

Video

Performance to Camera

Catherine Elwes

Once again artists are using video as a way of confronting the camera and the viewer beyond in uncompromising displays of human activity divorced from narrative and the ideological packaging of broadcast television. In this latest revival of body art, of performance to camera, and the inevitable flow of body fluids that accompanies it, we can detect in young women the determination to compete with the boys. This is not achieved by going one better, as I tried to do in the 70s by menstruating, bleeding without the help of the razors that my male colleagues were obliged to use, but through parody, sheer cheek and a delight in the polymorphous and perverse sensualities of the body.

The Swedish artist Cecilia Parsberg (Umbrella) spits the primaries straight at the camera in absurd mimicry of Abstract Expressionism and allows the paint to flow down her face in dribbling homage to Pollock. But *Those who hunger for life*, 1993, can also be situated within the feminist tradition of reversal. We might identify Parsberg as Klein's model stepping out of her role as object/paintbrush and spitting the stuff back into the face of the putative male viewer – castrating the gaze as the theory goes. If I have a reservation it is a certain resistance to theatricality, to actions that can become trapped in pastiche, in a continual recycling of old, in this case male, material without ever moving the story on.

The American artist Cheryl Donegan (Umbrella/London Electronic Arts) also uses ejaculatory metaphors in her work. *Head*, 1993, is a three-minute oral work-out in which the artist sucks at a stream of milk spurting from a hole in the side of a plastic bottle. She then spits it back in through the top, the whole routine being performed to a pulsating rock soundtrack. When she finally ejaculates the milk across the wall, the sexual metaphor is amusing but perhaps by now a little predictable. I can appreciate the play on stereotypical representations of female sexuality in a popular cultural idiom (the TV workout) but milk has a more subversive role to play as the product of female lactation.

This is something that is never seen on television nor anywhere in our visual culture and breastfeeding is still discouraged in public places. In the mid-70s Shirley Cameron sat in a cage and continuously breastfed her twin daughters in direct defiance of the taboo against the baring of the breast as anything other than a sexual com-



Annie Sprinkle 1992

modity. In 1986 I made a tape of a breast milking under the violently sensual caresses of an infant's hand. In both cases, the bodily function was not only an insistence on bringing a private experience of the body into the public realm of art, but it related directly to a political analysis, in this case of the position of women within a male culture. This may sound like a plea for political correctness but my observation is that when a work is founded on direct experience and an awareness of how that experience is mediated by the workings of power within our society, a richness and indeed a passion results that rarely arise from parody alone.

On this basis, I was moved by the work of the UK/Netherlands artist Michael Curran partly for his deliciously humorous erotic dancing in *L'heure Autosexuelle*, 1994, (Umbrella) but also for the anguished performance of a 'dangerous' sexual act in *Amami Se Vuoi*, 1994, (Umbrella). 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 and the brutal frontality of the performance contrasts with the rose-tinted, soft focus depictions of romantic love in the media mainstream.

When William Wegman made his *Spit Sandwich* in 1971 (LEA), bodily fluids had not yet taken on the significance that they now have in the age of AIDS. When he offers an off-screen companion a sandwich liberally spread with his own spit, he is not proposing a potential union in death, but a mild form of social transgression. We would have to go further back to the paintings of Munch to find an equivalent image of the terrible pact between sex and death that Curran's tape evokes.

Sex as the source of bodily and spiritual health is the message of Annie Sprinkle's extraordinary video *The Sluts and the Goddesses* (LEA), 1992. Claiming the performance artist Carolee Schneemann as a direct inspiration, Sprinkle demonstrates every conceivable sexual pleasure with the help of her women friends. Sprinkle is herself both performer and presenter. Dressed in a demure but tight-fitting frock, her hair pulled back into a French bun, the x-prostitute and porn queen punctuates the sex with a homely commentary: body piercing, she says '... hurts so good and will make you holier'. Calling on the collective wisdom of various Tantric, Chinese, Yogic and West-coast practices, Sprinkle preaches a kind of cosmic sexual revolution that is divorced from the power relations of heterosexual coupling as well as the political and economic enslavement that is so often the consequence of reproduction.

With its strong formal indebtedness to pornography, it is debatable whether *Sluts & Goddesses* achieves the cultural transformation of Schneemann's 1968 *Naked Action Lecture*. The artist's contribution to the ICA lunchtime lecture series was a highly academic analysis of the formal/political aspects of her work delivered whilst she repeatedly stripped and dressed – the question being, does a woman have intellectual authority while naked and speaking?

I can understand the current reaction to the sometimes dry academicism of 70s & 80s feminism, but I am not sure whether a return to the status of sex goddess is the answer. However, Annie Sprinkle's tapes are the most challenging of the LEA collection and for this reviewer at least, something of an education. ■

Fresh new releases from Film and Video Umbrella was launched at the ICA London in December and tours UK in 1995, including Ikon Birmingham and Video Positive '95 Liverpool.

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