

Video Loupe:

A Collection of Essays by and about the Videomaker and Critic Catherine Elwes

(London: KT Press, 2000) ISBN 0-9536541-0-9 £14.99

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Something like the healing of a wound in the time-lapsed image of her tape *Grown Up*, Video Loupe is a work that probes still painful lesions with the intelligent fingers of surgery or a mother's deft and knowing insistence that the stinging tincture will make it better. Still impudent after years of impudence, articulate, aggressive when aggression is required, Elwes collection of writings, reviews, interviews and documentation of her work as artist and critic is testimony to a gash in British art.

Before the yBas there were the oBas, and between them lie the mBas, artists who doggedly fished the slack waters of art's interminable Thatcher years of modish curatorial conservatism. They were years when Hodgson was praised as a colourist because there was nothing else to praise, and Araeen's Hayward show 'The Other Story' was slated by the critics as 'special pleading' for Black British artists excluded by a racist artworld, as if there were no one else to blame. Araeen showed Black Audio Film Collective's *Handsworth Songs* as part of the show. Apart from Salman Rushdie's notorious attack on the film (spurred by an ICA screening), the critics were silent. Yet here the quiet revolution was underway: the politicisation of art through the work of technology. Not quite what Walter Benjamin had expected, but history doesn't often do what we expect.

So now that finally, almost forty years on, curators regularly slot video works into group shows, and the Tate at last buys video works for the national collection (at least video works by white, male, established US artists), there is an ignorant generation Elwes rightly complains of: ignorant of their medium and its technological and stylistic capabilities, ignorant of its history. Garage-band aesthetics, with rare exceptions and those usually in film (Tacita Dean) rather than the media of the present.

The electronic artists of the middle generation, Elwes, Kate Meynell, Tina Keane, Jez Welsh, Chris Meigh-Andrews, were also articulate and incisive thinkers, writers, critics for whom the passage from formal minimalist aesthetics into the social demanded by the technological media was the reason of art, the matter they worked in. There were no critics otherwise: a handful of reviewers, and Chrissie Isles at MOMA, David Curtis at the Arts Council, partisans and activists as much as critics, so that Elwes also became a sharp-eyed, sharp-eared presence, the feminist among the largely white, male crowd.

But there would be gains to make in that environment — literally underground in artist-led debates in the basement of the old AIR gallery; a

ferment that saw many of the core group recognised far more abroad than in the stultifying banality of the 1980s British art scene. That awful day when, asked for her favourite artist, Thatcher dredged up from who knows what dank dungeon of memory the suitably Churchillian monuments of Henry Moore, public in the mode of the equestrian statue, the end of shipbuilding caught in the steel erection, static, deceased.

And meanwhile Elwes was beginning a series of works that travestied, picked at the scabs, aggravated, niggled, dragged us into the movement of change, made time not an abstract Cartesian category but the liquid geometry of growth, from the sexualities of pregnancy in 1983's *With Child* to 1997 and the passionate *Liaison Officer*. The genealogical, the biographical, the scale of families and the different times in which the different members move and have their being; form still radiates from the work, a second nature almost, not the source but almost preconscious, like framing, a matter of taste that guides attention, brings the emotional life into a shape that hones it to a fine blade.

A typical thought from the book: 'I am fascinated by the use of subtitles in films'. I tried a year or two ago to find material on just that subject. Nothing, nothing but a fine essay in Margaret Morse's *Visualities* on television titles. Elwes always spells out the unobserved obvious. She has the gift of being clearly in the heart of the debates, from Mary Kelly's elitism to Tracy Emin's adolescence by way of Sadie Plant's technofeminism, and always finding the hinge on which a fashionable discourse turns and making that hinge the fulcrum of a new work or a new essay.

The British art school once distinguished itself by demanding the dissertation: that some intellectual pursuit was key to the possibility of the contemporary, let alone the art. Contrast the philistinism of Saatchi's neo-conceptualists, still embroidering their way around Duchamp's upturned pissoir nearly ninety years after the event, evidence of the sagging of the modern and its post, end of the art school, end of art in the refusal to talk, think, communicate. The technological media have demanded talk: technical chat, of course but also, because of the expense of the kit, shared resources like LEA, the Filmmakers Co-op and the Workshop movement. Monumental egotism, vacuously unmade, is not an option, except for Thatcher's children, who of course entertain her other consumptive offspring by wriggling on the hook. Elwes inspects the hook.

Loupe is French for magnifying glass, but to me it

also has the reverberation of 'loup', wolf, as if the she-wolf, famously ferocious protector of her human young, and the focused intelligence that not only inspects but concentrates the sun's rays into a burning beam, stalked together. The cover image, from *The Liaison Officer*, shows a man's hands holding old photographs viewed through one lens of his spectacles, the gender always in the central optic of the work, the time, the transitions of recording and viewing, the senses of multiple times, the time of remembering, of remembering the memories that are no longer the event.

I would say the collection made me suddenly affectionate towards the work, written and audiovisual, but the warmth is always peppered with wariness because of the sharp edges that meet you as you move through. There is no rest, and no jolly resolution. Time doesn't flow but wrenches us apart and together. This is not a deconstruction: of television, of gallery art. It does not subvert and should never be praised for being resistant. It is not as cosy as that. It is the art of a heroine, who finds the courage to make writing and video when there is every reason to collaborate with the armies of occupation. That heroism is more generous than kind. Gunfighters documented the wargames of small boys: violence is the problem, not the answer. And we have driven apart intelligence and feeling, the one now instrumental reason of technocracy, the other the blind and brutal irresponsibility of sentiment. Elwes works to find a way to work that has as means and goal to weave them back together, a healer's art, but one that hurts and hurts the healer: an art of and for grown-ups.

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