

# the politics of the personal in british video art

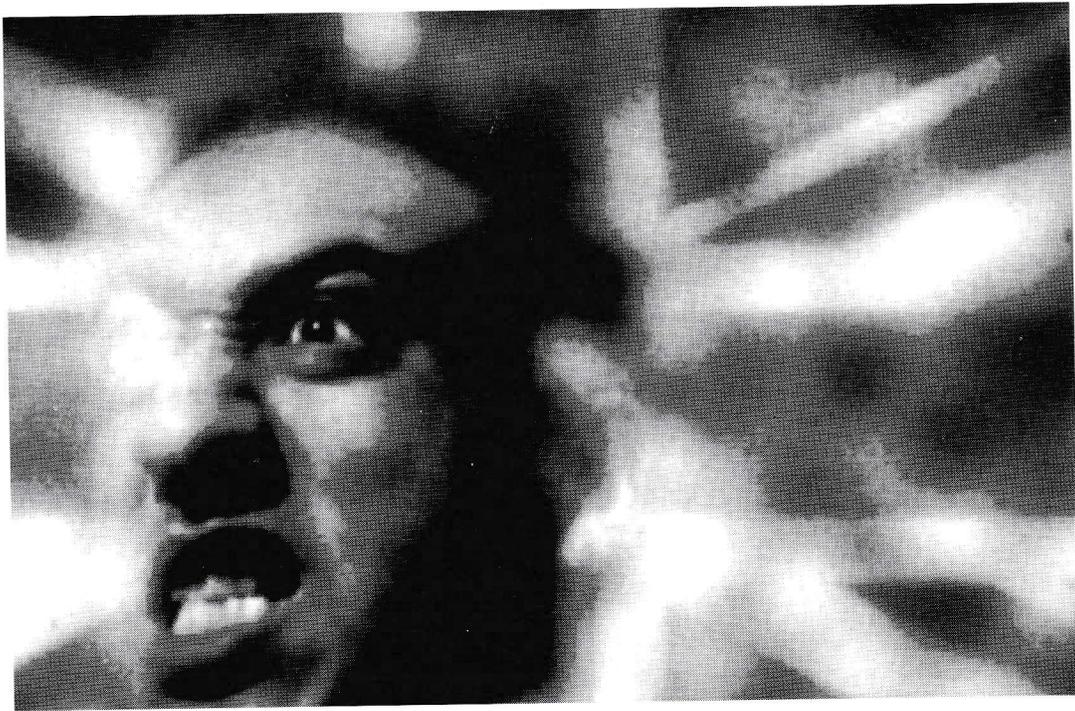
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he individual voice of the artist has long been heard through the medium of video. Back in 1976 David Ross saw the "personal attitude" as the only option left to video artists after the social, formal, economic and aesthetic systems of television had already been established. (1) But this may have been partly out of choice. Most artists saw no reason to abandon the terms of painting which has always been deemed to represent and encapsulate the personal vision of a uniquely (mostly male) genius. Video is ideally suited to this project and it doesn't surprise me that in "Video: the Aesthetics of Narcissism" Rosalind Krauss finds herself accusing video art of an in built narcissism. (2) She cites

Vito Acconci's closed-circuit tapes in which he finds a range of ways of talking to himself, the verbal equivalent of his masturbatory performances. Krauss sees this as removing the utterances of the artist from their own history, from the complex social and political present in which they exist - a form of artistic narcissism. But what she is describing is a narcissistic project that happens to have used video as its vehicle. Acconci's "art" could just as easily have used mirrors and live performance - which indeed it frequently did.

**V**ideo, like painting and performance can be used for radical as well as reactionary purposes. It does not need to be a closed-circuit system, in fact video has an extraordinary capacity to open up instant channels of communication between artist and spectator (video performance) and between spectator and spectator (interactive video systems). As a working process it has obvious advantages for artists concerned with subjective experience. For feminists in particular its appeal lies in its ability to give women instant access to their own image and hence an unprecedented control over what is kept, what is erased and what is finally transmitted to an



GOLDEN BOY DAVE KELLY

audience. The portability and immediacy of the medium - the instant feed-back of video recording systems makes it possible for both male and female artists to create images of the most inaccessible and private situations. Through increasingly sophisticated post-production techniques they are then able to control their "speech" and transmit it to an audience who are already receptive to a direct form of address both through television and the traditionally individualised voice of Fine Art.

The personal as political, the one-to-one of early feminist art was well suited to the direct address of video art. The process of consciousness-raising was reflected in tapes which told the stories of individual women's lives. It was from the aggregation of these testaments that a political analysis was built. In contrast to much male video which unquestioningly addresses a homogenised masculine audience, feminists speak directly to female spectators, sometimes identifying specific groups - young women, old women, lesbians, mothers or daughters. Tying in with the 70's insistence on the audience's "active participation" in the creation of the work's meaning, feminists established non-hierarchical relationships with women spectators. A tape would contain an implied invitation to the viewer to reciprocate with an examination of her own experience rather than preaching liberation from a position of superior knowledge. It was important that these works by-passed patriarchal channels of communication through which people transmitted and understood their experience - the church, the law and the male analyst's couch. Rather than mis-perceiving their subjective experience as a fixed "other" to the masculine norm, women built a sense of identity and community in

relation to each other and located their experience in the complex social, political and economic realities of their lives.

Nancy Chodorow has shown that at a psychological level, women's identification with each other negates the Oedipal process by which women are supposed to transfer their desires to their father and view their mother as a rival for his affections. (3) From this moment a women's sense of self, of personal worth is determined by her ability to inspire and hold a man's desire. Many women video makers 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 extraordinary *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 "to help you with your work" is a testament to the lived relationship behind the tape and a refusal of any competitiveness in relation to a masculine presence.

In *Measures of Distance* (1988), Mona Hatoum's mother specifically ignored her husband's wishes and gave her image for her daughter's work. The tape locates the mother-daughter relationship in the specific political and psycho-experience of Palestinian women. The grounding of individual women's in a wider political present can also be seen in the work of Marion Urch and Sadhna Jain. Catholicism and the influence on motherhood of the

virgin's image are playfully interwoven with Russian iconography in Marion Urch's *From Russia with Love* (1986). The specific experience of femininity within the traditional patriarchal power relations of an Asian family is explored in Sadhna Jian's *Thoughts in Return* (1988). Here life within an immigrant community trying to maintain its identity in the face of an alien culture further complicates a young Asian woman's attempts to evolve a positive sense of herself. In these tapes feminism has linked issues of race, class and psycho-sexual development to its established analysis of gender. At all times the diversity of women's individual experience is emphasised together with an insistence on women's ability to grow and change. This diversity stands as a profound challenge to the fixed categories of marginalised social groups and the central masculine subject around which they revolve. Kate Meynell's tape "Hannah's Song" (1986) moves the scene on the artist as mother. The flexible boundaries of the female psyche once again facilitates the oceanic delights of maternal fusion. The distinction between the artist, her daughter and her own mother begin to blur and through the ecstatic experience of her daughter's body she re-experiences the original maternal bond to which our own motherhood returns us. Tina Keane's work with her daughter in both video and performance similarly traces the matrilineal voice down through generations of women making itself heard through stories, songs and children's games. Zoe Redman's "Mrs. Kelly's Daughter" (1989) finds the artist with her children in a desolate landscape. The male element comes and goes as a shadowy and elusive figure, barely affecting the interaction of the family unit. Zoe's daughter dances on the hillside, oblivious to her father's comings and goings, a free spirit in the brooding landscape. Although these works recall the nurturing presence of the maternal, one senses a move away from the repressive sexual prohibitions which contaminate many of our memories of our own mothers. If a woman defines herself solely in terms of her sexual relationship with her daughter's father, any emergent sexuality her daughter displays will pose a threat to the security of the parental bond. In the work of these artist-

mothers, I sense a determination to free their daughters' sexuality by themselves extending their relationships to include other women, lovers, other ambitions, creative enterprises and political initiatives. In freeing themselves they free their daughters.

**J**ean Fisher has argued that women's voices resonate with pre-lingual, pre-oedipal desire for the maternal. (4) These early experiences of maternal bonding are also characterised by pure physicality, by the smells and the feel of that fleshy maternal presence. Jayne Parker re-invokes it in her mother's nakedness and Kate Meynell delights in its anarchic sensuality as it animates her daughters limbs. My own tape "Growing Up" (1990) insists on the physical presence of the woman through a rhythmic slapping of her thigh. The flesh and blood woman is further emphasised by a large stitched wound which proceeds to heal with the help of compressed electronic time and an internalised child - the grown-up of the title. Whilst the wordlessness of this image might appear to pull away from the restrictions of verbal language, Louise Forshaw's "Hammer and Knife" (1987) challenges the 70's notion of an impenetrable symbolic order which only allows women to speak through the cracks and fissures of its linguistic armour. The artist stands in the field and addresses the male viewer in the most uncompromising of conventional speech. "I hear you're hurting people outside on the street, and I pace the perimeters of my room. Because of you I've learnt martial art. You sit opposite me on trains and try to make polite conversation and when I answer you think I want to fuck..." The male viewer is suddenly stripped of his cloak of invisibility and implicated in the violence of a male culture. The artist is making herself understood in the plainest of possible words.

**I**f the male psyche is formed out of separation from the mother, from the family, from its own feminine needs and impulses 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 is bonded. His sense of identity is fluid, shifting. He displays the kind of negative capability normally associated with the flexible ego boundaries of women. Jeremy Welsh's "Immemorial" (1989) places the artist in his patrilineal relationship with his father and his son. In contrast to Kate Meynell's sensual connectedness, Welsh's attempt to make contact with the image of his father points to difficulties and conflicts of the father-son relationship. His father is shown in uniform, framed and distanced in time. His son is reduced to scrutinising shadows in an attempt to recall a warmth and a humanity that was perhaps never there. In complete contrast, the images of his son are sensual and unashamedly sentimental. The artist seems determined to ease his son's entry into manhood with a relationship that reproduces the essential intimacy of the maternal identification that the boy must relinquish.

**B**ut perhaps the boy is not prepared to sever emotional ties with his mother. The most exuberant image of the return to the maternal must be in David Kelly's "Golden Boy" (1988). After struggling with his multi-racial parentage he leaps into the arms of a grinning white girl - his present-day white mum. Other male film and video makers are exploring the complexities of their heterosexual identities through an investigation of formative relationships with mothers, grandmothers and fathers - real and imagined. David Finch, Michael Maziere and David Larcher all draw on the feminist tradition of politicising the personal. But it is perhaps gay artist like Stuart Marshall, Isaac Julien and Neil Bartlett who most confound conventional psycho-sexual patterns. In Bartlett's "That's How Strong My Love Is" (1989) the artist speaks of his relationship to his father and lover both of whom are present, but silent in the tape. Like Jayne Parker's mother, they give their image as a gift of love to their offspring. Bartlett not only publicly declares a loving relationship with his father, but by implication eroticises that relationship in his choice of lover. The deep, desiring link to the mother is transferred whole and



ALMOST OUT JAYNE PARKER

undiluted into the adult male identity. The artist is now characterised by connectedness, and by his ability to bond with others. He rejects a masculinity built on difference and separateness which a "normal" socialisation would have achieved.

**N**ow that the feminist art enterprise is fuelled a radical rethinking of conventional masculinity in time-based art, we may wonder what would happen to social relations, family patterns and the psycho-sexual development of future generations if men refuse to keep their end of the bargain. If men won't be MEN, if the male artist identifies more with the work of his contemporary feminist sisters than that of the Old Masters, will western patriarchal culture crumble? This is a pleasant fantasy, but I wonder if what we are actually witnessing is simply a change of management style. Men must be prepared to share actual economic and political power before their emotional and sexual liberation has any real impact on the status quo.

(1) "The personal Attitude" David Ross in "Video Art" Eds. Ira Schneider & berol Korot, Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1976.

(2) "Video: The Aesthetics of narcissism" Rosalind Krauss, "Video Culture, A Critical Investigation". Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1990.

(3) "The reproduction of Mothering" Nancy Chodorow, The University of California Press, 1978.

(4) "reflections on Echo-Sound by Women artists in Britain", Jean Fisher, "Signs of the Times" catalogue, MOMA, Oxford. 1990.