

WITNESS REPORT

ON COSMIC COSMETICS AND POLITICS BEYOND POLARITY

Press-conference / Performance

Melanie Bonajo & GENITAL INTERNATIONAL

Featuring; Annelies Bijvelds, Merel Cladder, Kinga Kielzcyńska and Janneke Raaphorst.

Duration: 50 min

Venue: de Appel Arts Centre

Date: June 27th, 2012

Location: Internal Atrium

At the time of commencement more chairs were called for – ferried down over three-levels of the newly opened building. The audience almost doubled the number of seats that had been arranged –neatly set out in front of a raised platform with a panel of desks and chairs. The light installation in the atrium of the recently re-opened building had been temporarily turned off and with this a passage-way was turned into a press-room – the set for a staging of publicness, publicness and visibility itself.

'Five long-haired women take to the panel', read my notes. Of course, long-haired is a notation in relation to the index of my own being as a woman with close-cropped back and sides. In conversation after the performance others' first impressions were 'silm', 'attractive', 'beautiful' etc... 'Young' could be a category with greater utility though – one that assists in a disaggregation of the complex of reception, performance and production of the female formation as image.

Certainly, youth is a category useful in thinking performance in art – in considering retrospectively the entrance of performance into white-walled spaces over the 1960s and 70s in the west – predominantly by women although not only – as means of negotiating phenomenological presence, of insisting upon bodily and gendered specificity. Age – and more particularly the ageing female body – is one of the great unspoken of performance and of the problematics of re-performance as they currently stand.

The spectacle that has become of Marina Abramovic's performance practice has its relation to an ageing body – and a resistance against such a condition through cosmetic augmentation. On making 'Mirror Check' in 1970, Joan Jonas declared that part of the piece would be its re-performance, by her, in forty years time. As 2010 progressed it was clear that the projection would not eventuate. Jonas stated that she hadn't anticipated the changed relationship that she would have with her body. And this is not a simple statement – not to be taken so easily as a value judgement that the relationship was worse per se. The relationship of subject to body is both in time, and related to time itself – it is rendered in the context of a broader social periodicity.

The work of VALIE EXPORT makes available the figure-ground relation of the body in performance and social time with particular clarity. Yet, 'performance' is importantly inaccurate as a medial category for the early pieces by which she is

best known. Previous to these, EXPORT had commenced her artistic practice in film – and it is as works of structural film that ‘Tapp and Tast-Kino’ (1968-71) and ‘Genital Panik’ (1968) are best understood. Whereas structural film classically takes the medium of film – its primary substrate – to be the formal element of celluloid. EXPORT’s radically feminist structural film understood the gaze as the primary content of film.

It is the gendered gaze within a social space-time that is the material of Genital Panik, activated and countermanded when EXPORT entered an art cinema in Munich wearing crotchless black jeans, looking fearsome and wielding small-arms. Who is looking at what, and why? The social context of a differently aged body – and of a time or place that configures differently the social order of receiving and producing gender through the gaze would change the piece.

The press-conference set-up at de Appel called rather to a Televisual era. The guerilla styling and confrontational frontality of EXPORT’s ‘Genital Panik’ had been taken at face value – lifted and twisted into the home-style media-tape of a paramilitary cell. The performance of an image, its composition, the clothes and styling of its protagonists and the list of demands were woven into a carefully choreographed scene.

Taking their seats, the five spokespeople of the ‘GENTIAL INTERNATIONAL’ spent the opening minutes shifting posture. Leaning back, crossing legs, uncrossing legs, leaning forward, hooking an elbow around the back of a seat etc. The ‘look’ of this preface was directed squarely at the audience. Perhaps already at this point, members of the audience came to realise that each person on-stage was wearing pants with a cut-out crotch. Perhaps they saw the color that the exposed pubic hair has received a colour makeover – painted red, blue, yellow etc. Even though the platform had raised the seats of the speakers to roughly eye-level of the audience, many attending would miss this until much later.

At no certain moment the press conferece commenced its active phase. A slide-show of images started up and the artist and convener of the event, Melanie Bonajo, began to speak. The imagery ticked over rhythmically, chain-linked by a set of thematics related to bodies – male, female, human, animal, machine and most often in part-combinations of these categories. The ‘GENTAL INTERNATIONAL’ was introduced and a position statement was read. It was easy for attention to drift between the spoken words, the images, and the visual presence of the speaker herself.

‘Where is your focus?’ said Bonajo – punctuating the declaration with direct address.



'Where is your focus?

Where is your focus?

Where is your focus?'

Intoned four or five times, after which the 'Action Pants' were explained as a metaphor for focus. The 'Action Pants' being the trousers with cut-out crotch – and 'Action' presumably as one's legs are covered from the elements whilst the crotch is left free for peeing, scratching, paint touch-ups or other such 'activities'. The opening speech comes to an end: 'Would you look at us the same way if we were sitting here as a man. Maybe we are sitting here as a man. Are you looking at the slide-show? Are you looking at our colored pubic hair? Long live ambiguity. Thank you.

The slide-show stopped and the next speaker read an essay addressing and theorising the queering that occurred within the closed performative project that the press-conference, and the 'GENITAL INTERNATIONAL' itself stems from. Theorists were cited – Frederick Jameson, Leigh Eidelman and Jose Esteban Munoz. I begin to wonder about the audience around me – it's mixed in gender, but certainly with more women present. I like that there's a water assistant who pops up upon request.

The third participant then stands to deliver – stepping up onto her chair becoming fully visible above the table. She faces a projected image of herself and recites a litany of questions. Her image – a recording – throws forward questions as well. They, the speaker and her image, ping-pong queries drawing a terrain of enquiry through an open edge of doubt.

At this point my notes devolve into a long meditation on the pants – 'What about the pants, they're all cut up. Were these pants clothes that the speakers would wear often? Where they purchased for the event specially – or was there an element of sacrifice/liberation at play? The pants seem to emphasise an everydayness, whereas EXPORT's clothes were clearly selected for theatrical impact.' Etc.

The focus of the press-conference itself returns to direct theoretical engagement with the fourth speaker who proposes to float some ideas in preparation for a book. The attempt is to draw a dynamic method of analysis through the writing of Marina Vischmidt and Michael Taussig – two thinkers very much of the moment. I drift again to note the audience and realise that I'd looked for diversity only in gender before – but what about age? Mostly young, with the occasional white-haired attendee. And going by visible markers of ethnic diversity – fairly squarely european in descent with a few exceptions. I smile to note a cute boy-couple cuddling in against the stairs.

Here I also note a strange lack of applause punctuating the presentations. Although, ofcourse, applause is not strictly called for in the structure of a press-conference. The role and relation of the audience to the staging is unfixed in this way - held taught with the direct address of speech but also slipping into passivity as though absently watching a news-feed.

The fifth person to the stand marks a shift – her approach is playful, she fixes the audience with an elusive look and declares the field of 'optimisticism'. This, she explains, is all about holes. 'It's not possible to see a hole; we can only see its edges. Does this mean women are more edgy?' Clearly then – in my concern for the pants I'm one to watch the edges.

Not so a member of the audience who was quick to respond to a call for questions. 'Bein' an old man...' he began, 'My mind has been on other things since the lady at the end stood on her chair. I think I missed something along the way. I wanted to ask; what is the reason for the pussy-show?'

Vivian Zihlerl.