

# Keren Cytter's Hydra-Headed Practice Is Building Into a Surprising Narrative



Artist Keren Cytter

(Courtesy the artist and Zach Feuer Gallery, New York)

Modern Painters April 2013

Keren Cytter just wanted to give some prisoners clay and let them sculpt things they coveted. Then she was going to take those miniature artworks and display them “in two big pyramids,” in a church in the town of Mechelen, Belgium, as part of this year’s Contour, a biennial dedicated to the moving image. Simple, except for a few hitches: The prison did not want the incarcerated men to have molding clay, since the self-hardening material might be used to make a cast for keys. Also, the prisoner-artists could not be paid for their labor. “So this idea is gone,” Cytter says, resigned. “And now I’m busy with something else.”

That's a bit of an understatement for one of the most aggressively prolific artists of her generation, a 35-year old Israeli currently based in New York, who makes videos (about 36 by now), draws, writes experimental novels, and organizes performances like Show Real Drama (staged last year at the Kitchen, in New York, and the Tanks, at London's Tate Modern). She's just returned from a research trip to Morocco, in preparation for her involvement in the 2014 Marrakech Biennale. In September she is staging a multimedia performance with the chaotic electronic band Marina & the Mirrors at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.

In the meantime, Cytter is bubbling with additional ideas, one of which involves the takeover of the global photography market. This latest project is a plan to create a Museum of Photography (MOP) that, in a perfect world, would be housed in Norway, in an eagle-shaped ice building designed by [Rem Koolhaas](#). Cytter has been taking hundreds of Polaroids, at home and on her travels. "I'll flood the market with photographs and erase the history of photography," she says. "I will be the market. It'll be like the '90s, when everyone had a black-and-white poster of that couple kissing in the moonlight."

But at the moment, the "something else" consuming most of Cytter's attention is the latest installment of *Vengeance*, a seven-part narrative epic that she's halfway through shooting. (The early episodes, along with nearly all the rest of the artist's oeuvre, are publicly accessible on her Vimeo channel.)

Cytter is offended, or at least pretends to be, when friends and critics compare *Vengeance* to a soap opera. Why not quality television, she wonders, like *Breaking Bad* or *The Wire*? She had the heights of HBO programming in mind while she wrote it—that and Russian literature. The end result is a hybrid of high and low, flush with intentionally cheesy effects, deadpan acting, romantic intrigues, backstabbing, and office politics. It's as if Don DeLillo teamed up with Donald Barthelme and wrote an episode of *Damages*, the chronologically playful legal thriller, and then hired Hal Hartley to direct it. The series is addictively entertaining, which is not a term often used to describe video art—Ryan Trecartin and Alex Bag, notwithstanding.

Cytter exploits genre clichés then douses them with spurts of nonsensical weirdness. The characters in *Vengeance* cheat on their partners, coldly profess

their love, and dirty talk like robots: “Are you getting wet?” one man asks. “Are you getting harder?” his paramour intones. The dialogue is alternately flat and manic. “This is the way Americans talk,” Cytter asserts. “With a bit of silly excitement.”

In some ways, *Vengeance* is a synthesis of certain of her artistic signatures: hyperbolic plots, ironic editing effects, and affectless dialogue that can give otherwise mundane non sequiturs the air of Zen koans. Like her previous videos, it constantly circles the drain of meaning, tantalizing with clues and echoed references that almost, but never quite, add up to a whole. “I’m not so sure I would enjoy my movies if I saw them,” she says, probably kidding. “I don’t like so much talking. I don’t like to think.”

If there is a unifying thread in Cytter’s work thus far, it is the primacy of language and its power to hypnotize, engage, illuminate, and obscure. Throughout her career, words have been central, especially the friction between speech and subtitle, the gap between lips moving and overdubbed voices, the distance between raw emotion and how we express it, and the swell of conversational rhythms that turn dialogue into a prose poem. Language arrives through layers of translation, in a literal sense; the artist speaks English and Hebrew but has made videos in Dutch, French, Italian, German, and Tsonga, as well.

*Vengeance*, however, is written entirely in English, with a structure that at least gestures toward something familiar. The majority of the action revolves around an advertising agency’s preparations for a shampoo campaign aimed at “everyone who has hair.” It’s a bit difficult to keep track of the protagonists, who occasionally seem more like placeholders for ideas and observations than individuals. “I’ll write a story and I won’t care about the characters,” Cytter says, “because I can’t be sincere and say, ‘This person is really existing and his mother really died.’?”

But there is a plot, one that even makes sense, the artist promises. For the remaining episodes—“Wet Dreams,” “Matters of the Heart,” “The Daily Standard,” and “Beauty in the Eye of the Beholder”—Cytter has been focusing less on atmosphere, more on storytelling. “I was thinking of a series where you question its whole meaning,” she says. “But in the end, you do realize there’s logic to it.”

That questioning on the part of the viewer means that Cytter's videos end up conjuring a state of pleasant disorientation. And it's hard to escape a reference to dreams when reading commentary about her work. Her "storytelling reminds you of the structure of a dream or the way in which memory functions," curator Beatrix Ruf notes. "It repeats; creates uncertainty about connections, time, and space; is self-referential; and blurs fact with fiction." And indeed her videos have an elusive, meandering quality that, to her chagrin, many people often mistake for improvisation. "It's quite insulting," she says, "because I'm trying to do something so precise."

Cytter shows me a few scripts for recent works; they are obsessively blocked out, with nothing left to chance. As a result, not much editing is involved since each moment, movement, and juxtaposition is delineated on page. "There's a logic in my mind; the flow is important," she says. "It needs to be stream of consciousness but not too theatrical; there needs to be some melodramatic stuff for volume and excitement. I'm not taking the plot and chopping it into pieces; it's not so conscious."

This approach is something Cytter's oeuvre shares with a book like David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, which for all its highbrow references and footnoted loftiness is unabashedly fun and funny. Her videos veer from poetic trills to psychological ruminations, one-liners, and earnest voice-overs. They are difficult but entertaining, obtuse but never pretentious. Cuts are quick, at times jarring; the action loops back on itself. "When I'm writing," she says, "I'm thinking, I need to add something to wake myself up. I hope people see my works more than once; I want them to stop and watch. That's why I'm putting in lots of surprises—so they'll be confused," Cytter adds. "If I go see an exhibition and there's a video, I'll watch it until the point that I get it, and then I'll leave. I'm trying to surprise the viewers so they won't get it, and they'll stay longer." Such willful obtuseness can seem confrontational: You have to work for the reward and yet can still leave feeling lost, woozy from an unreliable narrative.

Cytter's intriguing and disjointed novel *The Man Who Climbed Up the Steps of Life and Found Out They Were Cinema Seats*, 2005, sheds further light on how she approaches a story arc. The novel is about a young woman watching a film in a theater; the projector breaks, segments are screened out of order, and the movie-within-the-book traverses various tones and styles: gritty coming-of-age

tale, serial killer slasher, art world satire, and conspiracy thriller.

Despite the similar sampling of genres in her videos, the artist claims not to “consume culture too much.” Nevertheless, her apartment is decorated with posters for Michelangelo Antonioni’s *L’Avventura* and Larry Clark’s “Tulsa.” She has acknowledged her affection for David Lynch. Dance International Europe Now (or D.I.E. Now for short), a performance and dance troupe she founded in 2008, cites inspirations ranging from Yvonne Rainer to Disney on Ice. In turn, given such an eclectic cultural diet, Cytter has generated an oeuvre that varies wildly in tone and aesthetic, from the Godard-inflected film essay *French Film*, 2002 (in which her parents raptly watch a pornographic movie involving anal beads) to the enigmatic mystery-thriller *The Coat*, 2010, a Hitchcockian riff that invests the game of sudoku with occult significance. *Family*, 2002, explores Freudian psychosexual clichés and incest taboos, employs an autistic acting technique, casts women in the roles of men, and vice versa. Many of her works include a Brechtian nod to the artifice of the narrative itself. There’s also an oddly high number of suicides, murders, and unexplained deaths in Cytter’s videos.

Such a madcap juggling of styles and mediums perhaps reflects Cytter’s life thus far, replete with its own stops and starts. She was born in the suburbs of Tel Aviv and moved to the city proper at age 19. Her parents, with whom she’s not exceedingly close, currently live in Brazil; one of her sisters is a doctor, the other is studying the sciences. Video art does not run in the family.

Cytter served eight months in the army before receiving a mental health–related discharge, then studied at Machon Avni, an art school in Jaffa—“the worst in Israel,” she claims—for a few years before being kicked out. She attended a better institution, Hamidrasha School of Art, for a single week; she’s yet to graduate from any art program. She has worked as a waitress at a strip club, as an art critic—and as a journalist, until she quit due to “not being interested in other peoples’ stories.”

At her debut solo exhibition in 1998, at Tel Aviv’s Gross Gallery, she showed a sculpture of a plant. Shot with a hand-held camera, her first video works, like the *Friends* series, consisted of gritty vignettes that mixed personal dramas with bursts of Janis Joplin karaoke and intentionally overwrought sentiment (“At the

end of the day I find myself empty of all feelings, like a heavy parachute after a long fall”).

From Israel Cytter moved to the Netherlands, where she was accepted in the Ateliers residency program and worked at the notoriously scuzzy Hans Brinker Budget Hotel in Amsterdam. (She’s not fond of Dutch people. “I hate Holland with every bone in my body,” she says. “The people are awful; they’re racist. The buildings are awful; the weather and prices are awful.”)

After escaping the Netherlands, Cytter relocated at age 28 to Berlin, where she spent six years despite not speaking German. This was a productive time for her. She made several videos, including *Der Spiegel*, 2007, which was included in the New Museum’s “The Generational: Younger Than Jesus” exhibition.

Cytter’s life and work were constantly overlapping. In 2010 she and a few friends staged a faux bohemian endurance art project, *Mai Thai University*, with the goal of indulging in the poet’s lifestyle: staying up all night, wearing black, ingesting drugs, sleeping through the day, and occasionally maybe writing verse. She invited five friends—one from Amsterdam, another from London—to live in her house in Berlin and engage in a three-day bacchanal. Each of the impromptu poetry students picked a patron saint—Cytter’s was Arthur Rimbaud—and the group members embarked on their substance-fueled journey.

“We were too old for it,” the artist admits. The first night they made it through dawn; after that, the level of debauchery waned. On the final day everyone sat down to write the poems. The experiment culminated in a reading at Berlin’s *Sin Bar* and provided fodder for Cytter’s later exhibition at *Galerie Christian Nagel*, including the related video *Konstruktion*.

The artist completed three other important works in Berlin in 2011: *Avalanche*, *Video Art Manual*, and *Open House (3D)*. The latter aped the format of a promotional real estate video to satirize upscale urban living; she shot it using 3-D technology.

“My whole motto is to be like Jack London; I never want to be part of the group,” Cytter says of her decision to move to New York this year. “In Berlin I felt the

group was a bit closed.” So now she’s here, living in the Hell’s Kitchen neighborhood of Manhattan, recruiting a small crew to continue working on Vengeance. As a director, she’s not much of a democratic collaborator. Cytter handles the camera and all the editing; her dialogue is dubbed by actors after the shooting, which cuts down on production and location costs. A New York jazz musician provides most of the music in her recent work. She finds her actors and extras through friends of friends, sometimes using Facebook: “I feel sorry that they’re working for an art project, not in Hollywood, and me with my heavy accent. I don’t finish the final script until a week before shooting, and I don’t have the time to explain.”

So far, it seems that the production of Vengeance has reached near soap opera–level proportions. Cytter has lost a technician, and with him, the apartment she had been using as a set for one main character’s home, so she’ll need to rewrite. She had wanted to have that character’s clothing store burn down, but cinematic arson has proved to be outside budgetary constraints. When we last spoke, she was planning a trip to the gay bar Urge Lounge, to scout for talent; another actor had balked at showing his penis in a nude scene but agreed instead to play a Ku Klux Klan member. “It shows you,” Cytter wryly pronounces, “what the moral values of people are.”

<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/895972/keren-cyters-hydra-headed-practice-is-building-into-a>