

discussed studies by the metabletics (the psychology of history) pioneer J.H. van den Berg, on the opened body (1959) and the closed body (1961). They would be splendid points of discourse for the documenta. As would, by the way, George Bataille's texts on the body, not as an anatomical concept, but as a body that is tormented and tortured. What would we think of a master class based on texts by Marquis de Sade, illustrating live demonstrations of the newest surgical techniques? If these images are too gruesome for the new Documenta chief, then he could certainly make something of Agamben's *nuda vita* itself. For however deeply engaged his above-board approach to human suffering, the term is nonetheless a play on Luigi Pirandello's novella, *La vita nuda*, with its immortal first sentence: 'Un morto, che pure e un morto, caro mio, vuole anche lui la sua casa.' (A dead person..., even he wants a home of his own.) This is the naked truth of life, not in the bloody images of today's media, but in the detached irony of a masterful writer in a direct encounter with the absurdity of art and life. Pirandello, and of course Ionesco and Beckett in his wake, translated the incomprehensible horrors of naked life into the absurdity of art. The truth of the opened body, which is naked life itself, is processed into a closed art form. The alternately closed, opened and abandoned body then operates as a comic trio that finishes off gruesome reality with terrible jokes. We shall see if Buergel also dares to take on that side of Agamben's naked truth.

↳ Erik van Lieshout, *Rotterdam-Rostock* (2006), courtesy Stella Lohaus Gallery, Antwerpen/Galerie Arndt & Partner, Berlin/Zürich, foto Suzanne Weenink

← Erik van Lieshout, *Rotterdam-Rostock* (2006), video stills, dv on dvd, 17 minutes, courtesy Stella Lohaus Gallery, Antwerpen/Galerie Arndt & Partner, Berlin/Zürich



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Repulsion

After seeing Roman Polanski's film *Repulsion* (1965), Keren Cytter decided to make three short films based on that thriller. At METROPOLIS M's request, she explains her motivations and lays out the whole trajectory: from her first impressions of the film and her adaptation to the horrific dénouement, at the point where life always triumphs over art.

By Keren Cytter

The titles are rolling inside Catherine Deneuve's eye. She works at a beauty salon and shares a London apartment with her sister. When Catherine

Deneuve walks down the street there's always a feeling something bad is about to happen. Almost every time she roams the streets she meets a young man who knows her and courts her. We think that maybe the pursuer is the bad thing about to happen. It's not clear whether she thinks as we do, or is simply playing hard to get. The sister has a lover. He is bald and selfish. Catherine Deneuve hates him. One day the pursuer waits for Catherine in a cafe. They are supposed to meet. He looks at the clock and we, without knowing what time it is in the movie, know she's late. The pursuer asks the barman if the clock is accurate. The barman answers 'no' and the pursuer keeps on sitting at the bar.

The sister drives to Italy with her lover and leaves Catherine home alone with the rent money. Catherine Deneuve meets the pursuer again. He kisses her but she turns away and runs off. She washes her mouth and brushes her teeth in the bathroom. When she goes to sleep, she hears voices and footsteps. We don't know if they are real or

not. Anyhow, Catherine Deneuve barricades the door with the dresser. In the middle of the night someone moves the dresser violently, enters the room and rapes her. Although there's no sound, we can feel her struggling and helplessness – we see the man's hands and her screaming face – no one can hear her. In the morning she wakes up on the floor. We don't know if any of this really happened or not. Maybe it's her sister's lover, maybe they didn't drive to Italy. Maybe he murdered her on the way to the Tower of Pisa and now he is on his way back to the same house to torture and rape Catherine because she doesn't like him.

One day the pursuer arrives at Catherine's house. He talks of love and of how miserable he is without her but she remains silent. We know something bad is about to happen but we don't know who or what will make it happen. The pursuer turns around towards the door and Catherine kills him with a candleholder or some such heavy household object. She strikes his head and doesn't stop until

he is dead. She drags the body to the bathroom, fills the bath with water and throws the body in. It sinks and then bloats up, the water flows out and the bathtub fills with blood. Now we know that Catherine Deneuve is the real psycho.

** She receives a postcard with a picture of the Tower of Pisa from her sister. She hears someone knocking on the door – it's the landlord, he wants the money. She doesn't answer him and he breaks into the apartment because she hasn't boarded up the door well enough. He sees her wearing a white gown – skinny and pale, sitting in the living room. He's disgusted with the place and the rotten food and the darkness and asks: What about the rent? Katherine brings him the money and says she's sorry, she forgot to pay. He's shocked that she has money when the place is so smelly and disgusting. He tries to sleep with her, and it's a mistake – because Catherine Deneuve cuts his throat with a razor blade. Jazz music is playing in the background, drums and trumpets. She rolls his body inside the carpet.*

** Some time passes and the sister comes back home with her lover. They can't figure out what's going on – why is the door broken? They enter the apartment and can't believe the stench. The lover asks the neighbours if they have heard anything, and the sister enters the bathroom. She sees the pursuer's rotten, bloated body in the bathtub and runs outside horrified. Then they find the landlord's body rolled up in the carpet. They find Catherine in a faint under the bed. The neighbours, the sister and her lover watch – she's unconscious. The lover takes her in his arms and the camera moves to show the mess in the room, until it focuses on a photo that's lying on the floor. In the photo we see Deneuve's family in black and white; the camera pans over the faces of the family members and stops on the face of a blond girl who is staring at the corner and looks a little demented. That's it – the movie is over. We think of the photo*

and of Catherine Deneuve and of what went through her mind – and although we can't explain it, we understand.



I saw the movie about a year ago at the house of a friend who went mad. The sofa I sat on was covered with the hairs of a German shepherd who wouldn't stop sniffing at my crotch. On my friend's desk was an aquarium containing an Iguana that struck the plastic walls with its tail every time Catherine Deneuve murdered a man. The living room itself smelled of a dead mouse that had rotted away beneath the wooden floor.

When I left the house to buy cigarettes – and mainly to get out of that house for a while – I was filled with repulsion and disgust. The people looked sick and stupid, the streets were dangerous and the houses looked like coffins not properly nailed shut. For the longest time I was overwhelmed by a feeling of disgust, alienation and claustrophobia. To rid myself of this suffocation I decided to make a movie that would describe these feelings. The movie would focus on a weird and frantic fair-haired girl. The story about her actions would be less interesting than the moments in which the girl finds herself alone, and, without any warning, an atmosphere of suffocation overcomes rationality, reality is swallowed by paranoia, and an uncontrollable repulsion drives her slowly away from

life.

I decided to make three short movies that focused upon the protagonist and the two supporting characters. The interaction between the three characters would create tensions that led to a cruel death at the end of each movie. The characters would change parts – the killer in one movie would be the victim in the second and the witness in the third, and vice versa. This way the three short movies would serve as three layers of one movie that had no plot. I recalled the actions and objects from the original movie that had left the deepest impression on me and decided these would be the actions presented in my three short movies.

I decided to project the movies in a gallery – this way I would be able to spread that awful feeling through space. Great!, I thought, the loathsome spectator would try to seek out the real plot, but the story would trick him and dance between the three movies like a drunken clown avoiding raindrops.

My imagination ran riot. I imagined the young student, the assertive curator and the smiling collector hesitantly entering the gallery and walking through the movies in fear and loathing. I was filled with excitement and vicious joy – repulsion would spread through the gallery space like a thick fog. Cries of horror would be heard periodically from small speakers and visions of blood and death would be projected on the screens. Wonderful!, my soul rejoiced, the nausea would cross the gallery like a horrible fighter jet ready for action and every thought or common sense notion would remain broken and silent like a ruined city after a bombing.

I wrote three scripts, found three actors and shot the movie in three days. The scripts were satisfactory – the story didn't exist and the plot wasn't convincing,

but the actions were absolutely decisive and arbitrary. In one movie, for no special reason, the protagonist answered the phone with fear and horror; in the second movie the phone was angrily disconnected by one of the supporting characters; and in the third the phone turned into a murder weapon. The actors – friends – cooperated: one day the viewer turned into a victim, the second day the victim became a killer and on the third day the killer became a viewer. The symmetry was perfect.

A few days after the shooting ended, I started editing. Time and time again I went over the moments in which the protagonist screams in horror, and laughed to myself in devilish delight. In between the quiet and thrilling moments I inserted a slow piano tune consisting of one note played at different intervals. I turned the volume down during the quiet parts and doubled it during the threatening parts. Alas, all that was left to do now was to watch the three movies.

I watched them once and then watched them twice, I watched them thrice and with every watching I became aware of another detail that was missing, another idea that was omitted, an element that had never arrived. The horror turned into a joke. I was filled with sorrow and shame; the loathsome spectators left the gallery space as arrogant as ever, without a scratch, fear or concern. They mocked me. The hollow students wrote cheerfully in their notebooks, 'a pastiche of a horror movie'. The arid critics described it as a 'video which relates to a cinematic genre' and the fat collectors rolled into the gallery pleasantly speaking about the 'exhibition'. Without repulsion, nausea or fear, the spectators went back to their little sushi pleasantly mixed with wasabi and soy sauce, as if the sky never fell down. De-



cay and death turned into a conversation topic, repulsion and death became a small article.

My friend's house stood where it always has, in the same neighbourhood – a house built of small red bricks in a neighbourhood where all houses are made of small red bricks. In order to distinguish the houses and to add a little colour to this gloomy and tacky neighbourhood, the residents had decided to decorate the windows with small colourful flowers. The neighbourhood became tackier and gloomier. I hated the place. I hated the streets, the buildings and the narrow sidewalk.

I knocked three times on the door. I heard steps – it was my friend – and I heard him talking to someone; it was his nauseating girlfriend. I heard him say that it's me – the crazy one. I heard his girlfriend telling him to open the door. The lock turned and the door opened. My crazy friend was ten centimetres shorter than me – I despised his height and his small dimensions. He approached to kiss me three times on the cheek, but I couldn't bear the scent of sweat and deodorant and recoiled from him as a terrible nausea turned my stomach. He drew back in fear and asked me to come in.

I told my friend I wanted

to watch Polanski's movie again and he just pointed at the video shelf and said, 'please'. He went to the kitchen. His filthy girlfriend never even bothered to say hello. Better yet, she was twenty centimetres shorter than me and that's why I despised her even more. I approached the shelf on which videos were stacked in a row (poor bourgeoisie!), and looked for the movie. But unfortunately I couldn't find it.

I called my friend and went on checking the titles of the movies. The stench of the dead mouse rotting under the wooden floor suddenly wafted up, driving me dizzy and turning my stomach, and I felt as if my entire body were rotting, containing thousands of dead mice. I turned my head, and for a moment wasn't sure if I was imagining it – the entire living room was made of small ugly mice rotting in piles, one on top of the other, like a mass grave, like a torture chamber. I looked at the desk and searched for the poor Iguana, but there was no aquarium to be found, just a deep stench that filled my nostrils and flowed in my veins. The stench of death.

I called out his name again. But he did not answer and I went quickly towards the kitchen. The kitchen smelled much worse. Dozens of live mice were running to

and fro across the stove, quickly chewing the remains of rotten food and decayed bodies of dead mice. I left the kitchen and closed the door. I couldn't lock it, for I had slammed it a few times until the handle broke, because of the stress. The walls started to close in on me and suddenly I knew where my friend was. I didn't want to check because I knew the sight would be horrific, perhaps it would shatter me to pieces. I stood in front of the mirror and looked – but the mirror was no longer a mirror, it was a picture – and in the picture I saw the room. I saw the dresser behind me and the couch and I saw the dirty hairs of the German shepherd on the floor, but I didn't see myself. My dead friend lay bloated at the bottom of the bathtub, immersed in blood. I saw the walls crack and break and come nearer. I heard airplanes whirling over my head, over the ceiling, over the sky; the furniture blocking any possible way out, but I could not see myself. And all corners of the room, the dog's hairs, the dead mice lying underneath the wooden floor, the living mice running between my feet, were all directed into one feeling – everything I did, everything I experienced, everything I saw, everything I wrote, the three short movies, even this article, were concluded with one word, and I was not me but a nauseating pretentious feeling and I, without further discussion, article or criticism, without explanation or reason, I was nothing but repulsion.

Keren Cytter has a solo at Artis, Den Bosch, 15 october – 12 november

↗ Erik van Lieshout, *Rotterdam-Rostock* (2006), courtesy Stella Lohaus Gallery, Antwerpen/Galerie Arndt & Partner, Berlijn/Zürich, foto Suzanne Weenink

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Silence is Silver

Contemporary Caïro

The history of modern art in Egypt has had a remarkably strong presence of women. Women were prominently active as early as the 1920s. Marianne Brouwer decided to investigate. She travelled to Cairo and spoke with several important members of the younger generation of Egyptian artists and filmmakers.

by Marianne Brouwer

After my earlier visits to Egypt, I am now struck by it: the increase in the number of veiled women is unbelievable. They make up a new middle class, strolling out in the evenings through the shopping districts of Cairo, apparently with but one objective: shop 'til you drop. It seems as though piety has expanded along with materialism. What the real feelings and problems of the population are is demonstrated in the immense success of *The Yacoubian Building*, a recent filming of a popular novel about an historic building in Cairo and its residents. Day in, day out, long queues wait in front of all the cinemas. Everyone wants to enjoy this satire on the miseries of life, with terrorism, hypocrisy, corruption, dictatorship, violence, homosexuality, forced abortion and poverty. It is all there, even true love. The everyday scene in the streets summarizes the key to salvation from all of these Egyptian plagues in a single symbol: women are wearing veils.

Total Control

'The new Islam makes women into veiled leaders, in order to use the power of women to exert their control over the whole society. The woman has been turned into a prophetess, a guardian of the new morality. It is no longer about the things that it should be about: education, health care, child labour. It is only about what you should wear.' Hala Galal (1966), filmmaker and cofounder of SE-MAT, an institute for independent cinema in Cairo, is vehement. Her most recent film, *Women's Chitchat* (*Dardassa Nessae'yat*, 2004) is about a hundred years of the history of women in Egypt through the memories and personal discussions among members of four generations of the same family, alternated with historic images of the great pioneers of emancipation in Egypt. It is striking that the two older generations do not wear veils and proudly tell about how difficult it was for them to achieve their independence. The granddaughter and great-granddaughter, in contrast, do wear the veil and see this in turn as a challenging new form for establishing their identity. 'But despite their reasons for doing it,' writes histo-

rian Albert Hourani, 'this attitude ultimately tends to reinforce the traditional view of the place of women in society.'^[1]

Since the beginning, the participation of women in both modern art and film in Egypt has been exceptionally extensive.^[2] Egyptian film has a long history of important women producers and directors, beginning with the first film to be directed by a woman, Aziza Amir's *Laila*, made in 1927. The history of film, incidentally, is better documented than the history of modern art, which began with a woman in the 19th century, a certain Princess Samiha, wife of Sultan Hussein, who was reputed to have been a sculptor and even exhibited her work in Paris. Strangely enough, there are no known works by Princess Samiha, nor do we know her life history, although she only died in 1984. Almost the same thing is true for the first modern Egyptian painter, who was also a woman. She was Fatheya Zohni. Only two of her paintings are known, and not a single biographical fact.

Of the generation of modern art pioneers, certainly half were women. According to Nazli Madkour (b. 1949), the work of these women cannot be eradi-

cated from the history of modern art in Egypt. Madkour studied political economy, is an artist herself and also compiled the book, *Women & Art in Egypt*.^[3] When I looked her up in her studio in Cairo, she explained, 'In modern art, three factors led to women being able to rise to importance so quickly. First, there was no competition. Women were not pushed out by competition from the men, because modern art in Egypt was something new, and it was not yet clear how much prestige it involved. Moreover, in those years, the women's emancipation movement was exceptionally active in fighting for equality for women, and it profited from the rise of women in fine art in Europe. Everybody knew Käthe Kollwitz, Sophie Täuber-Arp, Sonia Delaunay and Natalia Goncharova.'

Clichés

A large number of paintings by that first generation of women artists can be seen today at the Museum of Egyptian Modern Art (MEMA), which opened in 1931. To my mind, three names immediately stand out: Margaret Nakhla (1908–1977), Effat Nagui (1905–1994) and Inji Aflaton (1924–1989). *Wom-*

en's Public Bath, painted in 1947 by Nakhla, a Copt, was a surprise. The title is borrowed from the famous painting by Ingres, but this work is a satirical pastiche, painted as if to say, 'This is what women really look like – all ages, all colours. This is who we are. Our dyed hair, our sagging breasts and rolls of fat are there to be loved.' It did not matter which of the clichés about women was destroyed here: the idealized soft-porn odalisque of orientalism, the ideal picture of the modest, veiled woman of Islam, or the nationalistic image of the stylized Egyptian goddess.

That modern Egyptian art exists at all, and that it moreover has an important figurative history in an Islamic country is not only thanks to an artistic tradition that goes back to the pharaohs, but is primarily due to an interpretation of what the Koran has to say about the making of images, which was more liberal in Egypt than elsewhere. That was the case for visual art as well as for photography and film. At the beginning of the 20th century, no one less than the Mufti, Egypt's highest religious authority, spoke positively about it.^[4] After Egyptian independence and under the Nasser government, women were granted rights to equal pay and general admission to universities. Women gained the right to vote in 1956. 'That was a major improvement on a lot of levels', says Hala Galal, 'but women did not get what was most important. The power to make decisions remained with the men. Despite, for example, the great admiration that Nasser had for the famous Egyptian singer, Umm Kulthum he never let her become his Minister of Culture. Today, women do hold high positions, maybe to show how tolerant the regime is, but I believe that it is all just pretence, because they still do not have a deciding vote. But women also play into the hands of maintaining the status quo – so many of them are afraid of change. Still, women can create problems, in order to facilitate real change.'

