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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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