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True Lies

In just a few short years, Keren Cytter has produced a singular oeuvre comprising dozens of films, works of fiction, and, more recently, theatrical pieces created with her new company, D.I.E. Now (Dance International Europe Now). Curator, critic, and *Artforum* contributing editor **DANIEL BIRNBAUM** takes stock of this prodigious figure—"one of the emblematic artists of our moment," he says—who is currently exhibiting at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, through April 4; who will stage a D.I.E. Now production this month at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, the Netherlands (March 8–21); and who will be the subject of an in-depth survey opening this spring at the Moderna Museet, Stockholm (May 8–August 15).

"STELLA!" "MY NAME IS LUCY, MAN." Immediately, things get complicated: Is her name Lucy or is it Stella, as the male protagonist—the bleeding man in the bathtub—insists? Keren Cytter's twelve-minute film *Four Seasons*, 2009, is a psychologically dense and convoluted story of a man and a woman living next door to each other (or perhaps in the same apartment—it's not entirely clear); it's rendered all the more confounding by a kind of metanarrative about divine architectures reminiscent of J. G. Ballard's icy science-fiction parables. "The structure seemed like a ghost town from a distance," intones a voice-over in a seemingly irrefutable American accent; subsequent musings describe cosmic constructions devoid of doors and windows but replete with celestial arches and stairways. This anonymous discourse is repeatedly interrupted by the most melodramatic music imaginable (the compositions of Ferrante & Teicher, whose dueling pianos scored many a 1970s love story) and by frenetic exchanges in which nominal confusion yields awkward and perplexing situations: "Stella!" "My name is Lucy." The very notion of the self becomes increasingly fluid. They are strangers yet share memories of passion and extreme violence. He: "I loved you then and I love you . . ." She: "Now you pushed me and my head hit the floor so hard my skull cracked wide open. You broke my back. My knees. My heart."

Cytter—born in Israel, based in Berlin, and operating ecumenically as artist, novelist, filmmaker, and dance-company director—creates work that lies "somewhere in between Fassbinder, John Cassavetes, *South Park*, and *The Blair Witch Project*," to quote artist Willem de Rooij. Asked about inspiration, Cytter herself lists Quentin Tarantino, Lars von Trier, Alfred Hitchcock, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Sam Raimi, the creator of the *Evil Dead* and *Spider-Man* movies—but points out that, as an influence, "none of them is bigger than the other, because generally cinema has a certain language which they are all talking. I don't think they are so different from each other." Another obvious figure to mention here is Jean-Luc Godard—although Cytter maintains he is a chauvinist with the mentality of an annoying

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This and opposite page: **Keren Cytter, *Four Seasons*, 2009**, stills from a color video, 12 minutes.

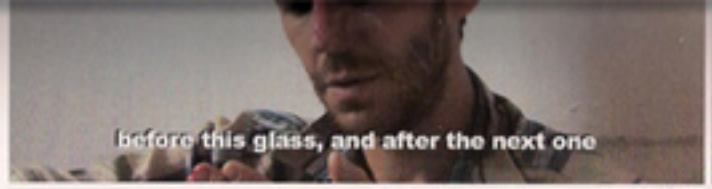
teenager. And Fassbinder? "I don't like evil people," says Cytter, "but I'm impressed by his quantity." In 1970, Fassbinder made seven films, including a few widely seen as very important—a feat that to most of us seems incredible. For Cytter, however, this kind of pace, while impressive, is far from awe-inspiring—after all, she has produced some sixty films in less than a decade. Not all of them are masterpieces, but together they form something of great significance: a new artistic syntax that is unmistakably of our moment.

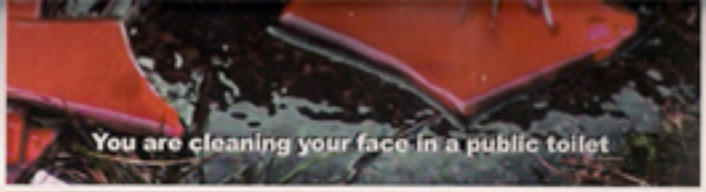
Crucial to this syntax is a sense of narrative under duress and run amok: No matter in what genre—novel, film, or dance production—Cytter's protagonists regularly lose control of their own stories. This was already evident in *Dream Talk*, a 2005 film in which a group of friends mistake themselves for characters in a reality-TV show. In the dense, rapid, looped video *The Victim*, 2006, five people gather around a table until one of them—the victim—is driven, by the strictly followed rules of a lethal social game, to suicide. In some of the filmic works there is a kind of short-circuiting that makes the narrative circular and self-neutralizing, as in the love story about Michèlle, a translator and amateur photographer, who, in *Les Ruissellements du Diable* (The Devil's Streams), 2008, appears on a screen watched by a man in love: "He can hear me talking, but he imagines my words. He is looking at me right now." Michèlle and the man meet in a park. They touch each other, but despite appearances they seem to be the same person. It's not so easy to figure out who is imagining whom on-screen, but they are both masturbating. In the final analysis, it doesn't matter, since neither exists beyond the eroticized screens projected by their reciprocal gazes. "Michèlle discovers that she doesn't exist, no more than the man who loves her," says the unseen narrator. "Michèlle understands she is endlessly reading this moment, eternally translating and presenting this nonparticular story."

If all this sounds a bit overwrought, it is. Nothing is too artificial or outrageously theatrical for Cytter. She has no fear of clichés: On the contrary, they seem to be her prime material, her basic building blocks. In the catalogue for her 2006 exhibition at Kunst-Werke Berlin, Cytter (in conversation with fellow Israeli artist Avi Pitchon, who appears in some of her films) elaborates on the role of clichés and ready-made behavioral patterns:

> A cliché for me is an absolute truth, it is like the practical bible, it is something that passed through many people and it is this one sentence that stuck with them all. At least one of these people must genuinely believe in it. If the majority holds on to it, obviously it affects them. I keep saying I'm one of those people but nobody believes me.

Her works are certainly full of visual and linguistic truism on every level: Irony





and moments of Brechtian *Verfremdung* themselves become the most predictable of elements. One comes to expect a kind of metacritical reflection on the narrative in progress, often in the form of common critical tropes and Freudian exaggerations. The latter in particular abound—for instance in *Family*, 2002, in which a young woman, in reference to her brother, tells her mom: "Don't you get it? He is sexually attracted to you and wants to kill Father." In that sense, Cytter's works almost seem to preempt critical assessment; they provide their own commentary. (As Slavoj Žižek once pointed out, to apply psychoanalysis to Hitchcock is like eating chocolate while drinking hot chocolate.)

Ironic or not, the visual clichés remain captivating: a vinyl record hypnotically spinning, blood dripping onto a white bathroom floor. Then the explosions begin: first a birthday cake, then a Christmas tree, and finally the spinning record. Everything is on fire. "Stella!" "My name is Lucy, man." "Stella!" We are back where we started: the man in the bathtub, his arm bleeding heavily. The foam from the bath fills the air, the window is open, and the white bubbles blend with the snow falling outside. It's snowing inside, too. A woman enters, complaining about the music. She is a stranger yet weirdly in the know. She and the man have never met; they are lovers. Cytter's works are full of this kind of blatant conundrum and absurdity—a defining aspect of a sensibility that might be called kitchen-sink surrealism. Typically, her work introduces us to young, desperate people in love and to haunted individuals in bohemian apartments. In the recent *Flowers, Cross, Rolex*, 2009, the lights are constantly, nervously flickering; sudden bursts of aggression make the mood vicious. A glass is dropped on the floor or thrown against the wall, missing somebody's head by an inch. A woman gets stabbed or shot, a young man throws himself out a window. Short intervals of sentimental music, blood dripping into a cup of tea. It often seems that the actors in Cytter's films, whether playing characters or narrators, are reciting words they are reading for the first time. Deadpan, they comport themselves awkwardly, not even trying to hide the artificiality of the situation or their awareness of the filmic apparatus in which they are embedded. Full of metaphysical doubt, they unconvincingly say pathetic things like

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This and opposite page: **Keren Cytter, *Flowers, Cross, Roses*, 2009**, stills from a color video in three parts, each 4 minutes 47 seconds.

"Blood. Sweat. No tears," "I promise you, dead or alive," "My head explodes when I think of the words that come out of your mouth." Meanwhile, lines like "It was early that day but too late in the script" (from *The Victim*) make clear that Cytter is keen on revealing the very structure of filmmaking. "I'm incapable of ignoring the fact that you have people acting to the camera," she says, "and that there must be something organizing it all." If it is understood by everyone that this organizing structure—namely, the script—governs everything at all times, then, she asks, "why not relate to it directly in the film?"

The same principals of Brechtian self-disclosure are at work in Cytter's fiction, which is as full of metaliterary puns and tricks as are her complex scripts. "Tibor doesn't know that his character is based on a story that his son Lars told in a press interview after his death—that's why he wonders whether his child will be a boy or a girl." That's a typical opening of a chapter of Cytter's *The Seven Most Exciting Hours of Mr. Trier's Life in Twenty-four Chapters* (Sternberg, 2008), an apocalyptic adventure novel based, she says, on a true story told by von Trier in a televised interview. The notion of truth doesn't necessarily seem pertinent to the description of this wild and thoroughly bizarre book, which is not a good novel in any normal sense, but which I nevertheless couldn't stop reading. The prose style itself is marked by repetitions and rhythmic effects. There are, of course, clear continuities between her lingaistic and filmic syntax, her sentences and her montages. Words recur mechanically, and phrases are stated more than once, if sometimes slightly altered. Someone walks through the door, then enters again, and again. Shots are repeated. As much concrete poetry as domestic metaphysics, her works function as simple musical scores built on iterations and small deviations and could, it seems, go on forever.

The notion of the score is germane to a certain improvisatory impulse apparent in Cytter's work. Most recently, she has been delving into a new discipline—dance. Some writers have claimed an affinity between Cytter's works and those of Berlin's Volksbühne (with its physically and emotionally excessive productions by Frank Castorf, as well as the philosophically more sophisticated genre transgressions of René Pollesch), but when asked about this alleged proximity, she distances herself from the "indulgence" of this theater. Instead, she emphasizes the openness of another Berlin institution, the Hebbel am Ufer, a cultural organization centered around a theater that has no permanent ensemble and often realizes experimental stage projects that cross the borders between disciplines. In collaboration with the Hebbel (among other institutions), she created an evolving multidisciplinary ensemble called D.I.E. Now, which stands for Dance International Europe Now; the idea is to actively break down boundaries between genres and to willfully

confuse the performer-audience relationship. (The group's most ambitious production so far, *History in the Making, or the Secret Diaries of Linda Schultz*, 2009, shown at the Kitchen in New York during Performa 09, is a multimedia extravaganza in which a man finds himself transformed into a woman, a woman into a man.) The start of this new career seems to have been rather spontaneous: Says Cytter, "We had to invent dances because we said, 'We are a dance company.'"

Conducted across forms and disciplines, Cytter's destabilizations of subjectivity are a cascade with no terminus. Alterity, in various forms, rules; no harmonious whole or fixed self-identity is in view. Perhaps most unnerving and telling in this regard are her subtle but constant manipulations of the relation between subject and voice: Grown-ups speak with the voices of children, men with the voices of women, and vice versa. The people we're watching, in other words, are alienated not only from those surrounding them—family, partners, friends—but, even more dramatically, from themselves. The natural link between human subject and human voice has been loosened—or eliminated entirely. There is always a fracture, a split or a dissonance, that divides and estranges the speaking subject from itself. And to the extent that it is shown to have no link to its own voice, the self is shown to be, finally, no longer identical with itself.

Works of art in which specific atmospheres and conditions of life are crystallized, named, rendered recognizable for the first time, are rare, and give rise to expressions such as *Kafkaesque*. For their part, Cytter's recent films capture situations in which immediacy and technical mediation, authenticity and artifice, collapse into a kind of indiscernibility that is recognizable today not only in Tel Aviv, Amsterdam, and Berlin, the cities where she has mainly worked, but, probably, in most of the world's cities. Just as the grand, static formats of old media—the giant movie screen, the TV presiding over every living room—have been undermined by the tiny, mobile, omnipresent interface of the wireless device, the heroic artistic projects that once sought to expose and deconstruct spectacle and mediatization have come to seem like artifacts of another age. In Cytter's work, the thorough infiltration of everyday life by media and the collapse of distinctions between authentic and staged are not treated as philosophically shocking or radical positions; they are, rather, regarded as a given and then

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Opposite page: **Keren Cytter, *History in the Making, or the Secret Diaries of Linde Schultz*, 2009.** Performance view, The Kitchen, New York, November 12, 2009. Andrew Kerton, Dafna Maimon, Susie Meyer, Luc van Esch, Fabian Stumm. Photo: Paula Court. This page: **Keren Cytter, *Untitled*, 2009,** stills from a color video, 9 minutes.

shrugged off (as they likely are, again, in most urban places around the world). Cytter suggests that the loss of authenticity and the more or less utopian hopes of overcoming this loss have themselves become clichés and readymades. And thus she is, I believe, one of the emblematic artists of our moment. The most salient of her influences in this respect might, after all, be Samuel Beckett, the twentieth century's quintessential interrogator of the coherent self and liberator of the voice, who dissolved fixed selfhood in a caustic solution of profound doubt. The speakers of, say, the linked works *The Unnamable* (1953) and *Not I* (1973) get lost in febrile soliloquy, dramatizing the death throes of the "authentic" self, while Cytter's characters have resolved the doubt and settled the question. There is no *I*, only the *not I* of prepackaged cliché and lines pewritten, and for Cytter, there is nothing radical or shocking in this message. She is not trying to be theoretically subversive; she is dramatizing the new normal.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Cytter's recent film *Untitled*, 2009, shot in the Hebbel-Theater, with an audience watching a damaged family's increasingly destructive conversations onstage as well as backstage. "Why do you hate me?" "Because you are a fucking hysterical bitch." "It runs in the family." It's a looped crisis that doesn't build to a climax, but instead lingers as a nerve-racking state. There are bursts of venom, then soft, melodious passages, and reactions from the audience: applause, laughter. Then a sudden scream of despair and, again, the most familiar of lines: "You are not my son." "Don't leave me this way." "So what you want me to do?" "Let's just run." "I want to die." The stage machinery is conspicuous, and as the actors (two of them well-known members of the Volksbühne ensemble) move on- and offstage, milling about among technicians, you are sometimes reminded through sound that the audience is omnipresent. ("I loved her once," says one character to another, in a seemingly private backstage moment. "I love all of you . . ." Laughter from the spectators.) The atmospheric sound track by Stephan Zielinski is, it turns out, a translation of the swine-flu virus's genetic code into a simple composition for four instruments; it sounds like an orchestra that's a bit out of temper. With the swine-flu tune punctuated by the noise from the audience and the actors' staccato line readings, one gets just enough information to figure out the basic drama: some kind of social carnage reminiscent of John Cassavetes's grandiose *Opening Night* (1977), of which this is, in fact, a loose remake. And then the Brechtian moment that is always close at hand, this time delivered by the producer backstage: "Tell him to stop improvising"—an injunction that reminds not just the actor but also the audience that the script, of course, has already been written. □

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