"I WANTED TO ATTRACT ATTENTION" Keren Cytter

words SKYE SHERWIN portrait FREDERIKE HELWIG

Despite growing refinement in the work of the Berlin-based video artist (and novelist and librettist), her use of cliché and overturned narrative and filmic conventions to address the cosmic struggle between order and chaos still has the power to shock

OVER THE PAST EIGHT YEARS, Keren Cytter has made more than 40 videos. In them, the young Berlin-based Israeli has unstitched and resewn the range of storytelling and behavioural formulae in moving image with a dynamism that answers the speeded-up reflexivity of culture at large, typically demarcated by the *Scary Movie* franchise, endless YouTube tribute videos and spoofs or the 'stars' of reality TV.

Yet as one of Cytter's works, the 10-minute short film *Les Ruissellements du Diable* (*The Devil's Streams*, 2008), demonstrates, no matter how familiar the material, there is always room for unfamiliar and even shocking variation. Recently on show at Thierry Goldberg Projects in New York and at the Rotterdam Film Festival, *Les Ruissellements* is a video without discernible beginning, middle or end. Dialogue (French audio and English subtitles, plus an additional Chinese musical soundtrack added to highlight the influence of Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai) cuts in and out, and credits pop up randomly throughout the production. With time out of sync, the narrative, such as it is, proceeds to blur masculine and feminine, fact and fantasy, viewer and the viewed (one of the characters appears both onscreen on the screen and simply onscreen), subject and object, and perhaps even bigger things like the notion of free will. And in the midst of it all is a full-frontal close-up of a man masturbating.

Each of the characters – one a man, one a woman – narrates the other's story, musing over the different ways it might be told: there's a meeting in a park, and an enlarged photo of that meeting which they obsess over, separately, in their apartments (cinephiles will note the comparison here with Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blowup* of 1967: both films are adapted from the same short story by the experimental Argentine author Julio Cortázar, 'Las Babas del Diablo', or 'The Droolings of the Devil', 1959). Through their voiceovers we learn that they are translators and amateur photographers: people involved in the transformation and manipulation of language and image, and thus able to effect subtle changes in how the world can be perceived. In *Les Ruissellements*, reality is unstable, art the only certainty, solipsism unavoidable, and consequently masturbation the only thing that seems truly, graphically and physically 'real'.

A standard Cytter production lasts no more than a few days, from the initial idea, to filming, editing and then distribution, both through gallery shows and via YouTube. And yet, though a graduate of the prestigious De Ateliers art school in Amsterdam, a winner – at Art Basel 2005 – of the Baloise Art Prize and a prolific solo exhibitor at venues across Europe, including the Kunsthalle Zurich and Vienna's MUMOK, she occupies the role of 'the artist' somewhat uneasily. "I studied art because I wanted to go to New York and wash dishes", she says somewhat provocatively when I visit her in her Berlin apartment.

What really separates *Les Ruissellements* from her best-known output is its controlled performances and visual finesse. Where the bulk of her work is more in keeping with the lo-fi appearance of much video art (as opposed to true 'cinema'), *Les Ruissellements* is notable for its controlled performances and visual finesse – painstakingly composed in shades of jade and ivory, full of atmospheric touches like a curl of smoke or flickering lights – and belies a new interest in objects, reminiscent in places of the work of David Lynch, such as when a close-up of the skin or the surface of a lightbulb is carefully framed and then lingered over.

And yet, despite its strong aesthetic, the literary adaptation (oh, yes, I almost forgot – when not making videos, Cytter has found the time to become an accomplished writer and novelist, and has also composed the libretto for a chamber opera) and the box of mirrors it

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sets up around desire, life and art, Cytter says that *Les Ruissellements* began with the penis. "I wanted to attract attention. And there are only three things that can do that", she says: "sex, violence or religion". This might sound like she's taking cover behind truism, but how cliché operates has always been a major concern for Cytter. Take her approach to 'I love you', three little words destined to grate senselessly against a billion other I-love-yous, a soundwall of pop songs or perfume ads. Channelling this into tragicomedy in the 2005 work *Dreamtalk*, the artist puts together a love triangle of slackerish twenty-somethings who pass the sentiment around robotically, with all the intonation of a voicemail greeting. Through their singsong stilted cadences, we learn that Girl loves Pretty Hero; Ugly Friend loves Girl; and Pretty Hero loves Sandra, the heroine of a reality-TV show the other three have gathered to watch.

However arbitrary it seems, the sentiments might just be heartfelt, yet their expression is repeatedly reduced to the status of a stock line. The characters are played to a script of types as limited as the crappy TV show they're watching. Though they are able to deconstruct their roles, they can't challenge the plot: Ugly Friend must leave the drama on cue, even if the others would like him to stay; and when Sandra seemingly breaks out of her role and steals the camera, the two remaining characters are left helplessly bleating in the dark. "I cannot see beyond the box in my heart", says Pretty Hero.

In exploring the parameters of this box, Cytter's films come brim-full of literary references, chart-topper clichés and cinematic quotes: the shadow of a knife upon a wall, or the instantly recognisable Ennio Morricone compositions on the soundtrack of a Sergio Leone movie, for instance. And though she seems to mine a concern long established by postmodernism, rather than enshrine a pointed dissection of how hand-me-down or self-conscious everything is, she also appears simply to take a mediated reality for granted. When it's impossible for her characters even to use the bathroom without commenting on what's happening ("I'm shitting now!"), a certain levelling occurs. This, her films seem to suggest, is just how the world feels. Self-consciousness, she points out, "is natural... it comes and goes. If you're too aware, you lose your meaning, because you get tangled. But I think we're just human, eh?"

Cytter's work reverberates with a tension between the order we impose on the world, through artmaking or social norms, and a pressing sense of chaos. While the *mise en scène* might be impromptu, and the actors are friends helping out, her artistic vision has always been tightly mapped. The dialogue tends towards high artifice, full of repetition, rhyme and rhythm that plays on the way familiar tunes demand that we sing along. Indeed, the script contains all her direction, from how the image will be shot and cut, to the actor's intonation and when music will segue into the soundtrack.

The bleed between Cytter's directorial strategy and the art/life amalgam is expressed in *21/5/04* (2004). Here a young man sitting

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on a park bench believes himself to be the director of all he surveys, able to control the action with a click of his fingers. At first everything feeds into his "certainty of my existence as a hero", yet at the apex of this heightened perception, his mood shifts and the certainty unravels. The world is revealed as "random". Such unruliness is also built into the fabric of the artist's earlier work. While it might seem there is no room for improvisational detours, no free will, perhaps, in Cytter's conceptual strategy, the script is constantly being undermined by the limited means at her disposal. Books, unwashed coffee mugs and other ephemera are left haphazardly around her locations; the amateur actors are often on the point of a cheeky smirk or of fluffing their lines: art and life are quite literally vying with one another for ascendancy.

Recently Cytter has been exploring what can be achieved with trained actors. As with *Les Ruissellements*, the 2007 work *Der Spiegel* (*The Mirror*) has a cast of professionals, which goes some way to calming the raucous, guerrilla atmosphere in many of her other productions. Its fast-paced dialogue is exchanged in an urgent chant between the principal speaker and a menacing chorus of supporting roles, as the heroine, an older woman who wears no clothes, pronounces discordant yearnings: "Dreaming of a beautiful man with 50 years of experience and a teenage soul." When the longed-for hero suddenly appears, he seems confused, approaching a chorus member before turning to the protagonist and hastily saying, "It's you who I've been looking for all my life." But thanks to his polished delivery, for once we know that the actor's befuddlement is intentional, a comment on the interchangeability of desire rather than bad timing or a case of nerves. What results is plainly subject to a more holistic artistic control, more nuanced in its effect and less accommodating of the actual intrusion of life into art. ⁑

WORKS
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Les Ruissellements du Diable, 2008, digital video, 10 min.
Courtesy the artist and Elisabeth Kaufmann, Zurich

Dreamtalk, 2005, digital video, 10 min.
Courtesy the artist and Elisabeth Kaufmann, Zurich

Four Seasons, 2009, digital video, 10 min.
Courtesy the artist and Pilar Corrias, London

Videodance, 2002, digital video, 13 min 41 sec.
Courtesy the artist and Elisabeth Kaufmann, Zurich

Der Spiegel, 2007, digital video, 4 min 30 sec.
Courtesy the artist and Elisabeth Kaufmann, Zurich