



- 2 'Beyond Control: a conversation with Stuart Morgan' *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller* ed and intro B Einzig preface L Lippard (Manchester University Press, 1996) p243
- 3 In her series of 13 large cibachromes *Wreaths of Pleasure* (1992) Chadwick suspended flowers and furs in brilliantly coloured viscous materials like washing up liquid, engine oil and handcream
- 4 *Inside the Visible: an elliptical traverse of 20th C art - in, of the feminine* was organised by Catherine de Zegher of the Kanaal Art Foundation in Belgium (1994) where it began a tour to the ICA in Boston, USA (1996) and the Whitechapel in London (1996) exhibiting an international selection of historical and contemporary women artists
- 5 *Hygiene: writers and artists come clean and talk dirty* intro A Kingston (Ikona Gallery, Birmingham, 1994)
- 6 *Purity and Danger: an analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo* Mary Douglas (1966)
- 7 J Frueh 'Making a mess: women's bane, women's pleasure' *Women and Modernism* ed K Deepwell (Manchester University Press, 1998)
- 8 C Doherty 'We're not in Kansas anymore ...' *Claustrophobia* (Ikona Gallery, Birmingham, 1998) pp12-13

In Video Veritas: a feminist perspective on women's video across two decades

The adoption of video as a creative medium coincided with a widespread disenchantment with easel art in the late 70s. Artists like Tina Keane, Rose Finn-Kelcey, Hannah O'Shea and Tamara Krikorian saw the fledgling disciplines of video and performance as fertile ground for female creativity where painting and, to a lesser extent, sculpture locked them into modes of representation that reduced the image of woman to model and muse or excluded any overt reference to the feminine in a sea of abstraction and conceptual language games.

Although it was possible to sidestep the domineering influence of male traditions in painting, video artists now had to contend with the new representational codes evolving in television and the older traditions of film narrative on which the younger electronic medium was founded. Some women solved this problem by relegating the video image to

a subsidiary element in a live performance and offered it as a mediated point of view and a counterpoint to the live presence of the artist. Sally Potter had pointed out that all forms of live art contained within them the contradictory elements of stereotypical behaviour, the stripper, the dying diva, the burlesque queen against which the disturbing reality of the artist's physical presence and skill revealed her performance for the act it was¹. In the art performances of Tina Keane and Sonia Knox the fixing of meaning by the camera image was simultaneously undermined by the reality of the artists themselves, the process of objectification being both demonstrated and deconstructed in the live event.

Artists like Tamara Krikorian and Marceline Mori working purely with the video image used duration and repetition to avoid reproducing conventional representations of women that were enshrined in the narrative structures and entertainment formats of broadcast television. By fragmenting the image of woman, putting her at a distance, and suggesting her presence through voice-over, gesture and written text, these artists explored the structures of representation and shifted the emphasis back onto the assumed male viewer and the expectations of his spectatorship.

In the early 1980s, narrative returned in the form of the personal testament, and rediscovered histories in the work of women identifying with an established feminist tradition of recuperation and the search for a feminist aesthetic². Here the personal



became political and individual testaments were seen as part of a process of consciousness raising whereby a woman might understand her particular experiences in the wider political context of women's oppression under patriarchy. This was part of a feminist project to validate women's private experience in the public arena of art.

This tendency produced art around the experience of motherhood, as in my own work with my son Bruno Muellbauer and Katharine Meynell's lyrical tapes made with her daughter Hannah Morgan. The artist as daughter as well as mother came to light in Jayne Parker's extraordinary *Almost Out* (1984) in which the artist overturned the cultural meaning of a middle-aged woman and through duration redefined conventional readings of female beauty. Louise Forshaw made a short sharp tape called *Hammer and Knife* (1987) in which she stands in the middle of a field and addresses the male viewer with a devastating account of her fear of strangers following a rape attack. All these works revised Laura Mulvey's famous characterisation of the audience as consisting of male spectators and women taking up the masculine position in relation to the image, and thereby denying their gender³. These new works addressed either female spectators in a feminist context of women's exhibitions, festivals and screenings or, as in the case of Louise Forshaw, the address was direct to the male members of the audience with the knowledge that women spectators might identify with her position as victim and witness.

This is a necessarily sketchy summary of women's activities in video in the early days, and the different tendencies did not always happily co-exist. Some commentators took women to task who tried to operate in the field of sexuality by using body images which were easily recuperable by patriarchal culture and the male members of the audience. As Lucy Lippard wrote in 1976 '...a woman using her own face and body has a right to do what she will with them, but it is a subtle abyss that separates men's use of women for sexual titillation from women's use of women to expose that insult⁴.' I have an enduring memory of the Slade Professor Lawrence Gowing whispering to his neighbour that I was better when I took my clothes off – I was performing in the dark by torchlight for fear of giving the chaps what they wanted. However, women performers and videomakers working with the body refused to return to the darkness of their enforced representational banishment, and tried to become visible on their own terms. They resisted the intellectualisation of feminism which artists like Mary Kelly and Susan Hiller came to represent, and insisted on the female traditions of storytelling and the pleasures of direct, realist imagery.

Other criticisms were levelled at such 'personal' feminist video work which relied on the transparency of dominant realist forms. Not only were these ignoring the inbuilt meanings contained in established linguistic traditions but, by emphasising the individual, the works reproduced the hierarchical male star system which conferred what Linda Nochlin called 'the

golden nugget of genius' on some but not on others⁵. Artists recording autobiographical outpourings were also accused of narcissistically indulging in public therapy. Sally Potter described this phenomenon at a conference at the ICA in 1980. The personal is not political, she said, '...when the attention narrows to the privileged tinkering with, or attention to one's solely private sphere, divorced from any collective struggle or publicly conjoined act and simply names the personal practice as political. For art this can mean doing art that looks like art has always looked, that challenges little, but about which one asserts that it is valid because it was done by a woman.'

In these post-feminist days, it is tempting to see the work of personalities like Georgina Starr and Tracey Emin as the direct inheritors of the feminist traditions of the personal testament in women's video, but the context has changed and the accusations of narcissism and exhibition are less easy to deflect. A work like *Dancing in Peckham* (1990) by Gillian Wearing sees the artist bopping aimlessly in public places like a Top of the Pops punter who couldn't find the television studio. The eccentricity of the action, the almost pathological repetition compulsion of the dance, shows the artist not only disconnected from the people around her, but from all social and economic realities.

Heidi Reitmaier has described how those young women artists representing what she calls '...the hard stare of British femininity'⁶ have been taken up by commercial art dealers and their work validated by the