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WOMEN'S ART IN 2008

This issue of *ETC* is very eclectic in its focus on women's contemporary art. It presents political aspects of creative research from several countries, in papers written by women from Québec and France. We chose the art of women in 2008 for many reasons. First, women artists are numerous, and their work is remarkable and very different from that of their male counterparts. The inclusive nature of their approaches bears witness to the societies from which they draw a wealth of references. Since the 1960s, one clear difference between today's creative women and those from the first feminist waves is that today's groups work in close relation to their environment, with encompassing and open attitudes. It is as if their political and social capacities influence their works. The distance between the viewer and the philosophical positions supplying these esthetics isn't any longer limited to, or stemming from, pure denunciation (instrumental in creating the work). Rather, it permits the elaboration of languages, as well as the construction of esthetic and social (or societal) driving forces that are feminine. Consequently, each creator's philosophical "position" brought up in this issue causes, in the writers that defend them, a burst of ideas and feelings that are aimed at capturing and opening our world, marked as it is by the uncertainty in our lives.

As some of our institutions perpetuate the tradition of not presenting as many women's shows as men's, we elected to use affirmative action in granting women artists enough space, as well as the analysis and questions that they deserve.

For Christine Palmiéri—who identifies a *soft* approach to feminine demands on every continent, life according to women artists becomes a work in its own right. The question of femininity is addressed without any cliché or stereotype. The important themes of everyday life disclose an intimacy between private and political spheres.

Conversely, Joanne Lalonde introduces the notion of resistance. A gentle worldview expressing softness is shaken up in the art of women who show social actions and performances on the web. Lalonde demonstrates how they associate themselves with a will to resist various models of domination and control in our societies. As for Maité Vissault, she is concerned with a contemporary art that is not marked by feminist views even if it is "a subjective art stemming from a thought that is not feminist nor feminine, being rather from an esthetic and a sensibility peculiar to women." Vissault introduces us to an art that is less idealistic and more down-to-earth, an art of identity more focused on difference.

Chantal Pontbriand continues her reflections on Yvonne Rainer, one of the great figures of the American avant-garde since the 1960s, tied to the anarchist scene. Dancer, choreographer, filmmaker and director, Rainer has inspired an innovative and radical style with her films and videos, where she exposes the animated human body. Pontbriand explains why this work is so relevant in 2008. Finally, a tribute is paid to semiologist and art theorist Fernande Saint-Martin: Christine Palmiéri conducts an interview that traces the milestones in the life of Saint-Martin, who has left her mark on the history of art and whose career path as a female editor, museologist, teacher and artist (involved in the artistic community since the 1950s) is outstanding. This issue should be read while keeping in mind that several important shows on women's art are taking place, and that the study of feminist and neo-feminist art is still in the making.

It is worth mentioning that a major show on the feminist revolution from 1965 to 1980 is presently on tour in several cities (but not Montréal), not to mention the event presented in September 2008 at La Centrale¹.

Yet, we shouldn't overlook the fact that the days when a realistic number of women artists were represented in Montréal are, for the moment, over. The Québec Triennial *Rien ne se perd, rien ne se crée, tout se transforme* organized by the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, despite enjoying reasonable success, have been blamed by critics and journalists (Jérôme Delgado from *Le Devoir*, Nicolas Mavrikakis from *Voix...*) because too many male artists were featured. This snarl, however disappointing, shouldn't come as a surprise: the more that women gain ground, the less that some men in charge are inclined to give more. In fact, the ground that they gain is usually due to their own effort.

The problem with women artists presently is not that they are in the minority or not visible enough, it is that they are visible "too much," their art being strong and exemplary, but different than that of their male counterparts. When one considers how women are still underrepresented at every level of artistic recognition mechanisms (shows, grants, market and exposure), one can't help but think that they must have stopped fighting sometime in the 1990s. They know all too well that not remaining quiet over the injustices they endure comes at a price. This is the reality for women who have taken for

granted the legacy of previous generations, contenting themselves with it. Next December, for the second part of this issue, *ETC* will feature women of humor and performance, the great therapists of our lives — so that nothing real is hidden, and to better understand strong and complex works.

Isabelle Lelarge

Note

¹ It is *Wack! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, a show that gathers about 300 artworks from 120 women, from 1965 to 1980. This show was created on the initiative of Los Angeles's MoCA. It has just ended at the MoMA (Long Island, N.Y.), but it will soon be hosted by the Vancouver Art Gallery in Vancouver, from October 4th, 2008 to January 11th, 2009. Also, in 2007, the Brooklyn Museum presented *Global Feminisms*, on the corpus of the 1990s. Finally, Montréal's artist-run center La Centrale (Galerie Powerhouse) presents a major event this Fall titled *Gender Alarm! Nouveaux féminismes en art actuel*, from September 17th to 28th. The program includes performances, round tables and screenings. For more information, see www.lacentrale.org

NEOFEMINISMS: POLITICS

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN
SILK THREADS, ASPHALTUM,
SHEPHERDESSES AND LOLITAS:
AN EMOTIONAL POLITICS

"I thought as a woman I was from the outset devalued," said Annette Messager in 2006, also admitting that she elected to base her artistic approach (as a woman artist) on giving stuffed animal totem poles or photographic totem poles made of Christ-like dismembered limbs to the public. Like her, many women artists resolutely chose to base their creations on their own identity: that is, on femininity. Still, this identity's constitutive elements or parameters are yet to be defined—far from being encompassed by clichés and stereotypes. Nevertheless, some salient features stand out: an increased sensibility to things and to the world, a manner of expressing one's emotions (education related), and an interest in biological characteristics as well as in the values of maternity. These features, or criteria, are among the most recurrent in women's artistic identities and they are found in the creations of many woman artists on an international level. (Have the same criteria contributed to the recognition of these works, like it happened before? This would lead to another discussion.)

"Soft" Approach and the Power of Seduction

In 1970, Rose-Marie Arbour wrote: With the women's movement in arts (that first appeared in Anglo-Saxon countries, before spreading to '70s Québec), women artists shifted the notion of creation to an angle of gender identity and social role. Instead of being ignored because they fall within tradition, domestic and everyday life were consciously put back in art and its practice: affirmation and provocation thus overlapped. The slogan "private is political" affirmed the dissolution of the barrier separating the private from the political. With art, they formed a trilogy in the plastic and visual expressions of many women artists aware of the relation between their artistic practice, their social position, and their own culture.²

This attitude has lost its provocative impact, yet it remains potentially active, if only in a certain power of attraction and seduction that it endows the artworks with. This leads us naturally to the works of Sophie Calle or of Tracey Emin, works in which confidentiality catches us, making us a witness and a party to the lives of the artists. The former's unhappy love affairs (photographic and textual) and the latter's desires and vengeance (slogans in naïve drawings) are integral parts of their works, so much so that the lives of these artists aren't just the material of the artworks anymore, but become artworks in their own right. These intimacies made public to an extreme extent are conveyed through a neutral and almost invisible esthetic (save precisely in a transparency esthetic), affecting the spectators all the more because it is done through the emotional mechanisms that have been characterized as feminine for a long time. This is tantamount to bringing someone along through an effect of collective pathos and developing its feminine side, rather than resorting to violent provocation such as Judith Chicago did, when she would scatter bloodstained sanitary napkins on the stairs of museums, or as Valie Export's threat, bare-sexed with a gun in the 70s.

In Québec, such a "soft" approach to feminine protest can be found in the approach of Raymonde April, who enthralles contemporary art lovers. Indeed, the work of Raymonde April looks gently at the world of men and women. It is an "amorous look" that caresses the outline

of everyday life in a way in which the technical yields to the natural in every situation, permitting a full embrace of the shifting rhythms of sceneries, landscapes and characters, in family and friends circles or in serene solitude. She offers us her world with the innocence of an eye catching an all-illuminated reality, a universe without any shadow, in perfect nudity—a world, as it is, full of grace. Nature is what appeals to us in this work, thus different from any other. Rose-Marie Arbour writes: Difference doesn't break or dissociate any given environment. It is experienced more as a distinction than as a break. Difference doesn't question institutional frameworks of contemporary art or society. It is aimed at an esthetic effect that lets us feel privacy and subjectivity in an everyday life context, a context rarely explored with such vividness and apparent fickleness.³ This apparent fickleness, this transparency and this opening up of the private would be assets to a feminine charming strategy that, contrary to the games of "femmes fatales," eliminates the notion of mystery and its gravity.

Playfulness

Besides this production of apparent "fickleness," some artists choose a style closer to comic strips. Such is the case of Aya Takano, a young artist from Japan who, like many others, is inspired by manga. She creates pictorial artworks similar to teen book illustrations. Takano reflects her own vision of Japanese youth in her pastels and characters—who are often lanky, modest, coquettish, daydreaming or fashion victims in an urban hell. Some features of her work include a freshness of color, ingenuity of the lines and of the feminine morphologies such as the candy-pink universe of sensual Lolitas in search of gentleness, over which collectors from all over the world fight. Through subtle allusions to Japanese culture, Aya Takano questions the place of women in her society: what is there to be found beyond the image of a virgin doll? Is a woman obliged to remain a cheeky girl with a manga look, or is an evolution toward gender equality possible? Aya Takano asks disturbing questions while still having tenderness for young girls illustrated in their everyday lives—a critical stance that is totally undermined and assimilated by the system. The ingenuity of Takano's graphic gesture is reminiscent of Canadian artist Kim Dawn and her clean and direct drawing stroke. With apparent playfulness and innocence, Dawn draws the emotions and anxieties of little girls whose words, written directly on the medium surface, appear surprising: "I deserve respect," or "I want to forget." These little girls have a lot to say in the mystery of the artist's spontaneous and fast gesture, who severs their hands, turns them into schizophrenics or makes them two-headed, exclaiming "Banana-split" on the sheet's blank background. Also going into the twists and turns of childhood and adolescence, Ève K. Tremblay considers the unclear waters of emotions by creating bizarre games that seem innocent. Like in Sophie Calle or Raymonde April's work, the photographic medium endows the artworks with a power of truth, of transparency and almost of ingenuity—just like in the naïve drawings of Aya Takano, Kim Dawn, Tracey Emin or Mika Rottenberg (a young American artist who, contrary to productions depicting an ingenious woman-child, offers a production oriented toward the works of women and of the adult body).

Burlesque and Glamour Nostalgia

Mika Rottenberg's videos present farm work by women in a poetic, rural and playful esthetic through the work [out] of fat women. She builds claustrophobic architectures where she sets comedians battling against hellish machines in absurd and ridiculous scenes. Such is the case of Dough (2006), presented at the 2008 Whitney biennial. In 2008 in Paris, at the Laurent Godin gallery, she presented a video visible only by looking through a small hole in the wall hidden behind a photograph showing a close-up of one of Marilyn Minter's armpits sweating—Minter the artist with whom she shared the showing space. The scene is set in a motel with exotic rooms with two sweating bodybuilders and a contortionist. Every drop of sweat falls on hot pans, hissing. It is the spectacle of the "voyeurized" body secreting in the nostalgic and desirable antechamber of secret. All this while Marilyn Minter's work shamelessly shows off photographs and lacquer wares of wide open mouths and exuding pores, as well as photographs of sexy glamorous women.

In a nearby gallery,⁴ Chinese artist Lin Tianmiao shows urban landscapes and blurred portraits in faded grey tones—on which float long threads of white silk similar to the hair of the white sculptures of women, dogs and frogs that she is also presenting. These threads "metaphorize the ancestral Chinese customs and serve as links to the past," she says. It is a dream-like universe where the figure of the mother is omnipresent.

Violence of the Flesh

Omnipresence of the mother is also present in Lydie Arickx's⁵ demolished and severed bodies emerging from a spiked paste or out of a nervously kneaded bronze. She says: "I use big and heavy material,

like asphalt, which is sent to me in 25 kg cans!" She battles the impossible, mixing wool with the asphalt in order to obtain a new material. "It's a kind of material apotheosis. When I paint, it comes from within. It's a compulsive need to create, as fundamental as hunger and connected to life." Thus, her paintings and sculptures inventory life's vivid forces and capture their inner influences in order to sublimate them, in the struggle with the ever mutating flesh.

This stroll through these contemporary productions of women from different generations illustrates to us that similar preoccupations exist within the variety of esthetics and mediums. Identity claims have shifted, but through the affirmation of the feminist subject they remain present. Women don't fear anymore—as Annette Messenger was saying in her beginnings—being devalued because they express themselves as women; to the contrary, they use the smallest affirmations, clichés and stereotypes to better denounce them with subtlety and charm. They create shrewd artworks with which the spectator empathizes, in an unconscious inter-subjective relationship—as if a secret fluidity, magnetic and organic, would come out of it. These artworks operate according to a principle of immanent perception or of "sublime percept"⁶—and not only in the mode of mnesic affects. In this sense, one could say that they come up in the present context (as described by Catherine Grenier in *La Revanche des émotions*)⁷ or even that they have led the way.

Christine Palmiéri

Notes

- ¹ Annette Messenger quoted by Catherine Grenier in Annette Messenger, "La dépouille du minotaure," in *La Revanche des émotions. Essai sur l'art contemporain*, Paris, Seuil, 2008, p. 79.
- ² Rose-Marie Arbour, "Dissidence et différence : aspects de l'art des femmes" in Marie-Charlotte de Koninck and Pierre Landry (ed.), "Délits. Art et société. Le Québec des années 1960-1970," Québec, Musée de la civilisation; Montréal, Musée d'art contemporain and Fides, 1999, p. 119.
- ³ Rose-Marie Arbour, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
- ⁴ Show "Visions de paysage," Galerie JMG, Paris, June 2008.
- ⁵ Show "Tellement j'ai faim," Galerie Polard-Hardouin, Paris, June 2008.
- ⁶ Michel Onfray, *Archéologie du présent. Manifeste pour une esthétique cynique*, Paris, Grasset, 2003, p. 114.
- ⁷ *La Revanche des émotions. Essai sur l'art contemporain*, Paris, Seuil, 2008.

NEOFEMINISMS: POLITICS WEB ACTIVISM: OVERVIEW OF RESISTANCES

I chose to contribute to this issue on feminism and politics by introducing and analyzing a corpus of hypermedia artworks made by women. These works are different and yet complementary examples of a tendency in hypermedia art that I call "web activism."¹ This expression refers to acts of political, social or feminist resistance. These works (mostly social actions/performances) used are exercised by the many forms of power in our hypermodern societies. They encompass diverse forms of resistance: resistance to sexism, racism, heterocentrism, neoliberalism, or to a technophilic view of social relationships. They can act on a small scale as well as on a larger one, whether they are intended for a specific community or whether they deconstruct conventional types from within in order to challenge our assumptions.

I don't want to determine the values and impact of these actions. Rather, my aim is to describe a phenomenon that is important in emerging practices, and to provide insights to understand them. Because of its democratic nature and its broad accessibility (at least in some regions or our planet), the web has provided to artists both a platform and the means for non-institutional distribution, creating more spontaneous actions, more 'free' and more 'anarchist.' A good example of this phenomenon is the multiplication and instantaneous publication of manifestos and other political writings as a recurring literary form.² Many infiltration practices are found on the web. For example, some try to infiltrate an institutional or commercial site in order to plant an alien and dissonant element, an element that dramatically changes the way given symbols and systems are understood.

Activism and Feminism

The Guerilla Girls are a canonical example of artistic activism. Their demonstrations, advertising posters and inscriptions on consumer products have captured our imagination for two decades. In combining incisive phrases with the gorilla mask, they create a model of resistance that is both political and playful. Their actions are innovative and feminist, as they claim it: "*Guerilla Girls re-inventing the*

"f word - feminism." As well as a venue for their artistic projects, their website has become a new platform to expose the persisting inequities in the world of cultural production.

With the same activist spirit in mind, I would like to draw attention to some hypermedia artworks that tackle the material forms of control systems. Prison stands out among these forms, and *Hard Place* (Jenny Pollak and Lauren Gill) reminds us of it. This work shows different locations in the US where illegal immigrant are detained, like the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). The images are inspired by plans and diagrams drawn by people who experienced detention there. The representation of prison life through its architecture is striking. The website also provides links to online resources on the issue of immigrant rights and civil liberties.

The Choice to Denounce the Aggressor

Media image of police and military is another leitmotif of the system of control, something that the very efficient website *Los Dias y Las Noches de Los Muertos* (Francesca da Rimini) exemplifies. Through many images, texts, quotations and slogans, this work takes a stand against violence, in favour of human rights. The political message predominates. The artist reuses shocking media images that have recently left a mark, like the photographs of the assassination of Carlo Giuliani during the Genoa Summit. This project uses various sources: popular movies, news, photojournalism images, graffiti and different media icons. The main theme concerns the idea of modern war: commercial, financial, and above all, media warfare. The reuse of clichés creates a critical effect as da Rimini reorganizes them, juxtaposing slogans with events, or images of crisis with the cries of peoples. Da Rimini shows us both victims and executioners, but also rebels, people who react against a constant global state of war, as Foucault anticipated it in *Discipline and Punish*. She presents us with the enduring spirit of democracy, which at times succeeds in shaking constructions of power and control.

Voices from Ravensbrück (Pat Binder) adds the voices of victims and prisoners to the images of rulers, military or police, using the prison's architecture as an interface. This work is based on the form of collaborative writing, and the website presents texts, evidence and images from a particular community—women who have survived a concentration camp in Ravensbrück. The polyphonic writing offers a variety of poems and photographs that are accessed by the user through the image of a prison. Every door leads to a voice who expresses her grief, tells her everyday experiences (work, resistance, death) or talks about her hopes.

In this work, to resist is not only to survive, but also to give rise to a poetry of abjection. It also insists on remembering. *Anamnesis* reminds us of the importance of memory and cultural memory, an idea shared by Lyotard and Ricoeur.³ *Anamnesis* is particularly significant when considering emerging artistic practices. We play a memory game that takes shape in the importance given to proof, accounts and experiences, a game in which what belongs to our past, whether close or distant, comes back to haunt us as the return of the repressed or as the refusal to forget.

The works of Pat Binder or Francesca da Rimini can thus be understood in this perspective: they denounce the aggressor and the system of control through a set of interplayed fluctuations around anamnesis. They advise us of the importance of remembering, the impossibility of forgetting and the challenge to depict the despicable, to imagine the unimaginable.

Deconstructing from Within

Let's now have a look at the websites of women artists who play with the conventions of pornography. I consider these to be practices of infiltration because they hijack the net users' interests in pornography while deceiving their expectations. The success of such websites rests on two elements: sexually-oriented content and the live-feed.

Deceiving expectations means to hide what is expected to be shown, or to show too much brazenness in disclosing—an excess that induces the creation of distance. It means to give the spectator all of the dimensions of pornography, not only transmitting the content through a transparent system of representation, but also exposing pornography and hypermedia as legitimizing authorities, that is, as control. These works aptly point at the paradoxical quality of the Internet.

Indeed, the Internet combines contradictory elements such as infinite access and normalized content, liberty and censor, subverting through the reproduction of popular belief and parody.

Natacha Merritt (with her *Digital Diaries* and her *Digital Girly*) and Ana Clara Voog (in *Anacam*) are among the most well-known artists of this movement. Without hesitation, they ostentatiously present their own bodies, strongly insisting on traditional feminine sexual markers (made-up mouths, breasts, and vulva). Following in the rich tradition of the self-portrait, they pit themselves against the world through the digital camera and the depiction of their sexual activities. To the casual net user, these images of female nudity simply add to all of the

images already encountered while surfing. But given a second look, the images and the text produce a fascinating and teasing dimension: the celebration of active sexuality, the play around the pleasure of looking at and being looked at, the amusement of the inclusion into the long history of art through iconic or formal quotations.

Opposite to suggestiveness, Sunny Crittenden proposes a destabilizing mix of genres. On the website *camwhores*, she is a pornographic hero; but she is also a writer, author of the *Camgirl Manifesto*, in direct reference to Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1991) and Ovidie's *Porno manifesto* (2002), while claiming to be a dilettante. Her website employs crude⁴ language in headings such as *Crap I made, Just screwin' around, Sunny's guide to anal sex, Pussy, it's what's for dinner, Blow jobs 101*. What is the most interesting are the collected reactions of the net users who don't seem to know how to reconcile the contradictory images claimed by the author: artist, intellectual, mother, virtual whore. This is a combination that evades trivial use while arousing discomfort and displeasure.

One last example: *Cyber Babes* (Lisa Hutton). This website is mainly composed of short sentences and shock affirmations such as *I am OVER 18 years of age and I am looking for the cyber*babes, or I am over 18 years of age and I don't feel like censorship*: sentences on which the users need to click in order to browse the site. The users need to choose among affirmations that lead either to images of characters displaying strong, sometimes combined sexual markers (musculature, huge breasts and moustache), or to websites dealing with the issue of pornography from various angles (legislative, spiritual, systems of control). Thus the artwork tricks the net users in search of erotic photographs, because it plays on their lust and desire while confronting and neutralizing them. This hijacking creates a polemic revelation: the true theme of this artwork is the porn user's search more than its result.

There is so much more to be said about these different websites—more than the short account I've given here. I've provided no detailed analysis of each of these works, works that engage particular experiences and particular readings. An overview presents the whole of a phenomenon—it is not aimed at the particular. Therefore, I hand over the task of a particular reading to the reader, and recommend that she/he adds her/his own browsing experience to mine. Who knows? Maybe new artworks will be found in this shifting corpus.

Joanne Lalonde

Links to the artworks mentioned:

Pat Binder, *Voices from Ravensbrück*, <http://pat-binder.de/ravensbrueck/en/home.html>
Sunny Crittenden, www.sunnycrittenden.com
Francesca Da Rimini, *Los Dias y Las Noches de Los Muertos*, <http://dollyoko.thing.net/LOSDIAS/INDEX.HTML>
Guerrilla Girls, www.guerrillagirls.com
Lisa Hutton, *Cyber Babes*, http://www-crca.ucsd.edu/~Variety_Is/TCA1.html
Natacha Merritt, *Digital diaries*, www.digital-diaries.com
Ibid., *Digital girly*, <http://www.digitalgirly.com/>
Jenny Pollak et Lauren Gill, *Hard Place*, <http://www.tenement.org/HardPlace/>
Ana Clara Voog, *Anacam*, www.anacam.com.

Notes

- I would like to thank doctoral candidates Marianne Cloutier, Émilie Houssa and Paule Mackrous, who have been working with me in locating and documenting hypermedia artworks in different research projects. They are associated with the NT2 laboratory as well as with the *Équipe de recherche sur l'imaginaire contemporain ERIC LINT*, at UQAM.
- Web manifestos have been proliferating in recent years. Here is a sample of websites that present a rich diversity of themes:
<http://www.art.net/about/manifesto.html>
<http://www.lowtech.org/projects/n5m3/>
<http://www.lastplace.com/webism.htm>
http://www.freethinkersmovement.com/index.php?type=artlinks#manifesto_services
<http://www.altx.com/manifestos/orgasm.html>
- Cf. J.-F. Lyotard, *Le post-moderne expliqué aux enfants*, Paris, Gallée, 1986, 165 p.; P. Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, Paris, Seuil, coll. Points, 2000, 690 p.
- Some references can be found on www.sunnycrittenden.com, the current version of which is smaller than the one studied for this text.

NEOFEMINISMS: POLITICS THE FEMININE "I"

"I want to enjoy myself"
Sarah Lucas

Since the "I" here is at issue, I will play the game by making no secret of subjective choices and reflections on this issue. My own "I" is

also feminine, even without being colored by feminist views. Consequently, my presentation might appear equivocal. However, it seems to me that—and it's only the tip of the iceberg—these subjective and equivocal aspects actually characterize the feminine content of a "political and social" art produced by women, an art that stemmed from ideas that are not properly feminine, and even less feminist. This said, if we are to determine how a feminine sensibility in art differs from a masculine one, it seems impossible not to consider, even briefly, the impact of the feminist struggles of the 60s–70s. This is because our perception of the art of women is conspicuously shaped by an art of emancipation that is head-on, militant, aggressive, accusing and caricatured (pejoratively dubbed "tampax art"), and that stigmatizes the many social identities of women. Besides, as soon as contemporary women artists approach themes even slightly related to feminine lives, they face recurring questions about their feminist "intentions," whether they want it or not.

In the present plural world, less polarized than in the 60s, female artists don't relate to any particular emancipation views. In an interview published in *Kunstforum* in 1997, Sarah Lucas rejected any intellectual affiliation with the feminist thinking. She said: "what I do is more down-to-earth, I think. [...] I'm not as idealistic [as the previous generation], most of the artists of my generation say that it's just like it is. [...] Today, it's very natural for a woman to do art, where the previous generation had to fight constantly. [...] I think that if a man was doing what I do, it wouldn't be as good, as funny..."¹ Thus, if such a thing as a new feminism exists, or, to borrow from a recently published book on this issue, a post-feminism, its field of action and of reflection have become considerably more complex.² Everybody agrees that it has widened to include other causes and that it encompasses a broader view on identity and difference, on power, domination and exclusionary relations and relationships in society. In this sense, the art produced by women—when politically and socially oriented—still carries something of the virulent claims and protests of a pioneer militant woman's art; when women consider the social space, their art is resolutely political but in a comprehensive way, bearing the mark of a subjective experience of the political and social space. In *What do I know*, Sejla Kamerić films children acting out private scenes in period costumes. Not only does she evoke daily life, the perpetuation of social structures, or the sentimental memory of things and of living beings: she summons the whole backdrop of Sarajevo, with war, loss, siege and claustrophobia, connecting all these to an imaginary personal narrative.

The Conquest of the "I"

Today, if a specific feminine aesthetic exists, it's not dependent anymore on a particular feminist view nor on a woman's specialization in feminine subjects. However, this aesthetic retains something of a relationship with emotional life and autobiographic tendencies, a subjective sensitive quality based on personal experience.³ Because of their place in society, and maybe also because of the shadow of the feminist questioning, women seem to integrate almost naturally, consciously or not, with a problematic concerning the contemporary affirmation of the "I", which could be defined as a tendency to produce self-reflections rather than self-assertions. This feminine "I" is political, and yet it differs fundamentally from the feminist "interplay" of the previous generation.

Contemporary art plays with desire and pleasure, but also with a dismantlement and a stripping that can appear critical, ironic, humorous, shocking, idle, or it can be perceived as plain and empty "nonsense." It is Sarah Lucas' art of sunny-side up eggs, Teresa Margolles' soap bubbles (are they this innocent?), or Pipilotti Rist's *Ever is Over All*, where one can enjoy the almost sadistic pleasure of seeing a beautiful woman in a blue dress, holding flowers and smashing the windows of cars. If we pay attention to these artists who leave a feminine mark on contemporary art, this personal affirmation (without make-up, or so heavily made-up it turns into parody) carries a scent of sexuality and a specific feminine meta-discourse, because it's always related to a view/gaze/mirror, but a distorted one, the contrary of a narcissistic one. Through an excess of staging, they project the subjective, the personal, the private and even the autobiographical, on the political and social scene.

Is This the Sign of a Fear of Running Risks?

On the masculine side, one common presupposition is that men have a sense of conquest that is unknown to women. A cliché if ever there was one, but a cliché that even appears in views with a feminist content, like that of Judy Chicago, when she claims that "the masculine gaze carries more than pure observation. It always implies some activity, to take possession of something. Women can capture a gaze and respond to it, but they can't react to it actively."⁴ It also appears in some men's views: in a discussion between Christine Macel, Xavier Veilhan and Jean-Marc Bustamante published in 2005, Bustamante claimed that men were impregnated with the conquest of new ter-

ritories, and that because of this, they took more risks than women, who had difficulty lasting the course.⁵ The debate is still open: are women artists less "conquering" than their masculine counterparts, or are they different in some other way? Is it again the remnant of the 70s feminist legacy (cf. Valie Export's *Genital Panic*) that makes us think that women are absolutely working in radical-ness? And by this radical image, wasn't Export acting and reacting? And isn't the practice of Teresa Margolles, when she exposes pieces of tattooed skin or blankets that were used to transport corpses, a reaction to indifference more than an answer?

It seems to me that the way women are engaged in a political and social art isn't characterized by radical-ness nor by military strategy, it's rather a matter of subjective power and of a certain physicality.⁶ Margolles extracts the water, the threads and other peripheral elements—physical above all else—that were used in autopsies, in order to "understand death in its social dimension."⁷ She initiates a work that is radically about art, poverty, anonymity and violence, using a work material both actual and organic, while giving a "physical" voice to outcasts or to those deprived of rights, the nameless victims of social violence. On *127 cueros*, an installation produced at the Düsseldorf Kunstverein in 2006 and composed of 127 threads that were used in the stitching of 127 corpses, Margolles says that this "work is what the threads have absorbed: interrupted lives, torn families, ruined cities. Every thread comes from a corpse and is a human being, a story, a reality."⁸

Staging the "I"

Like many women artists, Margolles tells a story (not necessarily hers) and offers the spectator/viewer an experience of the being-in-the-world that takes the form of a generic "I." Whether directly or indirectly, women artists often use staging that creates narrative structures. In that regard, one emblematic artist is Finnish Eija-Liisa Ahtila. Her films and videos form as many fictive moments of social psychosis, "human dramas"⁹ always told in the "I" form, those of the narrator or of the protagonist. In *Consolation Service* (1999), Ahtila tells the story of a young couple about to divorce. Set on two screens, this movie mixes documentary with fantasy language to generate a disconcerting complexity, full of different tensions and emotions. Physical and metaphorical death, the kind that looks at you straight in the eyes, appears in the gaps, in breaks both narrative and formal, through the process of a staging as sharp as a razor blade.

Thus, contemporary women artists speak more of the identity of human relations than that of women in particular. Their contributions to a critical and committed view in the late capitalism is to humanize politics, to envision the sociopolitical space in the light of the *polis*, a space where there are relations between the human and society, where a human comedy or a drama is played. However, this is a personal opinion.

Maité Vissault

Notes

- ¹ Sarah Lucas, interview with Noemi Smolik, « Es ist nicht alles perfekt in dieser Welt, aber trotzdem will ich mich gut fühlen », *Kunstforum International*, n° 139, 1997, p. 268.
- ² Béatrice Josse (ed.), *2 ou 3 choses que j'ignore d'elles. Pour un manifeste post(?)-féministe*, Metz, Frac Lorraine, Éditions 49 Nord 6 Est, 2008. This book constitutes the extended catalogue of a show that took place in April/June 2007 at the FRAC Lorraine.
- ³ In her book *Social Strategies by Woman Artists* (1980), Lucy Lippard presented the introduction of an emotional and autobiographical content as one of feminism's major contribution to art.
- ⁴ Judy Chicago as quoted by Antje Olivier, « Von der passiven Muse zur aktiven Künstlerin », *Kunstforum International*, n° 154, 2001, p. 213. For the first time, Judy Chicago in 1979 in San Francisco did a famous installation titled *Dinner Party*. This installation consisted of a triangular banquet table made up of stone, fabric and porcelain, holding 39 plates, each being related to a great woman of History. The names of 999 women from all eras and continents are carved in the stone in the middle of the triangle. Judy Chicago is also the author of many books about the legacy of women in society.
- ⁵ Jean-Marc Bustamante, « Discussion entre nous. Propos recueillis le 25 mars 2004 au restaurant l'Annexe », in Bustamante, *La création contemporaine*, Paris 2005, p. 165-170. This discussion has been reused in a performance by Cécile Proust and Jacques Höpffner, www.femmeuses.org.
- ⁶ This physicality can also be considered as an inheritance of the direct and harsh representation of the body and its sexuality conducted by feminists in the 70s.
- ⁷ Teresa Margolles in an interview with Amine Haase in *Kunstforum International*, n° 182, 2006, p. 278. The connected and tied threads were pulled across the exhibit room.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ Ahtila defines by herself her works as "human dramas."

YVONNE RAINER : DE LA CHORÉGRAPHIE À LA CINÉMATOGRAPHIE

Le cliché est, en un sens, l'art de rendre les choses intelligibles sous sa forme la plus pure; il nous soumet à la tentation de ceindre la vie à l'intérieur de formules merveilleusement immuables, et de dissimuler la nature arbitraire de l'imagination derrière une apparence de nécessité.

Leo Bersani

(Cité dans le premier photogramme de *Lives of Performers*)

Yvonne Rainer est considérée comme une figure marquante de l'avant-garde américaine depuis les années 1960. Issue d'un milieu d'anarchistes d'origine européenne de la côte Ouest, elle quitta San Francisco pour New York en 1956. Comme elle avait déjà fréquenté des événements artistiques (comme une performance d'Allen Ginsberg intitulée *Howl*) dans sa ville natale, elle était prête à affronter l'avant-garde new-yorkaise. Elle fit d'abord des études de théâtre, puis elle étudia la danse où elle trouva un milieu qui lui convenait mieux, où sa personnalité et ses talents d'artiste pouvaient s'épanouir. Une des choses qui l'encouragèrent était qu'à l'époque, une femme pouvait occuper une position de force dans le monde de la danse, ce qui n'était pas souvent le cas dans la plupart des autres disciplines artistiques. Elle préférait aussi la danse au théâtre parce qu'il lui était difficile de jouer un rôle, d'« être quelqu'un d'autre », comme on doit normalement le faire au théâtre. Il y a là un rejet de la notion de représentation, qui l'a suivie tout au long de sa vie professionnelle.

De 1957 à 1971 (de 23 à 37 ans), elle fut danseuse et chorégraphe, d'abord avec la compagnie de danse James Waring, puis comme membre de différents groupes ou associations, comme le Judson Church Dance Theater, puis au sein du groupe qu'elle créa et qui prit le nom de Grand Union. En 1972, elle acheva son premier long métrage, réunissant les chorégraphies antérieures portant le même titre, *Lives of Performers*; il fut rapidement suivi, en 1974, de *Film about A Woman Who...* Depuis lors, cinq autres longs métrages sont parus : *Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976), *Journeys from Berlin/1977* (1980), *The Man Who Envyed Women* (1985), *Privilege* (1990), ainsi que *MURDER and Murder* (1996).

Après s'être tournée vers le théâtre, elle n'a pour ainsi dire plus jamais créé de pièces de danse, à une exception près, lorsque Mikhaïl Baryshnikov lui demanda de réaliser la chorégraphie d'une nouvelle pièce pour un spectacle qu'il monta en 1999. Sa migration de la chorégraphie au cinéma fut radicale, déterminée et dépourvue d'ambiguïté. Avec le film, elle trouvait le moyen d'exprimer d'une manière plus subtile certaines idées artistiques qu'elle avait abordées dans la danse. Ce qui est frappant, c'est le caractère radical de ce changement à cette époque de sa vie. Aujourd'hui, il est courant que les artistes de toutes disciplines se tournent vers le multimédia à un moment ou à un autre de leur évolution artistique. Mais au début des années 1970, le changement opéré par Yvonne Rainer était novateur et même radical; même si plusieurs artistes visuels se tournaient vers le film ou la vidéo pour exprimer certaines de leurs idées, je n'en connais aucun qui ait fait dans ces années-là un saut aussi définitif vers le film ou la vidéo. Et il ne fait nul doute qu'aucun des chorégraphes de la scène artistique ne s'intéressait à l'image mobile avec un tel enthousiasme et une telle vision prospective. Le caractère unique de ce changement et de cette métamorphose appelle un examen plus approfondi. Yvonne Rainer et son œuvre occupent une place particulière au milieu des chorégraphes et même des cinéastes de son temps.

Un des aspects particuliers de ce domaine d'activités qui, à première vue, relie le travail de la danse au travail qu'elle réalisa au cinéma est le corps. Devrais-je dire le corps en mouvement ? La danse se caractérise par le corps et le mouvement, et il en va de même pour le film, à certains égards. Rainer est venue à la danse sous l'influence de John Cage et de Merce Cunningham. Cunningham avait déjà apporté une réponse au problème de la danse moderne en insistant sur la matérialité du corps dans l'espace, ainsi que sur la singularité des mouvements corporels par rapport à d'autres composantes de la danse, comme la musique, le son, les décors ou les accessoires. Cunningham s'est lui aussi distancié de la caractérisation et du jeu de rôle. Au lieu de travailler sur l'interprétation, il mettait l'accent sur la notion de tâche, laquelle fut continuée par la génération suivante, dont Rainer devait devenir une des principales figures.

Si on considère certaines des chorégraphies de Rainer, comme l'essentiel *Trio A*, on réalise que cette œuvre s'appuie sur une séquence

de mouvements qui peuvent être exécutés sans référence à une technique ou à un style particuliers. La séquence de mouvements est abstraite et précise, mais on ne saurait la rapporter à une émotion particulière de nature psychologique. Dans *Continuous Project - Altered Daily* (1969), cette approche est rendue plus complexe du fait que la pièce se présente comme une série de tâches, comme une suite d'instructions qui seraient données aux différents participants. La pièce est une répétition continue, en ce sens que son but n'est pas tant de maîtriser la prestation que les règles du jeu qui se déroulent sous nos yeux. Mais la question se pose : y a-t-il quelque chose à voir ? Et que faire de ce qui est vu ?

La pièce traite du temps réel et de ce qui se passe en temps réel lorsque des corps réels se meuvent dans l'espace. L'attention est dirigée vers les petits changements, souvent minuscules et inattendus, qui se produisent au cours de la pièce. La complexité sous-jacente aux actions quotidiennes est soulignée par une performance dont la structure et les personnages sont conçus pour changer tous les jours.

La matérialité des corps est mise en évidence, de même que les accessoires utilisés : oreillers, matelas, boîtes, structures rappelant des caisses en bois sont présents dans les pièces de Rainer. Ces objets traînent autour, ils sont là. Ils font partie de l'environnement quotidien de New York à cette époque. Ce sont des restes grossiers, presque des déchets, des traces de la vie industrielle de New York. Des structures en contreplaqué, un éclairage limité. La notion clef est celle de disponibilité. Les performances empruntent à ce milieu quotidien une proximité par rapport à la manière dont la vie continue, se déroulant suivant un cours « normal », urbain. Ce déroulement définit la performance, caractérisée par une intuition du temps, qui est la *présentité* elle-même, le fait d'être présent et de vivre au temps présent. Un concert qui a beaucoup impressionné Rainer, comme nombre de ses contemporains, présentait une œuvre de John Cage, *4'33* (1952). Dans cette pièce, le public est invité à être témoin de l'incarnation du néant; c'est un concert sans son, une performance du non-sens. Un néant ou un vide qui se transforment en plénitude, en l'acte d'écouter le monde tel quel. Le spectateur est invité à être lui-même tel qu'il (elle) est, au moment où on lui présente le vide sous la forme du vide apparent du silence.

À cette période de l'histoire de l'art, regarder est un acte qui est étudié pour lui-même, comme l'interprétation peut l'être. L'acte d'exécuter un morceau est questionné au moyen d'une série de stratégies qui mettent l'interprète et le regardeur dans des postures différentes, qui les préparent à explorer la *présentité*.

Dans certaines de ses chorégraphies, comme *Two Trios*, Rainer commence à introduire des diapositives, et finalement le film. Des diapositives présentant du texte apparaissent, par exemple, dans *Inner Appearances* (1972) (solo avec un aspirateur) ou *Film about A Woman Who...* (1974). L'utilisation du texte est intéressante, à titre de dispositif visuel offrant la possibilité d'exprimer des pensées. Le processus de la pensée est ainsi exposé et transféré sur écran, afin d'être capté par l'œil. De toute évidence, Rainer éprouve une fascination pour le texte : son intérêt pour les mots met constamment à l'épreuve l'utilisation qu'elle fait du corps et de l'image.

L'étrangeté de l'être là, de l'être ici, est au cœur de son travail; le questionnement de la notion d'être, de ce qui est réel comme de ce qui est irréel est exploré tout au long de son œuvre. Dans sa chorégraphie, Rainer se montre très préoccupée par l'espace et par la manière d'habiter l'espace : comment le corps singulier et comment l'ensemble des corps occupent un espace. Elle s'intéresse également à ce qui se trouve dans l'entre-deux, et dans le cours de ses recherches, qui tendent à minimiser l'importance de tous les éléments du spectacle à l'exception du corps lui-même, ce qui se trouve dans l'entre-deux occupe de plus en plus d'espace. L'image médiatisée, qu'elle introduit dans son œuvre à un certain moment, contribue à donner plus de place à l'entre-deux, qui est l'espace de l'autre, ou plutôt l'espace qui se trouve au-delà et entre les corps situés dans l'espace.

Le contexte dans lequel Rainer travaille, lorsqu'elle conçoit ses chorégraphies, est celui d'une Amérique très différente de celle que nous connaissons aujourd'hui. C'est une Amérique qui est toujours sous l'emprise de ses grands principes de liberté et de démocratie, mais c'est également une Amérique où s'expriment beaucoup de rage et de révolte dans le milieu des Noirs, des jeunes et de ceux qui sont politisés. La guerre du Vietnam a exacerbé ces tensions. Le monde de l'art est très intégré à ce mouvement de remise en cause des valeurs de la période d'après-guerre. Il s'agit de retourner les préceptes en vue d'élaborer ou de découvrir de nouveaux points de vue sur le monde, de nouvelles manières d'être, sinon de faire.

Le travail de Rainer s'alimente à la matérialité brute du corps, des choses qui se trouvent dans l'espace ainsi que de l'espace lui-même. Elle passe ainsi de l'environnement le plus élémentaire à des considérations de nature immatérielle, qu'elle cherche à incarner de la manière la plus concrète qui soit. Comme on l'a déjà mentionné, les

pensées sont travaillées par le texte au cours de performances en direct. Mais très tôt, cela ne suffit plus pour rendre la complexité de tout le matériau artistique qui surgit au milieu des processus induits par son travail. Cette complexité, qu'une simple relation à l'espace ou dans l'espace ne suffit pas à caractériser ou à nommer, elle va chercher à l'exprimer par l'image en mouvement. Quelques courts métrages intègrent les performances. Ils montrent des gestes simples : un film montre en gros plan deux pieds en chaussures de course qui déplacent un ballon de soccer sur un plancher de bois; un autre montre une jeune fille vue de dos traçant une ligne sur un mur nu, puis se retournant, souriante, vers la caméra; dans un autre film, un couple nu est assis sur un divan – il ne se passe pas grand-chose. Très simples, ces films sont aussi extrêmement importants en ce qu'ils définissent une esthétique très différente du cinéma de l'époque et même de celui d'aujourd'hui. Au moyen d'un ensemble d'énoncés aussi courts qu'ils sont simples, ils exposent la notion de *présentité*, qui est essentiellement ce dont il s'agit dans le film voire, et même encore plus, ce dont il s'agit essentiellement dans l'être au monde. Être ici et se mouvoir. Dans tous les cas, la structure de ce duo se modifie, comme le fait le monde autour de nous et en nous. Ces moments définissent la vie à la manière d'un Proust faisant une découverte semblable à la faveur d'une madeleine. Dans les œuvres de Rainer, il n'est nul besoin de madeleine, car la gestualité exprime le temps où nous sommes, un temps présent vivant, le temps de la *présentité*.

Qu'est-ce qui a amené Yvonne Rainer à passer de la danse à la cinématographie ? Indépendamment du fait que ces deux disciplines ont quelque chose à voir avec la *graphie* – l'inscription de soi sur une surface, la création d'un territoire personnel, le jalonnement d'un espace – l'image médiatisée est un facteur majeur. Qu'est-ce qui peut être exploré plus aisément au moyen du film que dans les situations de la vie réelle ? Un des paramètres de la danse est que cette forme d'art n'est pas fondée uniquement sur le corps, puisque la danse est une rencontre avec l'autre : l'autre en soi, ainsi que les autres qui sont extérieurs à soi. Son premier long métrage s'intitule *Lives of Performers*. Il commence avec une séquence où un groupe de danseurs masculins et féminins répète une pièce avec Yvonne. Le film débute par une danse et il émerge de cette dernière un réseau complexe de relations entre les danseurs. À partir de la simple narration de l'événement, dont la répétition fait partie, surgit un film entier qui comprend des descriptions, des interactions, des fictions mêlées à des faits, des fantaisies, et le tout se termine – doit-il y avoir une fin ? – avec 22 tableaux où s'incarnent les personnages (pleins d'humour) du film *Lulu*, de Pabst. Cette *mise en abyme* consacre la distanciation de Rainer par rapport à la représentation, elle vide la narration, la continuité narrative de *Lulu*, en présentant ses interprètes dans des positions et des postures semblables, ou plutôt, les uns en *vis-à-vis* avec les autres : homme/femme, homme/femme/homme, femme/homme/femme, femme/femme; ces différentes combinaisons constituent déjà, en elles-mêmes, une narration.

Tout se passe au milieu d'un loft pourvu de quelques accessoires, des chaises, une table, un divan et un matelas qui soutiennent l'action lorsque le besoin s'en fait sentir; ils interviennent de manière très pragmatique, uniquement lorsqu'on en a besoin. De nombreuses images sont en fait des gros plans des corps et des visages. La peau redouble l'écran dans une autre forme de *mise en abyme*, le corps projeté est cette interface, cette peau qui sépare le monde réel du monde imaginaire des dieux (il en est également question dans son œuvre *Performance*, créée en 1972).

La mortalité et l'immortalité, comme l'être, sont des objets de recherche pour Rainer, dans le cadre des « juxtapositions radicales » à partir desquelles son œuvre se constitue. Colliger des mots, des images et des corps est un paradigme constant chez elle, qui se retrouve dans toute son œuvre. Une figure de style qui se retrouve jusque dans ses dernières œuvres est l'image d'un couple homme/femme ou femme/femme, reposant sur un lit. Cette image est omniprésente, et elle est très révélatrice de la philosophie de Rainer. La verticalité et l'accent mis sur elle ont été un paradigme majeur de la danse occidentale, ce qui était une manière d'épouser les valeurs occidentales : il s'agissait de viser plus haut et toujours plus haut. La danse des années 1960 explorait la relation du corps au plancher, en vue d'une réappropriation d'un type d'espace qui avait été synonyme de saleté, de déchets, de laisser-aller, de paresse, etc. S'allonger est un état propice à la réflexion, dont la psychanalyse s'approprie. Cet état est associé à la réceptivité des pensées, de l'inconscient, voire à la découverte d'autres réalités et d'autres manières d'être. En s'allongeant, on accède à un autre état d'être, qui est libre des conventions et détaché de la rationalité.

Les relations demeurent un paradigme majeur des œuvres de Rainer. Les poussées-tirées sous-jacentes aux relations, et particulièrement aux relations femme-femme, aux relations de la femme avec le monde extérieur, avec la problématique de la ménopause, du cancer du sein et du lesbianisme sont présentes dans ses œuvres récentes,

Privilege et *MURDER and murder*. Elle y poursuit son exploration de stratégies théâtrales et de trames narratives, mais elle semble moins intéressée par les dispositifs visuels formels comme ceux qui intervenaient dans ses premières œuvres. Par contre, la rage et la révolution sont toujours présentes, rappelant les propos qu'elle tint d'une entrevue qu'elle accordait à *Art in America*, en juillet 1997 :

Thyrza Nichols Goodeve : *J'aimerais terminer en vous parlant, non pas d'histoire ou de souvenirs, mais d'émotion. Si vous deviez rattacher une émotion à chacun de vos films, quelle serait-elle ? Par exemple, quelle est l'émotion de *Lives of Performers* ?*

Y. R. : C'est une question difficile, mais d'accord. *Lives of Performers* traite de l'engouement.

T. N. G. : *Et Film about a Woman Who... ?*

Y. R. : La rage.

T. N. G. : *Kristina Talking Pictures ?*

Y. R. : Le deuil.

T. N. G. : *Journeys from Berlin ?*

Y. R. : Ce film traite de la rage. La rage projetée à l'extérieur comme celle que l'on garde au-dedans de soi.

T. N. G. : *The Man Who Envied Women ?*

Y. R. : L'outrage.

T. N. G. : (rires) *Une thématique commence à se dégager ici...*

Y. R. : Je voulais dire littéralement que la rage s'extériorise.

T. N. G. : *Privilege ?*

Y. R. : L'ambivalence.

T. N. G. : *MURDER and murder ?*

Y. R. : L'amour.

Cette rage toujours présente est une composante de sa révolte contre tout ce qui est systématisé, les conventions de toute sorte, les systèmes qu'elle examine à la manière de Foucault, le système médical, les codes des disciplines artistiques, etc. Chez elle, c'est la révolte qui fait la révolution. Elle le démontre dans une installation récente : *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan: Hybrid* (2002), où on trouve de nombreux renvois à la danse et au film, mêlés à des références à Vienne, Freud et Wittgenstein. Elle réintroduit dans le monde l'idée de révolte, qui semble absente du temps présent. C'est pourtant une notion essentielle à toutes les formes de créativité et de changement. La rage fait partie de *courage*, dans son cas au moins.

Chantal Pontbriand

Note

¹ Voir l'ouvrage récent de Laura Mulvey, *Inorganic Bodies*, publié dans le catalogue *Video Dreams* à l'occasion d'une exposition à Graz.

NEOFEMINISMS: POLITICS

THE STRATEGY OF IRANIAN WOMEN

"Islamic Republic" is a designation that, rightly or wrongly, has always seemed to me like a contradiction in terms. Res publica ("public thing," in Latin), from which the word "republic" is derived, supposes a social sphere where responsibilities are equally distributed. However, Hannah Arendt detected in the Greek foundation stone of democracy a rather elitist coefficient: to the patrician - the governance of the City, to the slaves and women - the crumbs.¹ Since the Enlightenment, this model has inspired our modern republics. It is not perfect, but it carries a sine qua non condition: the separation of the State from the Church. Yet, in the political life of Iran since 1979, both religious and executive powers, as well as parliamentary and universal suffrage coexist. Partly because of an Islam understood as a resource against the hegemonies imposed in the Middle East, this religious reference cannot be unilaterally considered regressive. Since the West doesn't have a monopoly on democracy, equality and equity can be pursued (and obtained) in other systems of thought. So, in the Iranian 70s, the impact of intellectual Ali Shariati advocating an Islam non ruled over by the clergy is still a vivid memory. As for Khatami, he tried to reconcile Islam's foundations with egalitarianism. Mohammed Arkoun thinks that it's a sensitive issue to "think Islam" because western modernity is itself in crisis.² Iranians, for their part, experience the shortcomings of a theoretical link between religious and executive powers that Shirin Ebadi, jurist and Peace Nobel Prize laureate, describes as "greatly fictitious."³ The role of Iranian women in the public sphere became antithetical to that of the regime when, in 2003, the majority of reformers brought into the Parliament fourteen women deputies;⁴ antithetical too to a public space that has, since Khomeiny, become a place of harassment for "badly veiled" women (an obstacle course

they learned to go around.⁵). Besides, what can we say about the pro-Islamists (something unseen in Muslim history) demonstrating in favor of the Ayatollah? Or, another "remarkable fact in the Middle-East" (S. Ebadi), that of the massive access of young Iranian women to graduate studies during the 90s?

These liberties have been secured due to political tactics. In 1962, the Shah's White Revolution, seeking to diminish the influence of the clergy, gave women the right to vote. The Ayatollah Khomeiny, in his turn, called young women from the country to the polls, aiming at a traditionalist electorate. This nevertheless constituted a "powerful symbol."⁶ These maneuvers benefited Iranian women in general. As the increasing number of university-graduated women became obvious to everyone, "(...) what the Islamic Republic had accomplished terrified its founding fathers."⁷

Nevertheless However, "feminism" isn't well thought of among Iranian women, even among artists. Thus Farah Bajull claims "the right to be feminine without being treated as an object." Many Muslim and Arab artists are of the same opinion. For Shirin Ebadi, the most important goal is to abolish discriminatory laws. Also, the history of a unified gender cannot be universal, despite the fact that women's struggles for their rights are similar. Iranian society—very sensitive to injustice—has many associations. Despite 39 years of severity, this confirms the existence of a critical coherence. The marginalization of women isn't as absolute as we thought. In the 90s, a new interpretation of the Koran (the exegesis of which was the prerogative of men for centuries) appeared necessary to the women editors of the Zanan⁸ review, friends of Shirin Ebadi who, herself confronted with the theocratic misogyny, advocated struggle "within an Islamic framework."⁹ Since the criticism of the intellectuals of Zanan was based on a clarifying hermeneutics, the project to amend the anachronistic precepts of the Koran with regard to an inescapable contemporaneousness would represent a stimulating reflection on the History of Islam facing itself. Artists, not so much in the open as waiting in ambush, left room for a fallback in order to neutralize objections from the orthodoxy. The stigma Westerners attack to the Hijab obscures reality, because the veil could be accepted if power and a useful purpose in society were to be conceded to women. For Ghazel, the veil, with which she has "grown up," doesn't represent a real hindrance to her autonomy. Her playlets filmed in autarchy "cuts" the chador diagonally. Her aphorisms titled Me—operating in the private sphere, house, workshop, garden—ridicule Iran's sociopolitical nonsense without hang-ups, and the disturbances of a somewhat unipolar New World: Keep the Balance, an allusion to the abuse committed in an Iraqi prison by American soldiers, are exposed through its ubuesque cruelty. During the Iran-Iraq conflict, she haughtily pushes a shopping cart in an empty supermarket. She also moves in quiet country places. Everything seems to be possible to her, as long as she resorts to being shrewd and brief. Of course, her veil seems to help her both to be and not to be: standardized enough to avoid being noticed, it is an innocuousness visa, a discursive camouflage. With it, yet like without it, the importance for Ghazel is to take action. Also, the civil society in Iran seems to be contained within home intimacy, although the unfortunate dichotomy private/public isn't without side effects.¹⁰ Between 1998 and 1999, the "Spring of Teheran" brought some liberalization of the press, but the upturn didn't last long.

Yassi Golshani crystallizes, for her part, the moment when every Iranian woman puts her veil on to go out. Her videos depict a moment behind closed doors when her mother is invited to unfold and fold up the fateful black headscarf. It's a bitter transfer, almost irrevocably wounding, between a woman raised in Europe during the Shah era and her daughter, an artist who has been forced to wear the scarf from the age of fifteen. Working in series, a sign of standardization and gregarious reprobation, Golshani liken this monstrous "social twinship" to a "death principle." To the view of Civitella Ranieri, Italia, to the park's labyrinthine paths, to a trip in jeans, bareheaded and with a t-shirt, follows a sad silhouette with a scarf and a coat. Then she is reversed in a mirror, a "thing so strange to itself." Were they given the choice, the majority of Iranian women would indeed go out bareheaded.¹¹ Golshani, whose work is spangled with references to the Persian heritage, sees in the shadow of a monastic shiism the "lost youth" of a whole generation. In In love With a Red Wall, Maria Kheirkhah incarnates the disappointment of a progressive/leftist generation that believed the Revolution would raise a wind of liberty on Iran. Veiled because she is concerned by the black tyranny of religion (M. Shirali), with perplexity she confronts an ideological wall that gives no reply. "Its red color is combined for me to desire in a broad sense." In her third photographic piece, she answers for her cultural autonomy, a book in her hand. A disturbing time when a person suffers from harsh pairings: inside/outside and hopes/disillusions. Affects and reason come to the surface in this plea in favor of discussion and debate. According to F. Khosrokha-

var, the gap between a "self-transcendentalizing State" and the abandoned people has then resulted in Iranians' "inner exile." In the same way, Kheirkhah incarnates the civic solitude of Iranian women. In Emergency (1997), Farah Bajull repeats a somewhat social and sexual insecurity: geared with a rescue bag and deep within her role of "air vestal," a stewardess anaesthetizes herself in subaltern narcissism and utilitarianism. While the public and private spheres are by tradition impervious in the Middle East, the people secrete internal complexities. After twenty years, Bajull comes back in Iran. Would her 15 meter torn coat symbolize Iran's cultural impoverishment due to the country governance of a conservative clergy? In speaking on her work, is she taking refuge in poetical, philosophical, metaphysical interpretations—that is, ahistorical? No, because her work rests on solid historical examples. Moreover, why would the Greek *nous* (us)—contemplation faculty before the ineffable—brought up by H. Arendt be out of the woman's reach or excluded from her works? Certainly, the ambiguity of the message seems to protect against authoritarianism, and every artist need to skillfully deal with it just like one would wield a key in a lock. Maybe the polysemy rags/veil/patrimony prevents women from the weariness of automatically having a political label. A yellow patchwork patched up with tears, fabric sarcophagus and heavy corpse reminding of the terrible hold of the Taliban, is yet another metaphor of the body as a crucial political issue. The feminine "bag" has always symbolized the body in Bajull's works: a handbag with an aggressive clip, a disturbing life jacket also expresses an anthropological sexual tension. The oppressive repetitiveness of Emergency is in the tradition of Martha Rosler enumerating, in the 60s, all her threatening kitchen utensils. Leila Pazooki analyzes feminine freedom of speech in Europe. However, Hydromania, a self-study, confirms this pursuit of individuality within the Iranian youth, an expansion of the Self far from the conception of a Muslim subject—a link in the familial and social group, in the chain in which private and public spheres interplay as cogs of a sexual spatial partition. The Iranian youth is certainly attracted to "the hedonism of a World/Culture." Yet, is this enough to overcome religious essentialism?¹² Nevertheless, Pazooki isn't under any illusion as of the meanness of the Western private sphere. What would this be? "To fall in love, to cry, to work, to eat, to read the newspaper, to pay bills, (...), to finally realize you're always consuming: food, sex, televised news, etc." So, to her, any private sphere seems to be controlled by a process of "transparency" that a self can't endure. In a swimming pool, she suffocates like "drowning," but underwater she also manages to capture the "dance on points" of a man about to swim. Reversed as a sky, this swimming pool becomes the horizon of a shifting masculine identity formatted by a patriarchal ideology that is ageless in every place.

The secret and the visible in Muslim countries have probably modeled the subject, but they couldn't keep in check the subtle escape stratagem designed against taboos and restrictions. Quoted by Y. Golshani (whose work is obsessed with a series of constraints), Gilles Deleuze advocates a dialectic subterfuge: "What moves and disguises itself within the series can't, and shouldn't be identified; rather, it exists and acts as differentiating itself in difference." Whether endured, overcome or outsmarted, the veil thus preserves the space of a mental secret that no theocratic transparency can threaten. Indeed, for such a threat to be effective, a guardian of the revolution should be assigned to every woman, to every thinking person. It would be a negative utopia bound to fail...

MICHÈLE COHEN HADRIA

Notes

- ¹ Hannah Arendt, *Condition de l'homme moderne*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1994, p. 114.
- ² Mohammed Arkoun, *La pensée arabe*, Paris, PUF, 2003, p. 4.
- ³ Shirin Ebadi, *Iranienne et Libre, La Découverte*, Paris, 2001, p. 195.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 234.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 138.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 140.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 155. See also Nouchine Yavari-d'Hellencourt, *Les femmes en Iran*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1998, p. 219-229.
- ⁹ S. Ebadi, op. cit., p. 156.
- ¹⁰ Mahnaz Shirali, « La jeunesse iranienne : une génération en crise », *Le Monde et Paris*, PUF, 2001, p. 28-30.
- ¹¹ S. Ebadi, op. cit., p. 96.
- ¹² Mahnaz Shirali, op. cit., p. 25.