The Da Vinci dog.
A conversation between Keren Cytter, Hila Peleg and Alessandro Rabottini.

Alessandro Rabottini: You work with videos and short films, producing a sort of "homemade cinema" where the aesthetics of private mini-films collide with a complex statement about the interconnections between media and private life. How did these elements enter your artistic training?

Keren Cytter: After studying painting at art school I wrote art critiques for a newspaper, but suddenly I realized that I didn't want to become a journalist, since I'm more interested in how to tell a story than in the subject or the story itself. I've always loved to read and write, but I didn't want to spend my life describing what people call "reality". Then my father bought a video camera and I started telling stories with it…. You know, it's very hard to create something that isn't just "home video" style when all you have is a mini DV camera.

AR: You personally work on all the production phases, from writing the original script to shooting and cutting…. It seems that the most profound of all the aspects is your relationship with literature and writing.

KC: I like Russian, French and American writers very much. I like to read fiction and autobiographies, and maybe that's why lately I've become so interested in figures such as Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar and the way they mix these two genres, or how they play with multiple levels of narration, time, interconnected voices and, most of all, how they present their stories under other names, mixing fiction with autobiographical material.

AR: This brings us to one of the core aspects of your work: the relationship between life and its mass media representation. You use a wide range of references, from cinematic experience to reality TV, from experimental cinema to mass entertainment, from a documentary style to the fictionalisation of private life and personal feelings. One could call into play the idea of "deconstruction" for the strategies that you use: non-professional actors (generally, your friends and relatives); the non-correspondence of voices, characters and sentences; revelation of the script as a fictional support; and the continuous overlapping of scenes. I'm wondering if your work aims to be some sort of political antidote to the sentimental rhetoric perpetrated by the media, especially concerning the idea that life has to be experienced like a romance, with all the consequences this entails in terms of desire and frustration.

KC: I'm definitely not against the model of life as a romance, since I'm one of the biggest victims (or consumers) of romanticism. To give you an example: on the way to the airport in Tel Aviv I was speaking with a taxi driver about our respective lives and romances, and I told him that I was in a relationship that was more comfortable than romantic. I confessed to him that I was not in love with this guy. And he got so angry! He told me: "You MUST be in love, because without love the relationship has no meaning". His aesthetics about love convinced me and I decided to end my relationship, simply because it didn't fit into the basic model of romance. Now I don't see any kind of love in the horizon… frustration is the only thing I feel now.…

AR: My question arises from the fact that, despite this supposed "deconstruction", when experiencing your work one feels trapped in the narratives themselves. I mean, you tell stories that one can easily perceive in terms of identification and personal projection, and despite the clear perception that what you're watching is "false", you enjoy the flow of the events and of the narratives (which, again, calls Borges' multiple narrations to mind). What about this balance between analysis and pleasure?

KC: The narrative in itself doesn't really interest me. I think that none of the stories I've written are truly original. Maybe that's why they bring pleasure: because they sound familiar. I'm more interested in the flow of the film, the way that every story can be told in different ways and can accumulate different kinds of information yet still be understood. Analysis is merely a tool that creates different kinds of images with different rhythms, and this is exactly the point of origin of the pleasure you've mentioned: the chance to follow different streams of information and still enjoy the flow of one narrative.

AR: Your words about fitting the supposed "basic model of romance" reminds me of an interview with Roland Barthes that I read some time ago (it's amazing, but it was published in Playboy in 1977!). He talks about the "romance" as a narrative mode with a beginning, an end and a crisis in the middle, and he says that this is the method that society gives people in love so they can reintegrate themselves in collective life, since "being in love" is somehow perceived as being "out of mind". In a way, these words echo a particular cultural climate – the one of the Sixties and Seventies – when "narratives" meant "ideology". What's the difference today?

KC: That's amazing! Barthes published an article in Playboy the year I was born! Everything that happened in 1977 acquires additional meaning for me, even though it's hard for me to say anything about that cultural climate aside from clichés about hippies, free sex and drugs. I think that today people are going back to narratives to avoid the abstraction that mainly evolves from the media. What we refer to as "narrative" today is a stable ground for every human being who understands that he or she was born one day in order to die another. As long you're alive and are not suffering from some kind of mental illness, you can't avoid narrative.
The only difference I see is that today the narrative is something that has more to do with the presentation of politics than with the existence of love, passion, knowledge or science.

AR: Many characters in your work relate their lives to some kind of pre-existing text. They experience a continuous shift between the idea of a text (and also of the act of shooting) as documentation of something that already happened and, on the contrary, the idea of a text as the script to be played, as the starting point of something that is still to be performed. What does this mean to you?

KC: I'm currently writing a script in which the characters discover that what they say is not related to the plot or the set. One of them suggests that they might be reading the wrong script, and the other concludes that if this is not the right script, then that means they're lying. Nevertheless, their lies and discoveries remain part of the script…. I think that a "script" can be the name for every spoken word or action. It's touching subjects such as the "certain", "the uncertain" and "determinism" in everyone's daily life. One could say that this kind of "script" can be every action that has happened, could happen or will happen in this world, at any moment, anywhere….

(Hila Peleg joins the discussion on March 2nd)

Hila Peleg: I think it is interesting to talk about the relationship between realities and scripts, for it seems to me that your work exploits the encounter and clash between the two. Formally, scripts are sort of enclosed, ordered universes. They have a defined format that provides an overall interpretative framework for their elements and determines the performative boundary of all action. Somehow one could say that reality starts where the script ends or fails. Because reality in that sense is looser, full of potential and unexpected shifts, more like Keren's broken scripts and their unsynchronised nature.
This unsynchronised relationship between the setting, the script and the protagonist's inner reality or subjectivity produces uncertainty: the same uncertainty that is revealed in everyday moments of participation in the world. This uncertainty is a great creative force; it fuels the imagination. It is interesting to think about participation and integration in the sense of activating imaginations, "putting them at work". Rather than being trapped by the narrative,

I feel that what we look at in your work is the creative process itself, the creation of possible subjectivities and social realities.

KC: Last night I was thinking about a guy I know, trying to figure out why I find him so boring even though he's such a great guy. And in the end I had to admit that he's boring because he always says what he thinks. If he has something serious to say, he says it with a serious tone; if it's a joke, he smiles before he telling it. In his words, form and content coincide perfectly, and morality and expressions are perfectly synchronised, in the sense that he would never say something morally wrong since he would never accept ideas that are considered bad…. And, obviously, this certainty kills the imagination, creativity and other such rare beauties.

HP: Yes, but it's also about changing something solid into something liquid, creating a different kind of access to the abstractions of the mass media – for example, these clichés and normative notions of social life that we identified before as the "script". Your films, like abstract formulas, generate a multitude of meanings and possible readings, based on an abstract, indexical order composed of motifs, gestures, textures and other categories. There is this amazing tension between the chaos you produce within the film, on the one hand, and the overall order and logic on the other.

KC: I think that the concrete must (or should) be placed in an abstract structure, and that the abstract which is not build on logic and facts is not abstract but simply non-sense.
As to the way the videos work, I think it is similar to the way I handle political arguments. Usually there is one line on which my argument is constructed – for the most part, it's an emotional reaction – and then I try as much as I can to show that I'm wrong. In doing so, I try to make the argument more interesting, more controversial. If absolute truths do not exist, then it's all a matter of how much you're aware of the logical "mistakes" you make….
Just to create a parallel with my work, when I'm thinking of a video sometimes I start to think about a certain emotion I experience. Then the feeling is so clear and bold that I feel it's pathetic, so I break this feeling by adding instruments that are considered "flat reality". Now the feeling is not as clear anymore, but the concrete layer gives the viewer a logical reason for this feeling that existed. To convey some moment of the feeling (that got lost) I use repetitions to show how these two elements functions with or without each other at the same time…. Of course, I'm just analysing the process right now. I don't actually think that way when I'm writing.
Another way to rouse the viewer is by adding controversies that are related but don't follow the narrative precisely, by adding my words or thoughts to the characters, so it seems for a moment that they can exist outside the story.

AR: What both of you are saying is interesting, since you're speaking a moral idiom. It implies that Keren's work – though it is based on a very strong awareness of cinema and TV-like languages (formally and structurally speaking) – has a core that deals with pivotal moral issues, such as the relationship between one's personal beliefs and values, reality and the space for interaction. This shows that the attitude of contemporary artists towards the media landscape has changed: from the Pop Art sabotage of the figures and icons of the mass culture, to the aesthetic camouflage effected by postmodern appropriative practices, we're now facing new problems, since our relationship to the media and how they shape reality is now a matter of intimacy. The media are entering the realm of feelings and people are trying to use interactive technologies to create personal narratives. But, as we all know, this is very problematic. We no longer share the enthusiasm of the early Nineties towards the potential use of participative technologies to penetrate the very core of democracy. What do you think about the new paths that artists can show in this contemporary landscape?

CK: I don't think that the media's intervention in private life is a problem. Generally speaking, what we call "the media" is a new language that is just starting to develop. It must happen and people are learning how to use this language. The more they learn, the more the technology will develop. People are starting to represent themselves and use media as naturally as they use their mouths. The media are just tools of expression. They are new and very effective tools, just as realistic painting was many centuries ago. Leonardo da Vinci once wrote that painting is better than poetry because it's so realistic, and that even his dog responded to his painted images, which is something that would never have happened with poetry. I think that the same thing is happening with the media today.

HP: For me, the mass media – such as newspapers, cinema, television and advertising – have always penetrated the private sphere ever since they were first implemented. What indeed changes is the relationship between private fantasy and public reality. I can see how Keren's work follows a long and consistent artistic tradition of interrupting and appropriating means of mass communication. These practices deal with the condition of the "mass subject", deploying excessive mass communication tactics in order to expose mechanisms of representation, perception and effect. What is so unique about your work is that it is not about media. The films and, inside them, your characters really become mediums. They seek this state of being taken over, of becoming fluid and losing themselves.
Alessandro, in relation to interactive technologies it is important not to forget that in certain cultural landscapes (I am thinking of the importance of the Internet for the political discourses in and outside of Iraq or China, for example), participative technologies are still becoming an ever-more crucial tool that enables democratic processes, regardless of the enthusiasm of the market.

AR: Another question I would like to pose is about two main strategies that Keren uses in her work: irony and sentimentalism, which are also two of the main strategies currently used in today's advertising industry to convince the customers, since they are now perceived as more "intelligent" (i.e.: the more advanced advertising strategies are self-reflecting and, sometimes, self-ironic or at least metalinguistic when they don't try to create "dreams" but instead flirt with the audience as if they were aware of the game).

HP: There are other less sophisticated but still highly effective motifs that are used in advertisers' branding strategies and they also pertain to Keren's aesthetic language, such as mystery, sensuality and intimacy.

CK: Languages are changing very fast and the viewer is now starting to understand the concept of advertisement. If advertising wants to be taken seriously and have some effect on the viewer, its language must develop. Getting back to my work, I use a certain emotion and then add different layers to it, because I know that the viewer is already able to read and understand simple messages like this. Therefore, if I want to keep the viewer interested in my words, I must develop the way I talk. And here is a line all of you have heard before: "Human nature doesn't change, only its means of expression does". It's pathetic to say all things are so simple, but it's true. And with all due respect for Da Vinci's dog, painting, cinema, literature, television and so on are aimed solely at influencing humans.

HP: It reminds me of what Robert Bresson said: "To create does not mean to twist, deform or invent people and things, but to create new relationships between people and things that already exist, the way they are."

AR: You're presenting two new works at GAMeC: *Atmosphere* and *Dreamtalk*. They form a loop even though they don't show any clear interrelationship. Can you tell me more about the "inner" relationship they have with each other?

KC: The two videos are part of a video triptych, but in the installation at GAMeC the last one (which was the second one in the original order) will be missing. I wanted to write three videos that were completely different from each other in colours, content and style, while relating to one another through the underlying story. The videos should be

deconstructed by different means: in *Atmosphere* it is achieved by editing and dialogues that overlap the images in a dreamlike atmosphere. In Time (the film that won't be shown at GAMeC) I tried to break the story by means of storytelling, through the figure of the protagonist who travels in time, and therefore creates repetitions of images and situations. The last video, *Dreamtalk*, is deconstructed through words and rhythm. The same words are repeated over and over, describing actions and thoughts, overlapping one another and creating a kind of music through the speed of their flow. In this work, the editing is forced by the text. Then I tried to connect all three in one storyline, which is supposed to bridge three dimensions of existence. In *Atmosphere* two girls are depicted in a vague and dreamy atmosphere, even though the story is supposed to take place in reality. At the end, one of the two girls is left to tell another story, a fictional one entitled Time. When the leading character of this story goes back to sleep, he dreams of the third video called *Dreamtalk*, at the beginning of which the voice of the storyteller from *Atmosphere* is heard, to remind the viewer that this dream happens in a fictional story. *Dreamtalk* portrays a group of friends watching a reality show, and all of their ambitions and relations are connected to those of the characters they are watching on TV. Suddenly the camera that is documenting them (or documenting the reality show) disappears. That leads us back to *Atmosphere*, which begins with the girl who finds the camera that was lost in the dream of the story she told, and with that camera she can tell now her story.

I decided not to show Time because for me it fell between the two: the video focuses mainly on the plot and time breaking the story, and when I looked at the result I thought it was not enough. Suddenly the connection and the narratives were not as strong as the deconstructed parts. The breaks themselves were connecting powerfully without the logical connection, without the narrative itself.

Keren Cytter (Tel Aviv, 1977) is an artist, she lives and works between Berlin and Amsterdam
Hila Peleg (Tel Aviv 1976) is Curator at the Kunstwerke in Berlin
Alessandro Rabottini (Atri, 1976) is Curator at the GAMeC – Galleria d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea of Bergamo