in Oxford, the Museum of Modern Art's cafe is the only place I know of where a mother can feed her child in peace. Shirley's performances were in direct defiance of the social taboo that denies a deeply subversive function of the breast, a most personal of acts which can only be made public when performed by animals in a zoo.

If *Myth* and Kate Meynell's *Hannah's Song* were concerned with tactility, with the smells and sensations of those early maternal encounters, the maternal voice and the pre-lingual utterances of the Child also feature in many women's work. Jean Fisher has argued that women's voices resonate with pre-oedipal desire for the maternal.<sup>11</sup> Artists like Tina Keane, Alanna O'Kelly and recently, Lucy Benning have used women's voices not only to recover the creative energy of that archaic bond but also to create a metaphor for 'women's entrapment in, and struggles against, dominant narrative closure'.<sup>12</sup> In *Horses* (1994) Lucy Benning records women who can imitate horses. The result is both comical and profoundly disturbing as we struggle to bring together the spectacle of a gendered female with the bodily eruptions and grunts that return us to her physical presence. In this context sound is not, as Jean Fisher puts it, 'the carrier of a message'. Instead it allows 'the power of the voice and body to act beyond its subjugation to articulated speech'.<sup>13</sup> Benning's final subject is so overwhelmed by the power of her own ululations that she ends each display with an apologetic giggle.

The emphasis on the maternal body, on pre-lingual utterances and primal configurations of desire and identification might appear to constitute a return to a biological determinism which, in the past, has justified the cultural and economic oppression of women. However, these are not formless primal outpourings that deny the existence of the female intellect. The best works are also demonstrations of consummate technical and formal skill. Sally Potter has observed that traditionally 'femininity' demands the appearance of lack of skill and emphasises nurturance.<sup>14</sup> Since the works I have discussed do nothing to conceal their artistry and yet are clearly by and about women, they cannot be explained away as the amateur ravings of feminine hysteria, speaking from the turbulence of the womb rather than from the clarity of rational thought. Female skill both behind and in front of the camera

helps to prevent the marginalisation of women's art into a feminist ghetto, and an engagement with the thorny structures of representation establishes women's formal initiatives at the centre of culture rather than on the periphery.

Technical skill is also one way of undermining content which might reinforce stereotypical views of women. As Sally Potter has observed of traditional forms of performance:

The ballerina's physical strength and energy which is communicated despite the scenario; ... the singer who communicates through the very timbre of her voice a life of struggle that transforms the banality of her lyrics into an expression of contradiction. All these can work against the pessimism of female *absence* and also suggest a new way of looking at skill and its subversive potential.<sup>15</sup>

If we extend this argument to include performance to and with cameras, then women's work in video while similarly emphasising supposedly uncharacteristic demonstrations of formal skills extends their subversive potential by allying them to personal content which has hitherto been denied a place in the dominant culture. In this way the monopoly of male subjectivity in art is challenged, while at a political level the skillful evocation of the personal goes a long way to establishing the validity of women's experience and their right to the status of personhood.

### **Unmasking the Masculine: The Personal in Men's Video**

Subjectivity in men's art has, by and large, meant the elaboration of acceptable masculine themes and concerns whilst excluding their emotional and sexual lives. There have, of course, been artists who wanted to excavate primary psychic drives and desires by staging abject displays of bodily functions and extremes of human behaviour.<sup>16</sup> However, I am concerned here with those who have explored the personal through the medium of video in an attempt to reinstate the autonomy of individual males, alienated by a patriarchal consumer culture. Many of these have drawn on the feminist initiative of challenging traditional gender formations through the examination of the specific experience and personal history of the individual.

Men, however, do not begin from the same position as women either politically or in terms of representation. Skill, for instance, is the traditional method whereby men establish their mastery, so that extensive demonstrations of virtuosity do little to dent the constructs of conventional masculinity. In terms of representation, male artists start from the centre, not the periphery. Historically, images of men have not robbed them of their social status, their *tribal* position. For instance, in Gainsborough's portrait of *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, we know that both the landscape and the woman at his side are part of his property. Nowadays, mass media's representations of powerful men portray them in settings appropriate to their status: the cabinet minister behind his desk, the scientist in his laboratory, the academic giving his *expert* opinion against shelves full of his publications. When a *personal* moment is represented, the contemporary Mr. Andrews is likewise set in the context

of the supportive wife, family and home which his success has brought him. In contrast, representations of professional women are often mitigated by irrelevant investigations into their wardrobes and domestic arrangements.

It is extremely difficult to produce an image of a man which robs him of his social status, of his unimpeachable right to personhood. As Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock have argued: 'A man can be placed in a feminine position, but will not become feminine. Because of the social power of men in our society, no man can ever be reduced to a crumpled heap of male flesh in the dark corner of some woman's studio.'<sup>17</sup> Men have to work hard to produce images that disrupt the social structures that both benefit and constrain them. Not surprisingly, few have considered it to be in their best interest to do so. But it is in the field of video art that some male artists have challenged cultural representations of masculinity and it is in the exploration of the personal that the most radical interventions have been made.

In *State of Division* (1979) Mick Hartney was prepared to drop the mask of masculinity and explore an *unmanly* vulnerability, an identity in crisis. As in many a feminist testimony, Mick uses the TV as a confessional box directly addressing the audience. His head is trapped in the box, the classic head and shoulders swaying in and out of frame failing to deliver the newsreader's controlled assessment of world affairs. Instead the artist reveals his agony: 'The audience is waiting for me to do something to say something so that they can analyse it, Criticize it, take it apart.' It is significant that this tape was made when the artist was relatively young, his career still in the making. Threatened by the constant intrusion of undesirable emotions and uncertainties, the tape can be seen either as an appeal for sympathy or as an attempt to toughen up, to exorcise the disruptive emotional material in the process of becoming a man. This tape was a one-off, Mick Hartney never made another like it. The same is true of Mike Stubbs and Nik Houghton who both made free-flowing, subjective works in their early careers but dismissed them even as they were being made. 'I pick my nose,' says Nik Houghton in *Jump the Gun* (1985), 'and I lie a great deal.' The threat to the emerging male of his 'feminine' side must be quickly repressed although this process is never entirely successful. Indeed, Jeremy Welsh has identified a tradition of lying in men's videos which can be found in Ian Breakwell's fictitious video diaries or in Dave Critchley's delightful fantasy of the Americas he never visited, the pieces he never did.<sup>18</sup>

Jeremy Welsh himself has had fewer difficulties confronting the truths of his own life. In his installation *Immemorial* (1989) he places himself in his patrilineal relationship looking backwards to his father and forwards to his newly-born son. In contrast to Kate Meynell's sensuous connectedness in *Hannah's Song*, Welsh's attempts to make contact with the image of his father points to the difficulties and conflicts in the traditional father-son relationship. His father is shown in uniform, framed and distanced in time while he himself is reduced to scrutinizing shadows in an attempt to recall a warmth and a humanity that was perhaps never there. It is

only in the images of his own son that the mould is broken. The child is shown exuding infantile sensuality and the father's gaze betrays a deep, unconditional love that he makes no attempt to hide. It suggests that when the child later shifts his identification from mother to father, he will be able to maintain the intimacy and continuity of bonding that so many men lose as they symbolically reject their mothers and enter manhood.

If the male psyche is formed out of separation from the mother and family bonds, then a male artist who defines himself in terms of personal relationships is breaking the patriarchal mould and refusing to pay the price of masculine privilege. In *On Being* (1985) Chris Meigh-Andrews weaves a gentle tapestry of memories and connections with places, objects and the image of a woman with whom he has bonded. His sense of identity is fluid, shifting, displaying the kind of negative capability more usually associated with the flexible ego boundaries of women. In a later work *Domestic Landscapes* (1992-94) the artist presents fragments of landscapes, domestic settings and those semi-natural spaces which link the locations that he has at different times called *home*. People appear and disappear, relationships are hinted at but never defined. The work speaks of an elusive masculinity which is forever shifting, evolving an image of itself in the places and through the people who become significant for a time. Since this work also exists as an interactive CD-ROM, the sense of mobility, of multiple permutations and connections is pervasive. At no point can one create monuments, nor devise grand narratives, theories or ideologies there are no closures. The identity which is proposed looks no further than its own humanity to establish a working definition of what it might mean to be a man.

Perhaps the most radical betrayal of conventional masculinity comes from the work of gay video-makers who have similarly adopted an investigation of the personal as a political methodology. Stuart Marshall devoted his lifetime's work to formulating a definition of masculinity that denies heterosexual configurations and insists on the personal and political rights enjoyed by the *straight* community. Although much of his work investigated the structures of language and representation, *Robert Marshall 1912-1961* (1991) was the record of a personal journey in search of the father he barely knew. As Stuart's own death approaches and we witness the various remedies that fail to cure him, he retraces his father's footsteps and takes us to the place where he died. The use of subjective, hand-held camera draws us into Stuart's investigations of his elusive relationship with his father. As in much feminist work the principal identification is between parent and child of the same sex and the classical shift to the 'correct' identification is denied. Robert Marshall can also be located within the wider political framework of AIDS and the struggle against institutionalised homophobia. But it is the work's *unmanly* preoccupation with loss of the father, and loss of life itself which makes it a disturbing indictment of traditional masculinity. We become aware of how denial, separation, and the suppression of emotional truth underlies the pain of that familiar reproach that 'big boys don't cry'.

Other video makers have explored the complexities of their sexual identities through an investigation of formative relationships. David Larcher, for example, made a lingering video portrait of his grandmother, while Michael Maziere has explored the image of his mother as a young woman in photographs and on video tape.<sup>19</sup> One of the most poignant evocations of personal relationships is Neil Bartlett's *That's How Strong My Love Is* (1989). Using a direct narrative address to the viewer, the artist speaks of his relationships with his father, lover and friends, all of whom appear in the work. Like Jayne Parker's mother, they give their image as a gift of affection to the artist. Sitting quietly at his son's side, Bartlett's father listens to a simple declaration of love and responds at the end by silently taking the artist's hand. In speaking his love, Bartlett insists on a relationship to the father that mirrors the deep physical and emotional bond more usually associated with maternal identification. His adult masculinity thus incorporates the emotional richness that he should more properly have abandoned to achieve the separateness and autonomy of heterosexual masculinity. The artist remains connected but not in the configuration sanctioned by patriarchal law. He interrupts the Freudian process whereby his emotional needs would be stifled in a male world but satisfied in the privacy of an exclusive heterosexual union. Instead he goes beyond the camaraderie of conventional male bonding and reinvests his relationships with deviant love and desire and nominates his father as the source and inspiration of the complex interconnected adult he has become.

A more confrontational approach to masculine sexualities is adopted by Michael Curran who performs a 'dangerous' sexual act in his recent tape *Amami se Vuoi* (1994). A young man is stretched out across the screen, naked. Another approaches, bends over the first and begins to spit into his lover's open mouth. The naked boy strains to receive these liquid gifts in an agony of desire. His willingness to submit to what might be interpreted as a form of abuse reflects on the narrow definitions of eroticism the heterosexual norm dictates, while the brutal frontality of the performance contrasts starkly with the rose-tinted, soft-focus depictions of romantic love in the mainstream media.<sup>20</sup>

Male artists concerned with homosexuality represent the 'purest' adaptation of the feminist assertion that the personal is political. It is indeed the choice of sexual partner - the most private aspect of their lives - that is responsible for the prejudice and discrimination from which they suffer. The public declaration of their sexuality, their *coming out* is a political act of defiance. But homosexuality can easily be marginalised, incorporated into the rich tapestry of variations that so ably confirm the centrality of the heterosexual norm. It is much harder to diffuse the disruptive power of a heterosexual male who will not conform to emotional type. If those in power embrace the personal as a valid and valued aspect of their lives, then those who are traditionally defined by the personal might themselves become empowered. But male video artists working with the personal are still in the minority. They tend to act as

individuals, lacking any sustained political organisation and the context of a widespread consensus of purpose which exists in both feminism and gay politics. Artists like the American video-maker Bill Viola may appear to be dealing with personal issues - the birth of his child, the death of his mother- but he does so within the framework of an art market which elevates him to the status of individual male genius of the video screen. He is seen to be operating alone, dealing in generalities, and the one-to-one of feminist art politics is replaced by a poetic introspection apparently divorced from the culture and the masculinity that generated it. However, it is possible to identify a greater willingness among younger video artists like Michael Curran to explore their subjectivities and redefine the parameters of a masculinity which offers them power at the cost of their emotional and psychic well-being. But it will require a greater awareness of how and at whose expense that power is granted for any significant social and cultural changes to arise from the politicisation of the personal in men's video art.

### **In Conclusion**

Whilst our main source of cultural imagery continues to be provided by mass media and the commercial interests that fund it, representation will remain one of the key issues of cultural politics - what is present or absent from the visual culture will determine our understanding of ourselves and condition our expectations and aspirations. It is at the level of representation then that models of femininity and masculinity find their power. The insistence on the personal, on difference and diversity in art, produces representations which help to counter-balance the media mythologies we continue to accept as reality.

By virtue of its immediacy, ease of use and its ability to be reproduced and transmitted, video remains a potent medium for unleashing the power of the personal in art. Video allows artists to reconstitute the individual using speech, gesture, fantasy and all the time that it takes for the whole person to emerge. The unity of the individual resists the dominant media's tendency to atomise and compartmentalise the audience into consumer groups consisting in fact of isolated individuals plugged into their television sets or computer terminals in search of a fictional sense of community and connectedness. Video can be used to represent the individual as part of a network of actual interpersonal relationships from which his/her identity is built. These individuals make up a group, a class or gender within a recognisable social and political reality. The central position of the individual in a work based on the personal as political speaks directly to other autonomous beings and offers them a value in relation to the work which invites reply. The aggregation of these works paints a broad picture from which political initiatives might concretise. These then produce a new generation of images and personal testaments against which political theories can be tested and the whole process starts again.

This essay was first published in Julia Knight (ed) *Diverse Practices : A Critical Reader on British Video Art* (University of Luton Press/Arts Council of England,1996). See also Catherine Elwes *Video Loupe* (KT press, 2000)

## Notes

1. This story is told in John Shotter's chapter 'On Viewing Videotape Records of Oneself and Others: A Hermeneutical Analysis' in P.W. Dowrick (ed.) *Using Video* (Chichester: John Wiley Ltd. 1983)
2. Such distinctions can still be heard today. In November 1994, I heard the 'revolutionary' films of Kurt Kren contrasted with Margaret Tait's films made in her native Orkneys. These were characterized as verging on the home-movie with their 'informal gathering of images' while Kren's misogynistic footage was said to represent a radical break from the conventions of narrative and linearity.
3. Sally Potter, 'On Shows' in *About Time, Video, Performance and Installation by 21 Women Artists* catalogue (London: ICA publications, 1980) unpaginated.
4. Monica Sjoo was speaking at a slide talk she gave about her work in 1978.
5. Laura Mulvey propounded this theory in her influential article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 6 (3),1975, pp. 618, reprinted in L. Mulvey *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1989)
6. John Shotter, op. cit.
7. See Nancy J. Chodorow *The Reproduction of Mothering* (Berkeley and London, University of California Press, 1978)
8. Martha Rosler was speaking at a debate at London's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), 'The Personal as Political Strategy in Women's Art' which coincided with the trilogy of exhibitions *Women's Images of Men, About Time, and Issue: Social Strategies by Women Artists* staged consecutively in 1980.
9. See Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which is Not One' in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (eds.) *New French Feminisms*(Brighton, The Harvester Press, 1981) pp. 99-106.
10. Ibid.
11. Jean Fisher 'Reflections on Echo - sound by women artists in Britain' in Chrissie Iles (ed.) *Signs of the Times* catalogue (Oxford, Museum of Modern Art, 1990) pp. 60-67.
12. Ibid, p.63.
13. Ibid, p.64.
14. Sally Potter op.cit.unpaginated.
15. Ibid.
16. Here I would include the work of the Viennese Aktionists, a group of performance artists operating in the 1960s who specialised in ritualistic events that included self-mutilation and the disemboweling of animals whose guts were then used to degrade naked individuals, often women. This was designed to produce a cathartic experience for the audience which would cleanse them of their bourgeois conditioning.
17. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul, 1981)

18. Jeremy Welsh made these observations in a conversation with the author in 1989. David Critchley's *Pieces* is a work called *Pieces I Never Did* (1979).

19. David Larcher's video portrait is called *Granny's Is* (1989). Michael Maziere's photographic work is called *Mother Desire*, while the video work is still in progress.

20. Curran's work has been identified as part of a new wave of performance-oriented video which take its influence from artists such as Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman and William Wegman, all active in the early 1970s. However, I would suggest that in spite of certain formal similarities, Acconci's aggressive confrontations with the audience have little in common with the personal, anguished eroticism of Curran's work.

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## 'Re-Orienting our Views'A rediscovery of Iran through its cinema and women filmmakers

**Rose Issa**

The First International Seminar on the Presence of Women in Contemporary Cinema, organised by the Women's Solidarity Association of Iran (WSAI), earlier this year, was a dream of an opportunity for me to discover and meet Iranian women artists, in a period when Iran is undergoing many imperceptible changes. I was invited to give a paper on Arab Women filmmakers, which was meant to introduce other cultural approaches, and their diversities, to a country with similar religious background.

I was far from knowing what to expect in Iran : strict rules, conventional and official talks, or a genuine exchange of ideas and experiences.

The latest recommendations for *Islamic dress* were less strict than expected: 'modest dress is required for women, this does not mean that one has to wear a chador. Loose trousers, long skirts, dresses with sleeves or manteaux plus a head scarf will be sufficient.' Such a dress code made many interpretations possible and can hopefully open new doors to young Iranian designers who can surely do better than the black chador, which immobilises one hand constantly, but also reduces half of the population to parts of one shapeless mass. In Tehran itself, one notices that the majority of the women in the streets were wearing black or grey covers - whether scarves, chadors or manteaux - these colours are not specifically recommended in any religious Islamic scriptures, so one wonders whether the choice of black is related to the Abbasid or Fatemid flag, or whether it represents simply a tendency towards general standardization of appearances to the detriment of local or traditional costumes? Whatever the reason, I was to discover that the limits of this covering was unable to conceal the real identity and role of some of the most interesting women that I was to meet during the seminar.

Women's contribution to the different spheres of art, literature, religion, politics and economics is hardly known outside Iran; their status in present Iran - mostly seen with critical eyes for those living within the national borders - is often discussed with a strong emphasis on its shortcomings. Yet, once there, most of the cliches are shattered: for women participate massively in the various fields of social, cultural and economic activities of Iran. And one of these culturally productive areas is the film industry.

The four day seminar, which took place at the end of February 1997, right after the annual Fajr Film Festival, was to be a true eye opener. This impression was shared by most, if not all, of the guests. For Iran's policy, both feared and criticised by the Arab and the European press, has been covered mainly for its extreme positions and shortcomings. This image was to change drastically during our stay.

The first surprise came with meeting the organiser of the seminar, Mrs Fatemeh Hashemi, a bright, young, energetic and tolerant character, whose longstanding efforts as the Secretary General of WSAI made the event possible. Mrs Hashemi happens to be also one of outgoing president Rafsanjani's daughters! Her sister, Faeze Rafsanjani, who is a member of the parliament, has built up a solid political reputation too, by supporting the 'liberal' candidate, Ayatollah Khatemi, the present elected leader.

Mrs Hashemi, a well travelled scholar and mother of three, was assisted by Parvin Dadandish, Mahtab Mansour, a team of young hard working women and Dr. Ahmadi, Director of Cinema Research Centre and former rector of National University of Iran. UNESCO was the other co-partner in the seminar.

The Women's Solidarity Association of Iran, which was founded in 1992 to recognise and develop women's roles and create links and solidarities between Iranian and foreign women, is one of the burgeoning associations which aims to improve women's contribution and recognition. Their activities are related to state and international organizations inside and outside Iran.

The topics of the lectures and panel discussions were related to: Women's presence in cinema as filmmakers; Women's image in world's contemporary cinema; Women and superstition in cinema; Women and morals in cinema; Promotion of violence against women in cinema; physical exploitation of women in cinema; women and national identity in cinema.

The Iranian participants, producers, scriptwriters, filmmakers, actresses, and journalists came in massive numbers, despite the fact that the festival took place in the old Hyatt, rebaptised the Freedom Hotel, north of Tehran, overlooking the old prison, and had been publicised discreetly. The participants included directors such as: Mahasti Badiie a scriptwriter-director & producer; Fariel Behzad the director of *Kakouli* - about a young coppersmith who experiences the hardships of life yet remains kind - *Valley of Butterflies*, and *Invisible Man* (both children's fables); Tahmineh Milani who directed many films for children such as *Children of Divorce*

(1990); *The Legend of Ah* (1991) ; *What Else is new* (1992); *Kakadu*(1994). The fate of children from underprivileged backgrounds, whether the result of divorce or poverty, is the main theme of Milani's films, who first graduated as an architect. Other women present included Mahvash Jazaeri, scriptwriter and director ; Yasmin Malek Nasr actress, director and producer who was showing her first feature *Common Plight*, which tells the story of two couples personal anxieties. Some of the most talented actresses, such as Fatemeh Motamed Aria, Niki Karimi, and Homa Rosta also came to the seminar, almost on daily basis, to participate to the debates.

However, the noted absentee was Rakhshan Bani Etemad, the leading film director, whose films (*Off the Limits; Canary Yellow; Foreign Currency; Nargess* and *The Blue Veiled*) have been shown on many occasions at the International festivals in Europe and elsewhere. Her films tackle important issues such as poverty, petty crime, divorce, polygamy, repressed feelings or ambitions and the way in which individuals try to overcome their daily hardships. We were told that she was busy preparing her next film.

All the same, it was a true discovery for all of us to hear the active voices of these women despite their work under difficult conditions and limitations. For it is thanks to them that stereotyped dialogues or the production of images of women as commodities, phantoms haunting the present, or as helpless young girls has evolved and changed.

A mixture of constraints and hazards in the last decade have paradoxically transformed Iranian cinema into a very productive and inventive cinema, now recognised worldwide. The fact that Iranian films have been awarded and appreciated by so many international festivals, with the recent top Golden Palm award in Cannes to *The Taste of Cherry* by Abbas Kiarostami, provokes contradictory reactions in Iran itself. The film is about a man planning his suicide and how the situation changes when an old man offers him a taste of a cherry.

The *hard* fundamentalists and some extremists swallow with difficulty what they consider as a *compromise with the West* i.e. satisfying Western taste and criterium. Yet it is these same filmmakers who have helped to change radically an unfavourable image of Iran. The censors are increasingly going to have a difficult task silencing them!

This crisis and the dilemma has resulted in many changes in the leadership in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Orientation (Ershad), torn between a more liberal attitude and political intransigence. The laws of censorship are themselves variable and imprecise. In summer 1996, the Ministry of Culture published, in a little booklet, the Rules for Iranian cinema, with a detailed code of censorship, of what is legal or not. At random, are forbidden:

- \* tight feminine clothes
- \* the showing of any part of a women's body except the face and hands
- \* physical contact, tender words or jokes, between men or women
- \* jokes either on the army, police or family

- \* negative characters with a beard (which could assimilate them with religious figures)
- \* foreign or coarse words
- \* foreign music, or any type of music which brings joy!
- \* showing favourably a character who prefers solitude to collective life
- \* policemen and soldiers badly dressed or having an argument

Films should also always include preferably a prayer scene (added at the last minute in Darius Mehrjoui's film *Leila*) and should exalt religion, heroism during war and denounce Western cultural invasion.

In fact if you respect to the letter the rules, you can hardly make a film. This can only add to our admiration for the poetic and imaginative films that some filmmakers in Iran are producing today, despite the restrictions, and the temptations of going abroad!

While visiting the jewel-like Museum of Islamic Ceramics just next to FARABI, the main Iranian Production/ Distribution house, and the newly built Museum of Photography created by the Jalali brothers, with the famously talented actress Motamed Aria, the star of the *Blue Veiled, Actor, Reyhaneh, The Journey, Once Upon a Time* and *Cinema*, I was very impressed by the way, whether in the streets or the museums, she was received by a warm welcome from the general public and students who were delighted to discover that she had not *emigrated*. This kind of rumour hovers around many free spirits who may at some stage encounter professional difficulties. The way they approached her, with admiration and expressing their pleasure and gratitude in seeing her attachment to her home country, created some very moving moments during our visit.

Another impressive encounter was that of Zeinat Darpayi, a poet and a colourful head nurse, an outstanding character whose life inspired Ibrahim Mokhtari's beautiful film, *Zeinat*. In *Zeinat*, a young nurse manages to convince her family and her newly wed husband of the necessity of keeping her job after her marriage and breaking social taboos that hinder progress in remote areas. I discovered how this woman, who comes from a remote village in South of Iran, assumes and imposes her personality while wearing her traditional colourful dress, and bursting with happiness! She not only continues to live with her husband, who was portrayed as on the edge of divorcing her in the film, but has three children, while working as a midwife and managing five nurseries for local women in five small villages in the south. Listening to her was a constant source of delight: she read her poems while travelling or eating. She has also written real life stories, inspired by her daily encounters, as scripts for films. All that was lacking was a publisher or a producer!

This is why I was delighted to meet the publisher and critic Shahla Lahiji, who presented a well prepared text on the portrayal of women in Iranian Cinema and its evolution from doll-like immoral creatures to passive roles where women are banished to the attic and kitchen as virtuous and shapeless mothers and wives.

Outside the seminar, from the sheer number of women students, teachers and professionals, seen in different parts of Tehran, it also became evident that women also seem to play an active role in study and research, a tendency observed in most developing countries, like Iran's neighbours Pakistan or India, with the possible result of creating a gap, in communication, between men and women.

Among the many foreign guests and speakers who were invited in this seminar one could meet filmmakers and film critics from Europe (Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, Amsterdam and the UK), Canada, Bosnia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Sudan, and for the first time in recent history guest speakers from the Arab world.

Though Arabic has become the second language taught in Iran in schools, this was the first time that Arab artists were invited to participate in a Seminar in Iran! Salma Baccar from Tunisia, whose most recent film *Dance of Fire* relates the life of a Jewish/Tunisian singer and dancer of the 1920s, killed by a jealous lover, was delighted to discover Iran and its film-makers. Attiyat el Abnoudi, a documentary filmmaker from Egypt, whose recent documentary *Days of Democracy* about women candidates in the 1995 elections in Egypt is refreshingly moving and funny was another director easily unwinding the effects of anti-Iranian propaganda on Arab minds.

One should stress, to Fatemeh Rafsanjani's credit, that while Iran took the initiative to invite Arab film-makers to Iran, apart from Lebanon no other Arab country - specifically Egypt and Tunisia, two countries known for their international film festivals - have ever shown any Iranian films in the last fifteen years. Whether they are afraid of Islamic influence or a discovery is anyone's guess! I'm afraid it is once again, only an ironical and sad political decision.

The Moroccan filmmaker and scriptwriter Farida Benlyazid, whose recent comic script *Looking for my Wife's Husband* was a big hit in Morocco, and Magda Wassef, in charge of film programming at the Arab World Institute were present. As someone who is half Iranian-half Lebanese, I was pleased to see the meeting of these two cultures at such an occasion. This was partly due to the perseverance of an Iranian film critic Hameed Reza Sadr.

As for Western participants, they included filmmakers and film critics such as Claire Clouzot, whose talk on the representation of Jeanne d'Arc in decades of cinema was much appreciated and Francoise Piot, from the film magazine *Cinematic*. Louise Carre, a Canadian film maker and critic, who directed *My heart is a Witness* which relates her journey to understand what Islam is about, thus meeting women from Black Africa, Maghreb and Arabian Peninsula. Another speaker, Salam Khan, Chairperson of UN Committee for Elimination of all forms of discrimination against Women (who specialises in human rights, Bangladesh) was intrigued by the contradictions between laws, rights and facts for Iranian women, and expressed her bewilderment strongly.

During a refreshingly animated moment at a press conference, Catherine Breillat, the French filmmaker known for her outspokenness, integrity and the daring subject

of her films (*36, Fillette, and L'Amour Parfait*), attacked the notion of censorship, and admitted that she found it very funny and disturbing that politicians should be so preoccupied with women's morals, instead of defining their own, and doing their job! When she added that the only valid moral is the one that comes free, without any social pressure or censorship, most of the journalists were pressing their hearing aids wondering whether they were hearing the correct translation! When she concluded that art and cinema are by definition perpetual heresies, one felt that it was a pity that time was up and other questions would remain suspended and unanswered.

At the end of the seminar, the organisers generously offered a day trip to Isfahan, a city which has kept, despite all the changes, times and regimes, its magic charm and beauty. This visit to the heart of Iran's old capital was a strong reminder of Iran's rich cultural past, which continues through the efforts of its present artists. It came as a moment of delightful relaxation during which more informal discussions and exchanges between speakers and participants continued.

With the coming elections in May 1997, and the risk of seeing the relative *liberalism* of a wing of Rafsanjani's regime in danger of shifting towards a regime dominated by more conservative clerics, one can only hope that the politicians will finally understand that their best ambassadors are the women and filmmakers that we met in Iran.

Rose Issa is an independent curator of contemporary arts from the Middle East and North Africa. She has been consultant to many festivals including the Rotterdam Film Festival, London Film Festival and Glasgow Film Theatre on Arab and Iranian Films. She now runs her own dealership in London.

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## Mali Wu: A Profile

### Katy Deepwell

I first saw Mali Wu's work at the Venice Biennale in 1995 where she presented *Library*.

*Library* consists of rows of glass books arranged in a formal order on metal shelves. Inside each glass book neatly and exactly titled in gold lettering are tiny fragments of pulped paper from the book itself. This piece intrigued me because of its formalist presentation, its deconstructive impulse and its concrete realisation of an irreverent feminist attitude to canons of (male) academic knowledge. Has this knowledge of the classics really been reduced to dust? Is it rotting through neglect or because it is no longer relevant to today's needs? I wanted to know more about this artist's work and when nearly two years later we established contact through email, she kindly sent me some of her writings and photos of her work. What follows in the next few pages are excerpts from Mali Wu's writing, images of her work and writing about her in the last few years. Linda Jaivin's analysis discusses an earlier version of *Library* in *Gnawing Texts, Reaming Words*.

Mali Wu was born in 1957 in Taipei, Taiwan. She graduated in 1979 from Tamkang University with a degree in German language



Mali Wu *Library* (1995)



Wu Mali , detail of installation *Swing* (1992)

and culture. She then went to Vienna, and shifted her focus to art. From 1982 to 1986 she studied with Professor Guether Uecker at the Staatliche Kunstakademie in Dusseldorf, after which she returned to Taiwan. Since then she has worked as an artist, lecturer and adviser to an arts publisher (Yuan-Liou) and critic, writing for Taiwanese art magazines like *Artist* and *Lion Monthly*.

**Wu Mali: Artist's Statement** from *Segmentation & Multiplication: Three Taiwanese Artists: Tsong Pu, Fang Marvin Minto, Wu Mali* (Curators Yang Wen-i & Enrico Pedrini ) Venice Biennale, June 15-July 28 1997)

'In recent years my creations fall into two styles : objects & installations. My perception of the *object* is merely as a life-size toy. As to the other, I express great interest in *installations* using various media, which implicitly describe the possibility of multiple intersections to seek a sophisticated significance with a space. A growing concern over society is also reflected in my work as an attempt to depict a close link between *self* on a small scale and *the community* on a large scale. Only in the process of seeking freedom and defining my own self did it enable me to deconstruct the human bondage imposed by the external world'

'To live in Taiwan today means to inhabit a fragmented and segmented world, where traditional cultures live alongside new Western ways of life and where identity is continuously put to a text and can be lost in an infinite accumulation of behavioural modes becoming an instance of new energy capable of creating interconnectedness, a reality where the elements of the past conjugate and converge with the evolved facts of the present'

(Press release, Wu Mali, *Scriptura*, Galleria Giorgio Persano, Turin)



Wu Mali : Notes from the 1996 work  
TAIPEI FINE ARTS MOTEL  
A conceptual way of occupying the  
Taipei Fine Arts Museum

'People's desire is always on my mind'

In this work, Taipei Fine Arts Museum will repackage its products in the line of a fashion beauty contest and serve those who congregate a refund, if visitors are not satisfied.

The presentation involved distributing yellow business cards as invites with fuchsia Chinese characters which read :

Registration with government NT\$20 per visit.

Exclusive celebrity club

on Chung-shan N. Rd.

Good choice for fun seekers.

Taipei Fine Arts Motel.

Revamped and reopen/

million dollar interior deco/

Innovative games & outstanding performance.

100% satisfaction guaranteed

Call hot line: (02) 5957656

Special offer: from July 13 to October 13, 1996

The Moral of this piece concerned doing some good by bringing the public into the Museum and illustrating its public function

The Spin: 'Hypocrisy in the closet'

### **Wu Mali: Artist's Statement**

(first published in *The Journalist* a weekly magazine, Taipei, May 5 1996 no.478)

Unlike some people who like to dig things up from their inside world, my works have always responded to stimuli from the outside world. I have always chosen to express my concept in an easy, simple, but tricky way, because I liked to deliberately associate things with my works. This is how I get my pleasure in the creative process.

### **Wu Mali *Collective Dreams Hong Kong Art Festival, 1996***

In *Collective Dreams*, for example, which was part of the *Out of the White Space* activity during the Hong Kong Art Festival in February 1996, this work actively emphasised the relationship between society, environment and the masses. It reminded me of the close relation between boats and Hong Kong. Boats could be the



logo of Hong Kong. Another reason was the close connection of boats to one of the most notorious personnel in the Hong Kong history, Bou Dzai Dzoeng the pirate. As 1997 is approaching, it would be about time for the Hong Kong residents to think about where to go and what to do. Spring would be the look most magnificent. I enjoyed the feeling that viewers came here to find their own dreams,

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right season for dreaming. Therefore, I worked out a plan: inviting everybody to fold paper boats, write down their dreams, or draw pictures of their dreams.

The activity of collecting paper boats lasted about a week, some 4000 to 5000 paper boats came in. The large amount of paper boats of a great variety and diversity were shown in the Art Centre and made it

their own boats, or even to peep at other people's dreams.

One day we hired fishermen to carry those paper boats in a fishing boat cruising in the Victoria Harbour of Wanchai area where the Art Centre was located. The purpose was twofold: to relieve the pressure suffered in the dreams and to wish the dreams to be well blessed. After the cruising ceremony was done, we resumed the paper boat show at the art centre.

These little boats could simply be a symbol of the romantic fantasies, which we all more or less had experienced.

Drifting freely on the sea, the boats seemed so carefree and so individual.

But here in Wanchai, only large ships are seen. This is where the handing-over ceremony site will be when Hong Kong is reverted to China in 1997, and where the British Admiralty still stands in the neighbourhood.

Thus, having those paper boats cruising in Wanchai suggested a contrast between individuals and the nation.

Does my work have too much to do with politics? No.

Because of the geographical connection, the Hong Kong people always had dreams involving boats.

A friend told me that a star singer, Sam Hui, once had a popular love song about the boat.

At a corner of Mong Kok, an old lady idler who had a slight mental disorder was seen sitting on the curbside folding paper boats for more than a year. The old lady always threw the paper boats onto the street, and let the cars run over them or let the wind blow them away.

According to the old lady, the street was like the sea, and the paper boats might just bring her husband back, who deserted her years ago. That the old lady turned dreams into a solid form and ritual of life.

This became the best interpretation of Collective Dreams; for the paper folding, dreaming, and cruising on the sea were all rituals.

Paper folding could be a wordless process, in which silence was written onto every fold. Alternatively, it can be a constantly murmuring process of subconscious

activity. Whichever it might be, the paper folding process was both reflective and anxiety-relieving.

When the boats undulated with the waves out on the sea, they appeared just like cradles, sending out gentle kisses of blessing to the dreams.

From this piece of work, I saw some new possibilities for working away from the land and on the sea or water.

Especially, as Taiwan is an island,

I thought I might actually develop something with a *marine* flavour.

The creator (I) would step back, then let the masses (the collective they) take over and finish the collaboration.

This was also a solution to what I had been seeking for years:

to the question of how to escape from a stereotypical art collection system, which always saw the route of art museum-gallery-collector. Some of my works were intended to criticise this system.



*Mali Wu Pink News (1994)*

In 1993, I had a solo exhibition at Yellow River Art Centre in Taichung.

The title theme was *When Mini Van Meets Super Mali*, with some *cars* playing the major roles in the show.

The silver one with a shape borrowed from a Mercedes-Benz model was called Proletarian Car; the golden one called Pink News (Sex Scandal), whose name was inspired by

propaganda vehicle used in street conflict.

Those *cars* were actually made by wooden boards and would not move.

The only movable *car* was made with two wheels plus some electronic devices. I called it Super Mali. The name came from a combination of a video game, Super Mario, and my own name.

The idea of this exhibition was like this.

Our galleries are so beautiful, even far too beautiful, whereas more and more car shows have come to be like art galleries for me.

If a car show could be like an art gallery, it would be natural to make an art gallery like a car show.

Perhaps only some viewers sensed the mockery within the work.

However, I thought it was full of fairy tale's delight, because it was so straightforward, so beautiful, and because its implication was planted deeply into an absolutely modern space.

After this exhibition, my friends often switched to calling me Super Mali.

The name would sound like somebody that belonged to fairy tales. While I was in

college, I was nicknamed Little Mali due to my petite build. As such, I felt that the change of my name was a kind of hypocrisy and over-inflation. On the other hand, the name Super Mali sounded like a cartoon character and for this reason I liked it.

In 1994, I presented three pieces of works of the more serious kind, all titled with different name of Disguise (Camouflage, Fake, etc..)

The first one called Camouflage made public in Promenade in Asia exhibited at the Shisheido Gallery in Tokyo, Japan.

It was an electric toy excavator, which kept knocking a hole on a wall. Dust and broken pieces of the wall materials fell out of the hole after the hole was made. Actually, it was I that had made the hole earlier. As the toy excavator could not possibly damage the wall, it was indeed a disguise.

The walls of the gallery suggested the art collection system which many artists attempted to change but eventually had to fall in upon itself.

Therefore I used a toy to make a mockery of myself.

Because during the time when destruction/reconstruction was emphasised, criticism could act as some kind of flattering in disguise.



Therefore, I interpreted this piece work as an 'opposition to the opposition', a hopeless mockery.

In June, I had an exhibition at Taipei Fine Arts Museum, whose theme was another Disguise-Fake. I used an 'empty-city strategy' to present an exhibition space of nothingness. On the wall near the entrance it was read:

'I am the FAKE author, you are the FAKE audience,

Let's stroll through the FAKE museum'

Obviously, the not only revealed the critique of the system but also was a metaphor of the king's new clothes, which is better known as the game of with or without clothes.

Since the show room was so open and so deserted, it could be, without lights and writings, filled with such an emptiness that made me feel regardless of the rest of the world. This feeling could be described, in King Yung's words, as 'Stalking in the universe' (*The Smiling, Proud Wanderer*) because I felt that it had the characteristics of a banquet.

What made the opening day special was that art critic Haiming Huang, who is male but dressed in woman's clothes did a terrific job in guiding the viewers to a better understanding of the work and making them delighted.

In July 1996, I had exhibition with a theme titled *Wrapping Apollo Building*, which was curated by Fan-Marvin Minto's Museum Nomad.

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I changed the gallery into a Pawn Shop intending to continue to think from the critical point of view.

In this simple, clean, and inexpensive piece of work, I borrowed symbols from pawn shop, so that the gallery look exactly the same like an usual pawn shop.

The viewers might think that they would not see any pictures, but actually they got instead words as mortgage items to read, such as cars, mansions, curios, calligraphy and paintings etc.

My works are always connected with language. Last year, I presented The Library at Art Taiwan in Venice Biennale. This piece of work was originally a creation titled Gnawing Texts, Reaming Words which was presented at the IT Park Gallery in 1993.

In this piece of work, I collected some influential books from the past, then put them in a paper shredder and let the machine grind up /destroy / chew up them. Later, I filled acrylic boxes with the shredded paper and affixed labels gilded in its original book title on the boxes.



The books had a wild variety of fields, including the 'Four Books', the 'Five Classics', 'Three Principles of the People', *Das Kapital*, *Der Traumanalyse*, the *Bible*, the *Sutras* etc.

Seriously, shredding paper was like breaking the original written structure, which implied rewriting the books.

However, after the books were shredded, the broken pieces of shredded paper instead emerged as a beautiful, well-structured pattern and turned itself

into an art with an eternal value.

Try and imagine this,

How marvellous it would be, when you had turned characters into grains of monosodium glutamate!

I was happy with this piece of work, because it helped me clear my already-crowded bookcases. Besides, the books could go to the right places.

It was during the period that I was working on *Library* I had a dream. In this dream, I saw a coffin shop, which kind of resembled a Chinese herbal medicine shop in a gloomy darkness. In order to explain the material, the decoration and other things about the coffins, the owner of the coffin shop pulled out every coffin as if he were pulling out the drawers from the medicine cabinet.

Some people had said to me my works were full of tough and aggressive characters, whereas in the exhibition place Palazzo Delle Prigioni in Venice, a place better known for having detained loverboy Casanova, my works had appeared gruesome because the *Library* smelt of the last vestiges of ancient civilisations.

The books in the *Library* were classified into six groups:

(1) the World of Art, (2) Encyclopaedia, (3) Chinese Classics, (4) Science and

Civilisation in China, (5) Nobel Prize in Literature, and (6) Godfather (books on or by great men).

This exhibition in Venice meant a lot to me.

Firstly, because of the lure of the Venice Biennale and secondly through the help from the Eslite Bookstore and friends from the galleries I was able to finish this expensive work.

It also seemed to open the door for me to reach out to the outside world, which resulted in exhibition invitations from several countries.

At the end of last year, I accepted an invitation from Persano Gallery of Turin in Italy and had my very first solo exhibition in Europe.

The title of the exhibition was *Scriptura*, which, in Latin, meant both writing and classics. As there were four show rooms available, I worked out a plan to present four themes related to writing and written words. Under the theme of *The Library*, sixty-three books of Literature in Sex, published by the E. S. Books of Italy were displayed.

For the theme of *The Time Space*, crumpled pieces of paper torn off coloured magazines were hung from the ceiling.

For the theme of *The Alchemistic Room*, I made *Zero Point of Literature*, the tapping of a typewriter out of a heap of shredded books was heard, which suggested the writers were allegorised as alchemists.

As for the last theme *The Archives*, fifty childhood pictures of celebrities, good



Mali Wu *Sweeties* (1995)

or bad, from different times and of different characters, were hung on the walls, making the room a nostalgic archive.

*Little Sweethearts* (*The Sweeties*) was the title of this section, which was sort of a recent creation but not absolutely new. It was inspired by a clipping in which I cut pictures of two little boys and jokingly put the names of a teacher and an classmate beside the boys next to the title *When They were young*.

It had a dramatic but not satiric effect.

In I tried to rewrite the stories of the celebrities where the adorable childhood pictures of the late political figures from three different eras--Adolph Hitler (Nazi), Rosa Luxemburg (Left-wing), and Petra Kelly (Green Party) - were displayed side by side....they were so unhistorical and nonhistorical.

This was done in Europe.  
Now, let me think about how to write our own history.

### Epitaph: Recent work by Mali Wu

*EPITAPH* was a work done for a show about the 228 incident held at Taipei Fine Arts Museum in February 1997.

The concept and contents of *EPITAPH* are based on two books: *45 years of loneliness and Sobbing in the dark corner* written by Mrs. Ran Mei-su, and *Documentary film of 228 (Feb. 28 1947) incident* produced by her. This artwork offers condolence to the female victims of 228 incident on the one hand, and on the other respects Mrs. Ran's efforts to record history from another perspective based on her



男人的歷史改寫了

HIS-STORY HAS BEEN REVISED.

暴民可以變成英雄

THE RIOTER MAY BECOME THE HERO.

女人的故事呢？

WHAT ABOUT HER-STORY?

Mali Wu *Epitaph* installation and details (1997)

#### 墓誌銘 EPITAPH

她以眼淚洗清罪孽。  
She washed the corpse with tears.  
待辦完喪事，親友都回去了。  
After the funeral was over and all the relatives has gone,  
終於放聲大哭：父啊——我怕！父啊——我怕！  
She finally burst out crying: God, I'm scared! God, I'm scared!

她，燒掉所有遺物，從此絕口不言提起，也不再打扮。  
She, burned everything, never uttered a word about it nor dress up again.  
她，洗髮淨身，坐在家中等待，有一波生死的準備。  
She cleaned herself up and sat at home waiting, prepared for life and death.  
她，極強裝，自慚形穢，留下孩子，跑走了。  
She, having been raped and felt ashamed, left the kids and ran away.  
她，身兼數職維持生計，六個孩子，從剛出生到十歲。  
She, holding several jobs down, has 6 kids from a babe to a ten-year old.  
她，常常在哭，但兵躲在背後哭，恐懼如影隨形。  
She cries all the time, but only in the dark. Fear follows her like a shadow.  
她，在雜碎聲中，度過了一生。  
She, passes the rest of her day silenced.

她，是複數的女人。  
She, is "women" in plural form.  
她的憂傷也一直是我們的憂傷。  
Her sorrow has always been ours.

own experience as a survivor (especially female) of the tragedy.

The 228 incident was a conflict between the Chinese who came to Taiwan from China after the Second World War and the Taiwanese. During this conflict, there were many Taiwanese intellectuals executed by the Chinese governor. From this time on, these two groups of people do not trust each other, and as a result of this more misunderstanding and conflict occurs.

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## Mali Wu : Profile Consuming Texts: the work of Mali Wu

**Linda Jaivin**

In *Gnawing Texts, Reaming Words*, a destructive violence lurks within the stillness and sanctitude of the library. In this installation Mali Wu presents pulp fiction - and pulp non-fiction-- in the rawest sense of the word. Processed in the blender of her studio, the great literary classics of East and West, art books, Encyclopaedia, and books by or about *Great men* are alike reduced to an indecipherable pap which she then repackages and reshelves. Not all of these works are reincarnated as bound volumes. The Bible is crammed inside a medicine bottle, romantic fiction appears in candy jars and experimental work in the tubes of the laboratory.

'I chose books that have been influential in the past but the authority of which has been much disputed, or works that have become outmoded and no longer influential,' explains the artist. The clarity with which Mali Wu typically outlines the ideas behind her conceptual work as well as the simplicity and directness of its presentation masks its complexity and cultural resonances.

The quiet reading room of *Gnawing Text, Reaming Words* in fact contains echoes



Mali Wu detail of *Library* (1995)

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of some of the loudest explosions in 20th century Chinese Cultural History. The first was the May Fourth Movement of 1919 sparked by student anger at humiliating concessions forced on China by Japan and other Imperialist powers. Many of China's intelligentsia came to the conclusion that the more profound source of their country's weakness lay in its outmoded Confucian

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ideology. Their slogans included 'Overthrow the house of Confucius!'. They advocated a complete overhaul of not only the educational system which was based on rote memorisation of classic texts, but of the written language itself. The explosion took place in the mainland during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), when, instigated by Mao, students rebelled against all forms of intellectual authority, burning books, torturing teachers.

China's 5,000 year old history has long been both a source of pride and oppressiveness. From the time of the May Fourth Movement, each generation of Chinese artists and intellectuals (and there is no doubt that Mali Wu is both) have needed to remove the obstacle of that authoritative tradition from the path ahead of them in order to move ahead. Neither the May Fourth Movement nor the Cultural Revolution was able to successfully deconstruct the resilient classical tradition. As a citizen of a very contemporary and world-wise place that is Taiwan today, however, and particularly as a woman Mali Wu is also struggling against the dominant ideologies Western civilisation.....

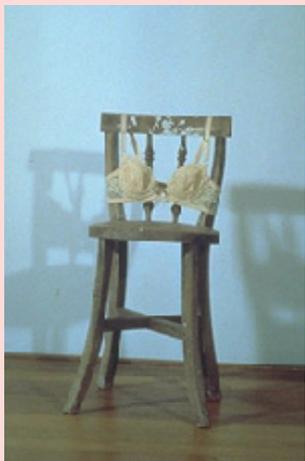
As the writer Ye Yilan notes in *Mali Wu's Conceptual Works* (Ye Yilan, 'Wu Malide guannian zhi zuo', in *Shinei zazhi*, March 1995, pp. 174-176) Mali's installations are characterised by their 'strong conceptual nature, their social character and their critical attitude'. When Mali Wu first returned from abroad, according to Ye she was struck by the 'political, economic and social chaos of Taiwan'. She wanted to 'transcend traditional notions of good and bad, beauty and ugliness, gender and even the common notions of the difference between art and non art as well as accepted standards.'

Wu's first major work back in Taipei *Time Space* (1985) consisted of a room filled with crumpled newspaper and the recorded sounds of the city streets. Visitors to the show shuffled through the balls of paper, trampling on the text, a culturally rebellious act in itself in the context of a society that so venerates the written word (a theme further developed in *Gnawing Texts*, among other works), and a political one given the fact that all the newspapers in Taiwan at the time were controlled by the state.

Political themes come to the fore in some of Wu's later works such as *Asia*, a huge maze with a red centre created in 1989 for an exhibition in Japan. Regional politics blend with gender politics in the literally startling installation *Swing* (1992). Viewers continually upset delicately balanced bowls and plates on a swing. The frequent sound of breaking crockery was particularly shocking since



Mali Wu *Swing Art Fair*, Taipei 1992



Mali Wu *Female* (1990)

*Swing* was positioned in the middle of an exhibition that also included genuinely precious ceramics and antiques. It played on the image of the fragility of China, its association with women's traditional duties in the kitchen and the intended double entendre of the English words *china* and *China*.

Gender has become an increasingly central concern of Mali Wu's work. *Female*, a bra hanging on the back of a chair, implies the passivity of the traditional woman, how they are sat upon, one way or another, by men. In the more ambiguous *Portrait* she wraps a meat cleaver in red cloth and hangs a string pearls around the handle, In *Pink News*, one of a series of faux-autos that she has created, a small loudspeaker truck resembling the type used by candidates in Taiwan's noisy election campaigns is painted pink and turned into a military vehicle for the battle between the sexes.....

Linda Jaivin is a freelancer who lives in Sydney , Australia. This article was orginally translated into German and published in the exhibition catalogue *Balance Act* (Stuttgart: Ifa Gallery, 1995)

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## T.Est.Art

### **Mare Tralla**

August 1995 was the date of first Estonian feminist art exhibition, which took place in three different Galleries in Tallinn: *Vaal*, *City Gallery* and *Mustpeade Maja*. Called *Est.Fem* it was organised by Eha Komissarov, Reet Varblane and myself. *Est. Fem* was sponsored and supported by many institutions, like Estonian Culture Endowment, Soros Centre for Contemporary Arts, Estonian Lesbian and Gay Association, various galleries and lot of private persons, who helped with little things. Twenty-one artists participated in that exhibition, not only by making works, but also taking part in discussions before August and writing short contributions to the catalogue about their works and their thoughts about feminism.

The preparation process for *Est.Fem* was long, beginning as far back as 1992, when Eha Komissarov became convinced of the need for feminist art in Estonia regardless of what others thought. She wrote in her essay, in the exhibition catalogue, about that time: 'My first experiences with feminism soon became conviction, that the questions of gender and identity are completely alienated in Estonia and dealing with feminism would mean voluntarily banishing oneself from society.' I met Eha in December 1993, when she gave me the opportunity to do a performance *Breaking Illusion* in the gallery *Vaal*. Later she invited me to take part in organising a feminist art exhibition. I honestly wanted to refuse at first, but she convinced and pushed me into action. After that I met Leena-Maija Rossi and Asko Mäkelä from Finland and invited them to give talks to Estonian artists about feminist art. They came in spite of the fact there was no money to pay them. Somehow we managed to create the interest around the up and coming feminist art show and through that made our voices heard in many different media channels. Finally the artists were willing to take part - especially the young generation. This exhibition

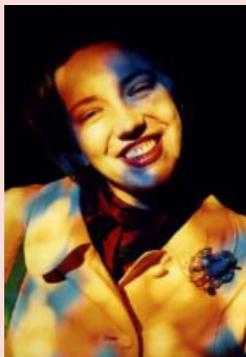
can be seen as the childbirth or first delivery of Estonian feminist art. Artists who took part in *Est.Fem* are closer to post-feminist thinking, to evaluating tolerance and to introspective thought.

This is a good place to give a light to some points of recent Estonian history, which may have influenced the artists through their personal experience. The following is my personal story or memory.

When I was a child I had many idols based on the female heroines of the Soviet time which had been created by both the totalitarian regime and the media. I grew up in the rural Estonia. My parents valued hard physical work, which is very typical of Estonians. Our national poet Tammsaare wrote: 'You have to work hard to get love.'<sup>2</sup> This suggests why our idols were always workers and why the communist propaganda succeeded to show workers as heroines: female tractor drivers,

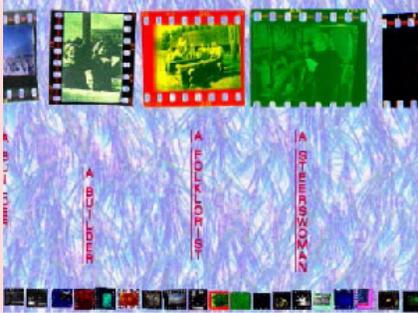


Mare Tralla performance  
*Estonian Dreams* (Tallinn  
Art Hall, 1996)



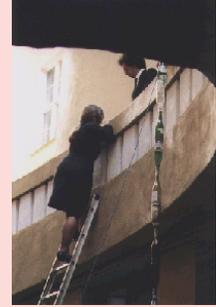
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Mare Tralla CD-Rom  
"her.space" (1997)

Right: Mare Tralla  
performance *Sun-  
Time-Games* (Vaal  
Gallery Tallinn,  
1995)



Below :Peeter  
Tooming *After Army  
Has Gone* (1989)



examples of porno magazines smuggled to Soviet Union and the illegal photo-cards did not fill the need to look at naked bodies for men.<sup>3</sup> Tooming's nudes aren't far from bad pornography. Shortly after Estonian Singing Revolution, in summer 1988, he made a series titled *After the Army Has Gone*. That series became extremely significant. Tired, old, used female bodies are photographed like abandoned coffeepots in the middle of waste land -

the land raped by Soviet Army. The body seems raped too, just an army bitch, whom nobody needs. This became a real example of the survival of the former Soviet woman. Nobody thought that his works may insult women. After my criticism was published I was accused, by another woman, of being immoral and mad, because I had said in words, what he thought.<sup>4</sup> I used a finger to point it out but this other woman disagreed with me.

Estonian artists like And Keskküla, Andre Touts, Tiit Pääsuke, Urmas Pedanik, and others have painted at the same time ideal landscapes - still-lives, beautiful paintings in which one can almost fully smell freedom - as if this were a reaction against the official soviet art-world. Under communism, a woman became a hero, if she managed to have kids and take care of her husband who was often just an alcoholic, or she successfully made a career for herself. It is known that women were forced to make a career, it was forbidden to stay at home and to be just a housekeeper. As we used to think then and do think now, woman is behind everything. Even when a man has always been on the screen or in the news, he is led by a woman. This is a common misconception. Nowadays it is even more obvious. Woman don't like to be seen, they want to lead but remain hidden by themselves. To talk about women's liberation and feminism in Estonia is the same as making bad jokes. Hasso Krull has seen it as a scandal for intellectuals.<sup>5</sup> All woman are happy! At least they appear

to be like this, because it is bad to talk about red herrings. And they are happy indeed because they got tampons with the independence!

It is not correct to say that women in Estonia have not had their liberation movement. During the era of national awakening, in the second half of 19th century, women, like poet Lydia Koidula, were extremely significant political organisers and educators. Before the Singing Revolution women had their liberation movement, too. The aim was to get the right to stay at home and look after children. The family became, for a short period, extremely important for Estonians. By 1988, it was established, that woman could stay at home till her youngest child is three years old. The state subsidy was not sufficient for living, however the right to stay home was a victory. I guess it is not so easy to understand for western people, who live in society with high unemployment how women felt in the Soviet Union after they got that right. I can talk only about Estonia and about the feelings there, what we felt was that there should be more children in Estonian families. A song, which has a chorus: "Our country must be filled with kids, and with kids, and with kids..." became popular before the Singing Revolution. During it, it was repeated thousands of times by tens of thousands of people. In the summer 1988 tens of thousand of Estonians gathered together under Estonian national flag 'blue-black-white' tricolour to sing about freedom at nights on the song festival dais in Tallinn. Musicians wrote lot of songs and rock-bands were playing and singing together with people at the same stage. The common feeling amongst all was a compassion for the people you met and a shared nationality. While formally Estonia still remained under the rules of Moscow, there was the feeling of independence. Indeed, the future seemed brighter and that had an impact for everybody, firstly for families: 1988-89 were the years of baby-boom. It is difficult to see any specific role for women in the Singing Revolution, only during the communist period women were perhaps the more active part of those who carried on the tradition of Song Festivals. The Singing Revolution was generally a political liberation movement, men and women were together for an independent Estonia. Creative people: artists, musicians, poets were those who played significant role in that movement. At the congress of Estonian Creative Associations 'The Declaration of Independence' was ratified on 15th of November 1988.

Now, Estonians are too much involved to observe the formal beautiful sides of capitalism and it is hard to believe the idealism of Singing Revolution ten years ago. I don't know how long it will take till the people will start again to value something other than money in my homeland. This will not happen until there are other grounds for discussions, until the newspaper editors will truly understand the effects of publishing advertisements with the text which suggest that only 25-year-old male will get a profitable job and only good looking females need apply. All the society is orientated to youth. And that was obviously one of the reasons why Mari Sobolev, Marko Laimre and me got the opportunity to make monthly TV program in Estonian State TV in 1994. We called the program 'Yesno'. It was great experience to work in

the real media world. And for me it was my pre-feminist period fruitful for later projects. We were idealists who thought: NOW WE WILL DO REALLY INTERESTING TV PROGRAMS, which will not talk about the official art-world and we'll have the opportunity to raise some issues around society and art. We wanted to do something alternative. Luckily none of us had had a TV at home and we had only seen one rarely, just enough to know what is going on there. The first demand for us was to make a show, which was accessible for everyone, so that even Louise, the former Soviet heroine, should like it. However, thanks to the other suggestion that we should look a bit more interesting than we did at that time, we took the word to dress at first greasy and then -- if you give the finger to the Devil, it will take the hand. So we almost created a show that we wanted in an ironical way. Art is mostly seen as extremely serious thing, in a way as a science, in Estonia. We didn't think so. The show had different parts in it. It introduced young artists, who were not known much. Then we talked about multimedia like 'Multimedia for beginners', in which we wanted to get to know the actual situation with multimedia in Estonia at that time. The situation was very bizarre, we found out, that even 'the experts' didn't know what it was although we let them show on the programme that they didn't know. Sometimes we used badly the misfortune of persons we interviewed. This was our method of ironic criticism and although we did make an art-show, we are artists and not TV journalists. We also discussed some general topics such as *money and art* or *social realism versus social art*. Finally after introducing 20th century art through visualised performance Louise, the heroine, got angry. We don't make the shows any more because we were called 'immoral'. This means we were not normal. We do more art and we write more articles now. The reaction to *Yesno* was the first time I found myself being accused of immorality. I opened the Campbell soup and left its content in the street. The content of modern art looks really like vomit. Later I acquired the title of *disgusting woman*. At first this was because of Est.Fem and my scratchy video-installation - an ironic criticism of Estonian feminism. During the emptiness the illuminating text appeared on wall of the gallery 'So we gave birth to estonian feminism'.

While I was organising Est.Fem and talking with artists and critics I saw how many of them took it only as an opportunity to be in a show, which may have some points of scandal in it, and may be liked by the media. Feminism was often seen merely as a fashion - a trend. And I remember my co-curator telling me how in the West they are waiting for the feminist art from post-soviet countries to emerge. As an artist I needed to react against this. So I made a video mixing hard-porn and old photos of my mother as a flower-girl and the local news. I added the text from my own pioneer-diaries and from the beginning of eighties all the wonderful backgrounds I have developed. Sometimes the lights were turned off and you saw on the wall light letters: 'So we gave birth to Estonian Feminism'.

Most of the artists in Est.Fem were very young, some of them still students. They

were looking at gender and their personal stories, nothing too political or shocking, using different mediums from painting till video-installation. Many artists used photography, which was relatively novel for Estonian art-world. Margot Kask made a series of photographs, set as a panorama of unidentified women. Grey blurred images. The artist writes about her works:

'...to recognise very familiar object, one does not need a detailed image. Because it could be very close, a very well known form. In this case the blur is equal to a

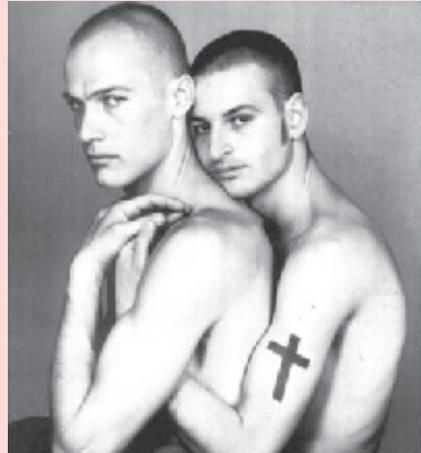


Margot Kask *Unidentified woman* 2 photos in series, *Est.Fem*, 1995

feeling of comfort and certainly which - through the incomprehensible form of movement in one moment - has obtained easily a sensible meaning of something already known, something that has been familiar for a long time, something does not have to be clearly understood.'<sup>6</sup> Something familiar and recognisable without explicit description was often searched for by artist. Anu Kalm was similarly observing her family story through women's eyes in her mixed-media work 'Four Generations: Great-grandmother, Grandmother, Mother and Me'. Little things, letters, buttons, scissors, that once belonged to those women were attached to four plywood panels. Piia Ruber made an installation around parental knowledge. Small photographs and images in light-boxes representing different everyday activities in layers, attached with mothering texts - all, what influences your understandings about life. 'A person finds him or herself dealing with the thoughts and matters which are not meant to be dealt with. Everything happens by accident and seemingly guided by somebody else. "THESE ARE FILES FED INTO (US) BY THE ANCESTORS.'<sup>7</sup>

Piret Rāni tried to find out how to become an ideal woman in her diary photo-collages and how that ideal woman feels. Black and white images of all time idols are combined with handwritten text on diary's black background. Somehow naive, yet still convincing: to sleep, to smile, to forget, to bitter. Ideals are incurable sickness, is her conclusion.

There were also three male artist taking part of the show. Toomas Volkmann, a gay artist had his series of portraits, in which he juxtaposed two traditions: the Renaissance portrait and the 19th century photo-iconography that has been established according to the ideology and definitions of the time. He explains himself: 'Reducing the social hints in my portraits to a minimum and freeing models from the 19th century ironic *man* and *woman* body-language attitudes, I have tried to attain a state where the image on the picture is not only assurance of which should be patriarchal *virile man* or *womanly woman* at the end of 20th century. It is on the contrary.'<sup>8</sup>



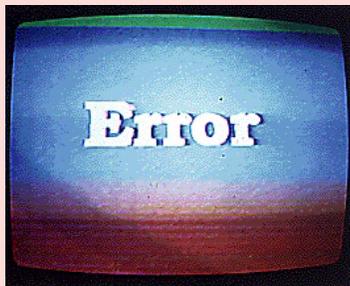
Above: Piret Ráni *Ideal Woman*, shown in *Est.Fem*,1995. Above right: Toomas Volkman David and Warren 1994 shown in *Est.Fem*

*Est.Fem* was important experience for artists and for all Estonian art-world, if not more. Several articles were published, not talking so much about specific artworks, more observing and analysing the phenomenon in general.

If I try to analyse why I call myself feminist artist or why I became one, it is not linked with theory or specific written works by feminist thinkers, simply because those works were very difficult to access in Estonia. I became feminist because of the Estonian society and how people and women were treated there. Consumerism was novelty for us and it's way of going over people. Old behaviours and convictions from communist period added some pepper to new problems. In some situations I just did not know how to behave or how to fight with stupidity or ignorance. As the time passed I felt the need to do something more radical or shocking to make those problems, which were bothering me more visible.

In my video-installation *A Toy* for the exhibition *Biotoopia*, the 3rd annual exhibition of the Soros Centre for Contemporary Arts in Estonia my friends and I were finally naked. Two monitors were placed face-to-face. In a one there was a Man, choosing and controlling a Woman in another screen. The Woman did at first, what he wanted, what he always wants with a kind smile: feeding, undressing and sex. The world was nice and perfect for him until the woman turned in on herself. He got lot of *error* signs and finally lost all the control: the woman transformed the Man: 'Welcome to a Mans World!'

In June 1996 at the Vaal Gallery in Tallinn I made a show called *Second-hand Lovestories* and later several performances. The Last one *Kiss* was a *break-through* for me. Even the male art-critics like Harry Liivrand who didn't accept me before did



Images from MareTralla's video-installation *A Toy* (1995), *Biotoopia*, Tallinn Art Gallery

so after that performance, because, wonder of wonders, I didn't undress myself and I was not considered immoral : I was kissing them - Estonian Male Art World - while they were talking about me. I have passed all the necessary Western and Leninist feminism exercises now I can start to create my own feminism. However, in spite of this, I am afraid, feminism can be successful in Estonia only through a miracle. (The ignorance and selfishness of people is too great).

Internet projects have offered me new experiences to learn and new ways of making art, as well as to show my ideas to new audiences who have no access to the galleries which I previously used for exhibitions. The internet gives me an opportunity to use different kinds of language and types of communication with people, it is playful environment and I am exploring it. *Loveline* plays with the idea of love advice and different subjects around love. How to succeed with love? What to do in certain situations, etc. It is fun project, which somehow continues the ideas I started in my exhibition *Second-hand Lovestories* , only it is more entertaining and at the same time I am manipulating the audience. Some parts of it might be seen pornographic, they aren't that, they are simply there as areas around love which come close to forbidden areas.

After a year in London I went back to Estonia and what happened was rather shocking. Harry Liivrand, the critic, said in public that wanted to see what is under my shirt. This was early in the morning on the street which was full of people, the participators of the *Interstanding2* conference. He was the member of the jury and I an artist whose work was on the show and which they were assessing. We have never been good friends, but he thought that he could make those kind of jokes. When you call yourself feminist they think they can do what ever they want. Unfortunately the society supports that kind of male attitude, more than it listens to words which might criticise common behaviour. Personally it is sometimes difficult to get over being insulted, yet ideologically things are moving. Only in which direction? The *Est.Fem* project will continue as there are artists in Estonia, who are interested to risk their personal comfort to say what they feel.



3 images from Mare Tralla *Second-hand Lovestories*, Vaal Gallery, Tallinn, 1996

## Notes

1. Eha Komissarov 'Testing Feminism' *Est.Fem* catalogue (Tallinn, 1995) p.4
2. Anton Hansen *Tammsaare, Tõde ja õigus I* (Tallinn 1964)
3. Mare Tralla 'Kaameranarkomaan' weekly *Eesti Ekspress* (23.02.1996)
4. Elonna Sprit 'Kes Te olete, Mare Tralla?' weekly *Eesti Ekspress* (22.03.1996)
5. Hasso Krull 'Feminism and the Estonian Community' *Est.Fem* catalogue (Tallinn 1995) p.9
6. Margot Kask *Est.Fem* catalogue (Tallinn 1995) p.12
7. Piia Ruber *Est.Fem* catalogue (Tallinn 1995) p.22
8. Toomas Volkmann *Est.Fem* catalogue (Tallinn 1995) p.47

For more information on Mare Tralla and her work : go to her website  
[www.tralladigital.co.uk](http://www.tralladigital.co.uk)

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# Diary of an Ageing Art Slut from London, the Montmartre of the Millennium

## **August 1997**

### **August 6**

The summer - how I dread it ...The temptations of the summer sales! It just about does me in...Low time for money. No teaching...no art sale for a while and all that time in the studio to use up all my materials.

### **August 13**

How could I possibly imagine that with all our renovations I would actually get some uninterrupted time in the studio .We have hammered and painted and sawed and plastered and poly-filled and painted some more. There is always something else to do ...All that is left is the kitchen floor and that we will actually have to buy tiles for the floor, probably retail, which is like committing a mortal sin in my family. But what do I care as of the 15th, I am off to visit the parents in the mid-west. Home on the range! I wait to be surprised as I never know what personality my mother will adopt for each visit.

### **August 20**

I hate airplane food almost as much as I hate airplane toilets. I always manage to wet my clothing. A friend told me one of those urban myths about sitting on the toilet and accidentally flushing it causing your womb to be sucked inside out if you are woman or pulls your balls off if you are a man. I know that it is not true but....beside

I might catch germs from the seat. I can not put make up on travelling on a 'plane either because every time I attempt it we hit an air pocket..The only thing I like about travelling on plane is that I make up what I do or who I am each time to the person I sit next to as I never see them again. So I have been a foot doctor, a mother with five daughters, a researcher into sleep deprivation, an art historian whose was a specialist on an obscure 17th century English painter and a clerk for the local council. It passes the time.

I am always slightly surprised at the personality my mother has adopts each visit. We have had so many. This one is a slight variation on an old favourite - the 'I am pissed off with everyone especially my children for giving me my varicose veins/ dropped womb/ lost figure etc.etc. I could have had a career if it wasn't for them.'

Nothing I do or say or suggest is right. My father has permanently taken both his hearing aids out of his ears and just smiles benignly at me and retires to the garden or his garage to continue his latest project.

### **August 28 , North America**

Apparently I can't make chicken soup properly! What a loss to the world!! After a week of harassment from the aged P. I piss off and go further west to stay with my other siblings for the rest of the visit. They along with their various children have decided to have an impromptu reunion without the parents. We proceeded to eat and get drunk every night after the younger children have been put to bed. I spend my days shopping with teenage nieces or swimming in the local pool with the younger ones or having my finger and toe nails painted every colour imaginable by all of them. They first give me a stiff gin and tonic then ask if I mind them painting my nails. These kids will go places in life.

### **August 29th, back in London**

Well what a pleasant little trip I had after all!!! The last day I spent back in the home town was with the man I was once engaged to be married. Or 'that twerp whose got one ball' as nearest and dearest refers to him . When I questioned him on how he could be so certain as to this fact he replied that 'You only have to look at him to see that.' Well, I don't know. Maybe men can tell these things about each other at a glance like women can tell if another woman has had silicon implants or not. But as far as I can remember he had it all there but then we always did it in the dark; me not being as adventurous as I am now.

Still we had had a great day together cruising all the second hand thrift shops and Salvation Army stores looking for 1950s china and crockery. I picked up a drop dead gorgeous pair of sparkle earrings and a Grace Kelly like bracelet and a little swing coat that had never been worn all for only 11 dollars! Of course near and dear got his litre of whiskey and Levis boot cut jeans. Still I wonder what my life

would have been like if I had told near and dear to piss off when I discovered him following me around at that party all those years ago instead of asking him if he had any shows coming up in the near future.

### **September 8th**

Just got over the jet lag to be hit in the face with the whole Diana business. Life is strange. Who would have thought she would meet her end in such a sordid manner; trying to escape the paparazzi with her lover. That will teach me not to be so envious of all those gorgeous clothes and designer freebies.

I also arrived home to find the daughter and boyfriend of my best friend from high school encamped two weeks earlier than expected and with very little money between them as they come to the end of their European tour. This is as much as I can find out about their financial position with direct questions like 'Have you got any money left?' It seems very obvious to me that they have about two beans between them until they depart. He has developed a symbiotic relationship with the television and she spends most of the day wrapped up in the duvet in the spare bedroom reading my old copies of Vogue. They can not change their flight date as they came on a very, very cheap charter flight, where they even have to buy their own sandwiches in flight, it's so cheap. Beside which they have no money to do even that with if they wanted to...

So I have drawn up a list of things to do in London that are free and either within walking distance or a bus ride away. But they don't seem to be that excited about seeing another museum and are appalled at the idea of going to a modern art gallery, let alone a private view. The final straw broke when I got up at 7 a.m. and staggered down stairs to find him watching T.V. I have taken the plug off the television set in desperation.

### **September 16th**

At last I get a chance to write....It's been really mad here since I got back from abroad. While at my parent's, I had to face the fact that my parents lives are ending, as my mother's health was not good at all and that my generation is soon to replace them as the next in line. But age is no guarantee of position in The Queue for death. I have been to four funerals of friends and colleagues this past eighteen months and they were all under 50!

G. phoned me the Friday at 5pm and said 'Get your sleeping bag and sandwiches ready. We're going to camp in Parliament Square to get a good view of the funeral' and promptly hung up. Well, with only half an hour to go, I packed a sleeping bag and sandwiches for the couch potatoes and told them to go watch history in the making while pushing them out the door with their tube fare. Then I grabbed what remained of the litre of whiskey and two thermal flasks filled with tea plus my duvet and left a note for near and dear saying G. and I had taken to the streets. It felt just like going on marches in the seventies again. The slogan 'Thatcher, Thatcher, Milk

Snatcher.' kept going through my mind all the way to the tube.

I find it hard to describe the mood of the country and London over Diana's funeral especially except it felt like a personal death in one's own immediate family all week. The floral tributes had to be seen to be believed. The smell of the flowers hit you before you arrived at Kensington Palace, at least a block before. I stopped to look, as I just happened to be in the neighbourhood seeing my therapist one day. I came away thinking that no artist single-handedly could have created as good an installation as that at Kensington Palace especially at night with all the candles around the trees.

But it was the funeral itself that was the most profound experience. G. and I camped out at Parliament Square before the funeral and stayed up all night. One could not really sleep with all the fascinating things that were going on around one. We staked our place and asked our neighbours to guard it, then took a stroll to the Abbey and checked out all the news crews.

All along Whitehall we saw whole families camped out. Little children were tucked up in sleeping bags with their teddies or were being read to by their parents and all the while London traffic and life went on. I did managed to sleep a bit but it was with my head on G. back. I didn't even realize I had dropped off but G. said I drool and make little whimpy sounds when I sleep which she found embarrassing. It is not true. Anyway she didn't have the sense to bring any whiskey. We shared our's with this older Asian couple who just brought their blankets and camp stools. At four in the morning we were sitting on the ground trying to remember our first sexual experience and that old classic 'did you know that so and so once went out with ....' when a couple came up with a child in a push chair and another one strapped on the back and started putting out a dozen plastic cups on the curb. Then they proceeded to fill them with coffee from their thermoses and then poured in whiskey from a big bottle. THEN they proceeded to hand them out us and said that it's a reward for staying up all night. They had just come in from Ealing and thought we might need some re-inforcements from the cold night air.

I almost fell asleep again. G. began talking to anybody available.

It was a faultless Autumn morning that started the day. One could see that as the sun dawned over Parliament and a cloudless morning began that sharp clear skies were in order for the day. We stood on the balustrades around the square with bouquets of flowers woven into the railings so that as you approached the Abbey there was a floral hedge leading up to the entrance, very romantic.

When the bell began its insistent toll at 9:08, every minute on the minute, until the coffin reached its door at 11:00, the hairs on the back of your neck stood up. A deep quiet and profound stillness descended over London that I have never heard and probably will never again be witness to as I and all who were there participated in a strange and unique historical event. In the distance, you could here the muffled

step of the horses as they drew closer. Then there they were, so close, within touching distance, the young boys with their grief-stricken faces set in determination to get through to the Abbey. Most people who attended came dressed in funeral garb even those who camped out had changed into black shirts or pulled out black ties and dresses in the morning. G and I just had dark circles under our eyes.

The cheering and clapping that swept through the crowd after the tribute by Earl Spencer was truly spontaneous. The huge turnout seemed as much a political gesture as a mark of grief. The whole event has been like something out of Shakespeare. One almost expected to hear that Earl Spencer has retreated to Northamptonshire to raise an army and toppled the Queen. G. and I sat for half an hour with the elderly Asian couple after the cortege left the Abbey, in silence and exhaustion. The old girl had belted out all the hymns right along with us. For once we had nothing to say so we took photos of each other with the couple and promised to send them a copy. Then we picked our way down a flower-strewn Whitehall to the Tube. When I got home the couch potatoes had reconnected the T.V. Apparently they saw the coffin go by then immediately came back to use the loos as they didn't think the public ones provided would be too clean.

Personally I like taking to the streets. I suppose it's a habit I picked up from my student days. The rest of the weekend was a wash out. I can't do all-nighters like I used to. Another sign of age, I suppose.....

## **Part 2: September 1997**

### **September 15th**

Went to the opening of Bob and Roberta Smith's show at the Chisenhale Gallery. It was something else. Of course it was done by young artists and with loads and loads of irony and bizarre British humour. The type of stuff that has near and dear wetting himself. The liquid refreshments were coyly served out of bottles that had cleaning fluid labels on them and were mixed with a wino's favourite tipple *Thunderbird*. The expected effect, of course, happened. Everybody's brains were immediately turned to porridge. I politely poured mine down the sink in the loo and noted how effectively it cleaned the rather grungy sink surface. The sight of all that shag pile carpet and paisley wall paper, so loved of council flat dwellers of the seventies, left my stomach a bit queezy so I left early. G. told me later that it got a bit out of hand with people peeing in the street and running almost naked down the road. Well I am not surprised! Giving the punters that brew to drink was like giving them a liquid lobotomy. When I went back later in the week I could appreciate the exhibition better. I will take my second year students there as part of their gallery visits next month.

### **September 27**

The old birthday has come and gone again. Next year is the big five-o. Went to

another 50 th party last Sat.night; an ex-boyfriend's new partner who I rather like and know. They've renovated a huge Edwardian house really well and it was partly out of curiosity that I went. Being into renovation the way I am...

When I arrived everyone was learning to salsa. The dance instructors who are friends of hers were v. good and its a v.provocative dance

....well in my tipsy state I asked the old b.f. if he was happy. BIG MISTAKE! Silly me ! I expected a jolly 'Oh yes!' NO WAY. He paused and wrinkled his brow then looked at me and then looked away. I was wishing I had never asked and was thinking of how to end this situation quickly when another happy but drunk party goer insisted that I salsa with him. So I, gratefully, salsa-ed off thinking that was heavy work.

However, when it came time to go ex-b.f. insisted he see me to the door and after the usual chit-chat on house renovations that people at our age have and are so ready to swap he smacked a whopper of a snog on me. As I staggered to the tube it took me a full two blocks to take in the significance of it all.

Hang on I thought! I just got snogged !

What was that all about?

Work in the studio is actually going okay. If only I can get in there this weekend!!! But I feel a cold coming on with my throat a bit ticklish and my nose has turned into a leaky faucet. One thing I thought about on my way to find the party last Saturday night was the fact I was always discovering bits of London that I didn't know existed before. I have lived in the city on and off for some 27 years but every now and then I find an area that I never knew existed. Some little bygone village or manor that has been vacuumed up in the large and never ending expansion that became the capital city - London. These areas are not new housing developments but solid Victorian and Edwardian villas and homes that form part of the sprawl. The roads are named after some long forgotten event or land mark that once was very important to the area's history and formation but now they are just difficult to spell. Still it's a lot better than 19th Street South West for a name any day.

### **September 30th**

Heard a great little story that G. had some how forgotten to pass on about the current show at the Chisenhale. This relaxed and very ironic little master piece which if one was not to initiated into the current trends of avantgarde art, could think that it's just a bit of worthless rubbish strewn about, was visited by the local street urchins who had come in to see the latest goings on in the art world. 'What ho !' they thought. 'Looks likes its okay to throw a bit of custard about and knock around a few concrete vegetables or even kick about the old smelly rugs that are strewn on the floors. After all " Its not whot I call art ! Is it darlin?'

Apparently such said children really got going in enjoying the exhibition. So much so that they had to be turfed out for enjoying the exhibition a bit too much! The children couldn't see the difference they had made and protested vehemently.

Now a sign resides on the door that says 'NO CHILDREN UNDER THE AGE OF 18 ALLOWED WITHOUT THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF A PARENT'

Like I mean, children, especially working class children, just don't understand irony let alone be able to recognise cutting edge art even if it looks just like a squat...do they now. That's the problem with our education system, isn't it just.

### **October 6th**

My friend Em. has just got unengaged again. Only the third time in ten years. This time they actually bought a ring. Not like last time where they had an argument while buying the ring and broke off the engagement. Apparently she hit this one with her cane that she is still using after her leg accident last winter. This came out in confession when we were making plans to see the Sensation show at the Royal Academy of Art. I decided to go in the end with my colleagues in the Art Department at the Secondary school where I teach (one of four part time jobs I hold down that together still don't quite make up a full time job in pay). I have been poked with that cane once too often when she wanted something and it hurts. Beside it would not 't look too good if I knocked her cane away like I did last time.... especially in public.

Most of, if not all, the works I have seen before but it will be interesting to see them in such a hallowed environment. I don't know if its a sign of old age but I find things that are supposed to be shocking rather boring these days. What I want is a deeper experience and perhaps some sensuality, both visual and intellectual....something other than a quick shock horror? Yes! there's lots in life that is horrible and horrific that needs to be reflected on ..but I am truly pissed off with artists and more so the women, trying to be more *one of the lads* than the lads and then calling it *girl power* ??? That's not empowering! That's trying to be one of the boys and we've all seen that before !!!!

Good news is that I have lost two kilos...sort of...perhaps one and a half...I am trying not to drink more than one G & T a week and definitely no wine until I get back to 63 kilos. I am pissed off and going to have a hot shower and a hot toddy then go to bed.

Dear and nearest is being really boring these days spending endless hours watching old golf games on the video. Maybe its the beginning of senile dementia...either that or grounds for a divorce!

### **October 11**

Sensation...or rather it should be called Spectacle. My assistant somehow managed to acquire two free tickets to this much-talked-about show. As I never managed the private view I thought it more fun to go with him and not fork out any money. So after feeding him a solid lunch of fish an' chips we set off to the R.A. I could not believe my eyes when we got there. The Queues were massive. Four or five across and all the way to the gate after snaking twice around the court yard. We

minced in and flashed our tickets.

The first exhibit greeting us, of course, was the well known and famous shark in a tank of formaldehyde by Damien Hirst. Assistant and I gazed in boredom. That is what comes with being hip and seeing all the cutting edge exhibitions before the rest of the population. Mark Wallinger's *Horses* left me cold with their dispassionate objectivity, just like bad wall paper in my books. Assistant just yawned, apologised and wandered off to see the rest which was on offer.

We were good little art consumers and saw everything. We even familiarized ourselves once again with Tracey Emin 's sex life by lying in her tent and gazing at her handiwork. Lucas' sculpture, Table with Kebab, intrigued me though. That table was exactly the same table that I was looking for for my kitchen (the present one being too big).

Assistant was not impressed with my lack of seriousness regarding the exhibition. But as I pointed out to him the only exhibitors that I found who had any sensuality, joyousness or intellectual integrity and whose art didn't pale after one got the one-line joke to it was Rachel Whiteread and Jenny Saville. With that he gave me one of his looks which means he sticks out his tongue at me and shuffles off. OK, the rest had their merits but to me they were rather thin and far between. We did share a moment over a piece called *Dead Dad*. The child beside me asked his mum if it was an Alien

As I was standing there contemplating the viewing public in this circus-like atmosphere, one such member in a wheel chair ran over my feet in his enthusiasm to get to the next room. He didn't even notice as he shouted 'Oh look its the cow !', that he and his wheel chair had tilted slightly in the process as it ran over my foot. Obviously the heavy pre-publicity had geared him up for this magic moment. He was in a great state of excitement about finally getting to see this exhibit after all he had heard about it. Is this what people feel like when they finally get to Disneyland and see what they have previously only read about or viewed in photos?

It sure made his day. Thankfully I had my trendy D.M.'s on for protection.

So as we wound our way through the throng of art voyeurs I pondered on the exhibition. Besides being only one man's collection and an advertising executive's taste at that, is it because there are no more boundaries or limits to our society that greater and greater anxiety seems to invade the production of art.

Artists seem only to be left with their our neuroses and inner fears to contemplate and mine for inspiration. Most must have had bad separation experiences from mum I think. But I'll say this for the new breed of artists they certainly are the product of a consumer generation. The souvenir shop (and it is truly that) had the most bizarre little gifts for the culturally minded among us to remind us of the art long after we had left. Not satisfied with polyester ties with Les Mademoiselles D'Avignon sprawled across the front, it also had little cows in vacuum bags. I spotted my wheelbound visitor heading towards this display and I hurriedly grabbed Assistant and we scooted

away. I had had enough cultural battering for one day. But he had to stop me from buying a tin plate with *The Owl and Pussy-Cat* poem on it by directing me to the tea room for a large pot of Earl Grey and cakes.

We sat there for a while sharing a table with two young urban professionals and ear-wigged on their discussion about the exhibition interspersed with some juicy gossip about some friend who was having a raging affair with an office colleague which nobody was supposed to know about. But they had better things to do like some serious Saturday clothes shopping and soon left. Assistant and I sat there rather dejected and silent before he took the plunge and balefully looked at me before saying the dreaded sentence 'What did you think of the exhibition?'

'You go first' I replied.

'No you.'

'Well!', I began 'I, I, I...need to think a bit.'

He sighed then said 'I think they have named it wrong. It should be called Spectacle not Sensation!'

After a pause I agreed and asked him if he wanted another tea cake before we wandered home.

### **October 26th**

Openings! Openings! Openings! What would I do for my social life without openings. Well, I have found out...Nothing much. I have managed to not go to any openings this month or most of this month. This self imposed exile has its roots in a very nasty flu and the inability to take any time off from work because if I do I don't get paid. Horrors of horrors! I have lost my appetite for openings. I have not gone to anything this month. No Hayward Gallery, no South London gallery, no little avantgarde galleries, no well-established Cork street galleries....just nothing; just me and my cold ...sort of...and a developing allergic reaction to nickel in my earrings....The Gods are against me. I know of no crueller fate than to be allergic to all your old and well loved ear rings. Sick isn't it? Why not an allergy to washing up liquid or even meat ...No, I develop an allergy to nickel which just happens to be in most of my earrings...like all my Betty Jackson ones....unfortunately hardly any of mine are gold or silver. Well that will have to change now, won't it. Perhaps there are some benefits to this allergy after all...diamonds...yes, they look best with gold and silver, don't they now....One should have reflection of light around the face as the years advance to soften the lines or so I've read in Vogue.

### **November 8th**

Well ,well , well , isn't life funny! Like I mean who could make it up any stranger than the real thing? Certainly not me. We all know or we all have at least one acquaintance who is ever so smug about every thing. Her relationship is the perfect one. She is not going to have babies because that will spoil her career. Until that is

she accidentally gets pregnant. Then isn't motherhood wonderful and aren't the schools awful...blah blah blah. So after years of listening to such shit you accidentally on purpose lose contact. However, as I then found out, two months after the event, this perfect person has split with the ideal partner after having an affair with a woman! The partner now has been in and out of hospital with the world's greatest breakdown and, all my friend Em can say, is that even though she has worked with him for several years, she had no idea that I knew him, despite that fact he often asked after me !!

All this was revealed at the annual Acme fire works party on Guy Fawkes night...The pioneers of the Artists invasion of the East End were all there with the next generation of whom quite a few are God-children of mine. We now all just shiver at the thought of some of the derelict and unheated accommodation we lived in all those years ago - over twenty five years ago to be exact. Anyway I saw a mutual friend, who hasn't really spoken to me over the incident since her partner, accidentally on purpose not revealing when Helen Chadwick's funeral was taken place, because he thought I wasn't important enough to attend, and she then also let slip about the perfect woman splitting up with her man. Well my mouth dropped open and I asked her to repeat what she said as I thought I hadn't heard right. So more gory details emerged !

"Why didn't you 'phone me and tell me all about it?"

"Well I just can't telephone you after not speaking to you for a year with gossip. Can I?"

You bet you can sweetie ! What else was the telephone invented for, I ask you !!!

As I say, you can't make it up better. Life does it for you! So with a great feeling of smugness warming me I watched the fire works display in the park opposite. Until I overheard it erroneously pointed out that even though we are the poorest borough in the United Kingdom our fireworks display was wonderful. Ha! my council tax couldn't pay for all that. I had to point out to the silly person that the coffers of the Labour party were subsidizing this night due to the fact that the President of France was in Canary Wharf that looms in the night just half a mile down the road watching it and sipping champagne with Tony and friends. Sort of like the nobles of old in the towers of the castle looking down on the peasants. How times change!!!

### **November 23**

What a month ! and Christmas is only less than 4 weeks away !! Thank goodness there's a postal strike in Canada. It means I can get away with not sending presents.....But I have my nephew over for Christmas. He visited during the mid-term break and ate me out of house and home. Mind you he always had his little gang that he hangs out with. An international crowd of seventeen years olds on exchanges. Similar to the ones I teach in the inner London sink school but also very different. These ones grunt in several different languages instead of just the one! But as far as I can make out they all eat endlessly. I laid in a sack of potatoes and

tons of spaghetti for the week and they went through most of it. How do they keep so thin? As they had no money it was cheaper and warmer to hang out here. It was nice. The house was very quiet after we put him on Euro Rail.

The show at Flowers East for the Small is Beautiful exhibition is DEATH this year. I dread to think what some people will put in. The last one was on the theme of SEX which was one of the most boring shows you could imagine considering some of the lives of the artists who exhibited. I came away from the last one thinking 'I hope it was not a reflection of their real lives. No wonder so many of them got divorced or their partners walked out on them!'

I also managed to stagger down to the Chisenhale for the opening of Fernanda Gomes exhibition and managed to walk into one of her pieces immediately upon entering the gallery space. Then, in my shock, at having a fishing wire around my neck I lurched backwards and sent a little ball sculpture rolling. Good thing she had a sense of humour otherwise some artists can be very touchy about people who become strangled in their work!!!!

Roll on Christmas and my annual cocktail party!!!

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