

eye-deals



myths of beauty, femininity, desire and the self...

Curated by Edwina Bartleme, Griffith Artworks

Presented by Griffith Artworks (Queensland College of Art, Griffith University) and The State Library of Queensland

program

Jill Orr

Either/Orr 1997

video (shot on Betacam SP)

10:00

from a series of performances that took place in the Myer display windows (Melbourne, Australia) as part of the Melbourne International Festival in 1997

Jan-Nell Weaver & Kelli Dipple

Surfacing 1995

video

10:10

from a voice and movement performance held at Metro Arts (Brisbane, Australia) in 1995. The film was projected into the performer's space and onto a charcoal layered screen that was built up with fragments of text from the spoken word elements of the performance

Robyn Webster

Snow White 1996

video (B&W Super 8, edited on SVHS)

20:00

Mahalya Middlemist & Sue-ellen Kohler

Vivarium 1993

16mm film

13:00

performance and choreography by Sue-ellen Kohler based on the solo dance performance *Hybrid – turning the body inside out*

Maree Cunningham

Secretions 1997

video

29:18

from a performance at Cherry Herring (Brisbane, Australia) 7 November 1997



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Performance art and experimental film and video have been important media for female creative practitioners since the 1970s. It was during this period that many artists and cultural theorists were questioning the role of art in capitalism and the systems of organised power in society (Marsh 1993, p.2). Questions about the 'cultural elitism' of the arts and issues of sexual discrimination were beginning to be addressed in arts industries. Performance art and experimental film and video were seen as media that were relatively free of the cultural and historical 'baggage' that more established media, such as painting and sculpture, brought with them.

Existing art evaluation, marketing and gallery systems of the 1970s economically and culturally privileged the position of male artists over female artists. Feminist artists, curators and art theorists challenged these systems and began to investigate why art and craft objects produced by women were usually valued as inferior to the creative objects produced by

men (Kirby 1992, p.12). The conclusion that they came to was that the gender of the artist was significant in defining the value of cultural objects and that this issue needed to be addressed (Kirby 1992, p.13). Connected to this process of revolution and revision was the issue of female imagery and the quest for new modes of creative practice that better captured women's public and private experiences. Thus, the 'new' forms of creative expression, like experimental film, video art and performance art, were viewed as a break from the past, and a movement towards a more democratic artistic system (Marsh 1993, p.2).

Feminist performance artists attempted to 'democratise' art and make it more accessible to different audiences, while raising awareness about female issues and experiences (Marsh 1993, p.2). Some strategies adopted for achieving these aims were to directly engage the audience in artistic events, create interactive installations and performances, and take art out of a museum context and into public spaces such as shopping centres, business districts and parks. These strategies continue to be

significant practices for contemporary female performance artists and can be witnessed in the five works presented in this screening.

Jill Orr is one of Australia's best known female performance artists, and she is also renowned for performing her work in public spaces. *Either/Orr* documents her work in a public/commercial space, the display windows of a department store (Myer, Melbourne, Australia), and captures the responses of her pedestrian audiences. The selected scenarios included in this video are from her performances: *Ice Queen*, *Anorexia*, *Nocturna and the Panther*, and *Cracked Divas*. In *Either/Orr*, video documentation has been creatively edited together and supported by a musical soundtrack, to create a new work that explores the interrelationship between consumer culture, gender stereotypes, female mythology and women's self-image.

Film and video's close relationship to popular culture makes them ideal media for challenging gender stereotypes, sexist representations and issues of body politics. **Jan-Nell Weaver** and



Kelli Dipple reject prevailing representations of the female body in their video *Surfacing*, by refusing the viewer complete visual access to the female form. The seductive, poetic voice-over and fragments of black and white or blue-toned imagery, suggest a sensual encounter between women. The lovers are divided and joined by skin. The fragility, tactility and penetrative qualities of this surface are described by the narrator in fetishistic detail. In contrast to Jill Orr's work, where the artist's body and presence is central to the performance, the artist's body in *Surfacing* has almost disappeared completely. The body appears only as seductive, grainy textures and fragmented images. This technique effectively denies the viewer's voyeuristic desires to see the female body uninterrupted. Viewers are forced to acknowledge their role as voyeurs before surrendering to the seductive visual and aural textures of the video.

The body may be thought of as a site where gender, sexuality and power are inscribed, signified, and negotiated. It can be argued that femininity is a socially constructed discourse

that consigns women's sexual and bodily experiences to the private (secret, hidden and abject) realm. This relegation to the private domain may be seen as a form of marginalisation, as if the physical dimensions of the female body are too treacherous and subversive to let loose on the public sphere. Consequently, the female body is a site of surveillance and desire – where women perform their identities and sexualities to an audience made up of themselves and others.

Themes of self-surveillance, narcissism and desire are addressed in **Robyn Webster's** video *Snow White*. The ideals of youthful beauty and passive femininity, endorsed by the *Snow White* fairytale, and perpetuated in many contemporary visual and oral narratives, are deconstructed and subverted in Webster's multi-layered video. Webster's retelling of the tale is a visceral exploration of the female body. Objects such as the mirror, corset, lace, comb, apple and internal organs, used in the Grimm version of *Snow White*, are further fetishised in Webster's interpretation of the myth, referencing regimes of beauty – grooming, decorating and

feminising the body. Practices of self-regulation and surveillance are implied through the use of the mirror, as it is a site where *Snow White* trains herself to control her behaviour and contain the abject qualities of her body. The theme of unhealthy body image is reinforced through the use of the apple in the video. The urgency shown by *Snow White* to examine her internal organs to locate and remove the poisoned piece of apple has obvious parallels with bulimic practices of purging after eating. Furthermore, the taking of pills to suppress pain and anxiety comments on the dependence many women have on anti-depressants, dieting pills and other drugs to deal with feelings of personal inadequacy – the childhood fairytale fuels other, darker fantasies and fears.

Several of the works in this screening could be defined as 'body art' in that "the physical and psychological presence of the artist is foregrounded" (Marsh 1993, p.96). Jill Orr, Sue-ellen Kohler and Maree Cunnington use their own bodies to address the audience directly, and to subvert the viewers' expectations of female attractiveness, grace, and femininity.



They present “a subject in crisis” (Marsh 1993, p.96). The artists perform repetitive physical actions as a form of catharsis, attempting to free themselves of those experiences, anxieties or desires that are often ignored, repressed or taboo in society.

In **Mahalya Middlemist's** film *Vivarium*, Sue-ellen Kohler's body moves across the screen using strange and distorted movements, generating an aesthetic that is the antithesis of the grace and fluidity emphasised in classical ballet and dance. The estranging quality of this work is produced not only by Kohler's contorted body movements, which seem to turn the body inside out, but also by the way the body is lit and framed by Middlemist. There is a heightened sense of physicality in the work, of weight, strength, and gravity. Issues of surveillance, body discipline, rigid codes of femininity and the corporeal aspects of the body are both demonstrated and denounced through the dancer's body and its manipulation and representation in this film.

Memory plays an important role in **Maree Cunnington's** work, and in *Secretions* she

represents the experience of growing up in a fundamental religious community that enforces strict codes of conduct for women in terms of how they dress, communicate and behave. The repetitive actions of covering the mouth and suppressing a smile, connote a number of things, including the practice of keeping secrets; remaining silent; knowing your place, and repressing signs of pleasure and desire. Cunnington creates a multi-layered environment using slide projections, lighting and sound, with gesture and movement to juxtapose conscious thought, memory and unconscious disruptions to illusions of self. The action in the performance is minimal and stresses repetition and fragmentation. By engaging with the act of recollection, and exploring how conscious and unconscious thoughts are often blurred and confused, Cunnington effectively disrupts the notion of an authentic self. She presents the viewer with a decentred interpretation of identity and self – stressing the elusive and fluid qualities of human subjectivity.

Women often have complex relationships with the ideals of beauty and morality upheld by

mainstream culture. On the one hand women are often critical and suspicious of the media and discourses that disseminate information about the standards of appearance and behaviour for women in our society. On the other hand women often desire the sexual and cultural power that beauty and physical attractiveness buys. Women are trained from an early age to watch other women to learn how to act in public – in turn they realise that they must perform a version of their identity to an audience made up of others (family, friends, lovers and strangers). The works in this screening address the power of the gaze and a number of them reflect on the consequences of watching and being watched by other people. Themes of self-image, self-control, stereotyping and hidden desires recur in the works.

It could be said that the performance of femininity requires less ‘belief’ and more ‘skill’ than the more rigidly defined masculine counterpart. These works both celebrate and critically analyse the power of feminine masquerade and performance. The works themselves are embedded within the very



actions and discourses they wish to make visible, and the complexity of this layering is evident in the works and adds to their richness and power. Each work is an example of a woman's artistic attempt to speak outside the dominant commercial paradigms forged by the mass media industries of fashion, advertising, mainstream film and television, and pornography. They are individual voices which seek to expand and question our understandings of gender and the feminine. They are both public and private testaments by women, about women, for other women, and for all those interested in questioning and exploring the border zones of our bodily experiences. Performance art, experimental film and video, and collaborations between differently talented women have been important to feminist attempts to deconstruct and subvert dominant ideals about female beauty and femininity. The artists in this screening have used these media to subvert dominant ideals and produce their own *eye-deals*.

Edwina Bartleme – Curator

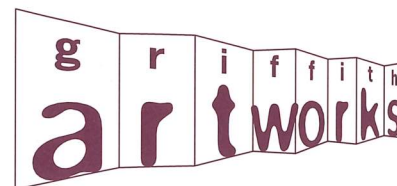
bibliography

- Marsh, Anne 1993, *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969 – 92*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Kirby, Sandy 1992, *Women's Art and Feminist Perspectives in Australia*, Craftsman House and Gordon & Breach, East Roseville.

list of images

- Cover image from Jill Orr's *Either/Orr* 1997
1. Still from: Robyn Webster's *Snow White* 1996
 2. Still from: Jill Orr's *Either/Orr* 1997
 3. Still from: Jan-Nell Weaver & Kelli Dipple's *Surfacing* 1995
 4. Still from: Maree Cunnington's *Secretions* 1997

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