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The Pleasures of Psychoanalysis

Sorel Cohen, *The Pleasures of Psychoanalysis*, Galerie Samuel Lallouz, Montréal. October 26-December 7 1996

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ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

MONTREAL

THE PLEASURES OF PSYCHOANALYSIS

Sorel Cohen, *The Pleasures of Psychoanalysis*, Galerie Samuel Lallouz, Montréal.

October 26 - December 7 1996

Freud's study and consulting room in Vienna was lined with richly coloured oriental rugs and wall coverings, shelves of books and glass cases holding hundreds of antiquities of remote historical and cultural origin. At the centre was Freud's famous couch with a heavy brown rug neatly folded at one end. The couch in association with Freud, is maintained as part of our cultural currency and is found in consulting rooms to this day. With the passing of time, Freud's work still serves as a point of reference in relation to current modes of psychotherapy, but it is his initial conceptualizations which still reside in popular thinking, guiding a stellar range of assumptions.

Sorel Cohen's exhibition presents a series of photographic compositions featuring the immutable couch in various consulting rooms. The layout is arranged with diagnostic-style text fragments, written in with a blend of uncited quotations from Freud, seeming excerpts of a case study situation. The approach is elegant, with formal boardroom-type materials which speak of stability and wealth through which we get a glimpse into the world of high-end psychotherapy. The exhibition refers uniquely to a female patient/male doctor situation, which recalls not only specific gender theories developed by Freud, but also the early practice of psychoanalysis, developed mainly through the study of female patients. The text directs the reading of the images, with the first-person voice of the artist fusing with the historicity and authority of psychoanalysis as a practice. This fusion of sources initiates a series of dilemmas which the viewer is called on to negotiate, mainly around the bifurcation of female roles. The exhibition serves to mark the moment in the current actuality of gender relations.

The central themes developed in "A Body that Talks", call on us to follow through a description of the hypothetical doctor/patient roles in a pattern suggested by Freud's classic theories of therapeutic transference. The mediating voice of the exhibition is understood as that of the artist speaking to the viewer; she reiterates the words of the psychoanalyst as a third person narrative. While two separate productive identities are being suggested, the opinion and pragmatic authority of the artist-as-narrator is drawn out of that of the therapist as an ideologically neutral authority. There is some confusion as to who is saying what, and with what authority.

The object of discussion is the patient, whose presence becomes manifest through this discourse. Through the

enunciations of the narrator, the female figure is constructed as the silent object of study, extracted from any social environment. However, we eventually realize that the intended "patient" has never been explicitly revealed to the viewing public, and we don't hear anything from her point of view. The couches lay empty in every photograph except for those few where we see a solarized ghost-image of a figure.

The major roles of the Freudian family seem to materialize in this scenario, with the patient as female child and the analyst and artist as parents. The relationship of these roles and their inherent imbalance is magnified by the influence of Freudian ideology as it has permeated our culture. For the modern-day viewer, discomfort is initiated through the fact that the intents of psychotherapy as a restorative process seem to be in conflict with the imbalance of this model, which perpetuates a subordinated class. Initiated within the framework of the Victorian era, psychoanalytic theory had a tendency to situate the source of broad social problems within the female character. Their distress was overwritten as an internal struggle with authority and the rebellion against the inherent insufficiencies of the feminine psyche; they were isolated in narrow biologically determined roles to the detriment of other aspects of human growth. Today, the pervasiveness of these ideologies makes it continually necessary to recover our evaluative faculties.

Freud's contemporaries questioned his emphasis on sexual drives as primary motivating forces in human



The course the analyst must pursue is one for which there is no model in real life. He must keep firm hold of the transference, but treat it as something neutral, as a situation which has to be gone through in the treatment and traced back to its unconscious origin and which must assist in bringing all that is most deeply hidden in the patient's erotic life into her consciousness and therefore under her control.

Sorel Cohen, *The Body That Talks*, 1996. Épreuve ektacouleur, 104 x 140 cm. Courtoisie Galerie Samuel Lallouz, Montréal.

identity. The feminist challenge of the past decades, added a broader public dimension to subsequent critiques, distinguishing psychologically produced neuroses from the difficulties of women's real social inequality¹. Feminism criticizes the institution of psychotherapy on the grounds that "it works in concert with patriarchal

ideology to enforce restrictive sex roles legislating female passivity on the basis of theories that infantilize and secundarize women in comparison with men"². One of the major areas of contention has been over the psychoanalytic emphasis on sexual seduction as a developmental role, with the tendency to obscure sexual



Sorel Cohen, *The Body That Talks* (détail), 1996. Épreuve ektacouleur; 104 x 140 cm. Courtoisie Galerie Samuel Lallouz, Montréal.

abuse and minimize *social abuses based on this gender relationship*³. In current times, this latter tendency often accompanies a broader move to essentially stigmatize the female character as defective, with the articulation of her experience deemed as socially inappropriate, compared to the dominant male, whose negative actions are accepted as a minor aberration from accepted roles. This image of the defective female is illustrated in one of the works, which shows a circle of afflicted tongues held in orbit by bass strings around a diagram of an inflamed ear on a male head. Here, the tongue is a sexual image rather than one of communication. It is the narrator who speaks by entitling it in third person, "Psychoanalysis: her tongue in his ear". This scenario recalls the practical psychoanalytic struggle with subjectivity, in locating the sources of sexual fantasy in the interpretation of transference and countertransference. These historical critiques lead us back to the exhibition in terms of a gendered role dynamic.

The personal cure or fulfillment as a female as suggested by the exhibition, lies in the successful expression of the subject's sexuality and in gaining mastery over her own socially untamed passions. The exhibition implies that the voiceless female "body" will mature into the disembodied female "voice", like that of the narrator, through successful transference therapy. Implicit in this is

the gain associated with the status and credibility as represented by the narrator's voice who has gained mastery over her own passions by separating herself from association with the role of the invalid body. This alignment is consistent with a patriarchal system of mastery, with adjustment/resistance dynamics being the norm. Participation in this dynamic of mastery amounts to promotion of a sex polarity structure⁴, which is prone to developing sexual inequalities. While the voice has privilege, it is not fulfilled as a larger social identity. The female role of the body lacks the status which opens channels of communication in her language of experience, and so remains impersonal, duplicated as many times as there are female bodies, completely interchangeable, and even disposable. This psychic split is a reaction to social pressures, a conscious and unconscious survival mechanism that originated with the need to reduce the chances of perishing. Both the demi-roles of the female body and the voice are highly valuable auxiliary functions that stabilize the patriarchal system. The central aspect of the exercise of power in a patriarchal system is the maintenance of an underclass, represented in this exhibition by the female body. More broadly, this "voice" role may further the reaches of patriarchal/sex polarity thinking, and even end up carrying out many of the duties of governing the female



psychic suffering

body as a resource and speaking for it. By the same token the Master role, in exercising the rhetoric of control, makes definite gain but doesn't evolve; it is immature.

Whether a given era favours the limitation of sexual contacts or an abundance of them, control is sought through gender-specific pressures exemplified in common terms such as "sexually repressed" or "slut". The intent behind these terms rarely corresponds to any descriptive or therapeutic intents; it's a way that men and women attribute inadequacy to the female identity. It often accompanies a frustrated attempt to get into her bedroom, either physically or voyeuristically.

The fact that in this exhibition the role of the therapist is exempt from professional examination is problematic because of the way that this type of gender dynamic has paralleled classic situations of social abuse. In both situations, there are patterns of resistance and adjustment. They both involve eliciting signs of trust from the subject, after an initial apprehension, and then submission or "adjustment" to the intervention of authority. In the exploitative situation, the submission to authority may take on the form of humiliation, with gratification to the authoritarian sexual self-image and imagination as the primordial effect, even more so than physical gratification. The initial signs of willingness and trust are subverted and become instruments of humiliation. This trust, along with the unconditional support by those who defer to his authority, take on an affective connotation; he nurses the fantasy that his power of attraction over others is invincible.

This formula is echoed whenever imbalances of power are maintained by overwriting the right to self-representation and validation of experience. Easy stereotypes may depict a race or gender as rebellious by nature with the need to be subjugated to authority, but not part of it, in order to fulfill itself. Depictions of complex social realities are supplanted by static, easy-to-focus-on images of weakness and disorganization, elevated as the inherent traits of the subjugated. Appropriation of the vital connections to the past, dispossesses its owner and reconfigures the image of the future. Alternate means of representation, which are outside the usual channels, may be ultimately less effective and risk perpetuating the imbalance of power. The subordinated class diverts energy to reclaiming dignity rather than to realizing its potential.

The argument or fear within a hierarchical system is that the power structure will be inverted, so that the governing class becomes the governed, or that a horizon-

tal structure with leveling effects would reduce all qualities to the same value. The alternative position that sex complementarity suggests is that the loci of power are varied within time and space. The challenge is to deconstruct this order through knowledge and fairness rather than cede to the pressures to take part in either the dominating or the subjugated roles, or participating in it as undiscerning spectators.

No discourse of madness can now know whether it is inside or outside the madness it discusses.

Shoshana Felman

The exhibition recreates the cool ambience of a professionally designed outer office with the photos being the voyeuristic window into the private consulting area. This reinforces the element of voyeurism in this exhibition (the term voyeurism is used in the press release), which entreats the viewer to take part in the process of attributing madness to the female identity. Considered as a social practice, it's evident that the often barbarous culture of voyeurism enjoins its spectators to suspend an integrated evaluation in order to facilitate diversion. The exhibition appears to borrow from such a scope of non-therapeutic objectification, providing a point of departure for individual critique on the part of each viewer.

As a visual approach, the construction of normative distances which rely on academic or scientific-style objectification generally tend to standardize the possible relationships that a work of art may have to the viewer. This essential conservatism compels us to embrace the madness of "socially inappropriate" gestures, informed by skill and experience, to evolve our creative roles and relations.

JOAN RZADKIEWICZ

NOTES

¹ Janet Walker, *Couching Resistance: Women, Film and Psychoanalytic Psychiatry*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 49.

² *Ibid.*, pp. XV, XVI.

³ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁴ Christine Allen, *Sex Unity, Polarity or Complementarity?*, *International Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 6, n° 4, sept-oct. 1983.