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The Spectre of Cinema: The Videos of Eli Cortiñas

The Spanish, Berlin and Cologne based video artist Eli Cortiñas works almost exclusively with found footage, whether it is Super-8 or 16mm films bought through e-bay or extracts of iconic art films from the 1960s and 1970s by directors such as Luis Buñuel, John Cassavetes and François Truffaut. A large part of her practice, in fact, revolves around the idea of challenging cinematic memory, and inventing a cinematic vocabulary anew by selecting from already existing material, painstakingly analysing scenes, stripping away narrative, and re-editing to arrive at new meanings and associations. Whether she employs existing footage or her own material, the editing process itself is of paramount importance in Cortiñas' work. The artist approaches editing as a kind of writing, using the process not merely to re-arrange sequences and create a new cinematographic choreography of images, but to disrupt or re-structure narrative flow, creating shifts in meaning and a kind of narrative slippage which, on the one hand, remains true to the original material, on the other creates new shifts in emphasis and generates alternative if somewhat more fragmented narratives.

Cortiñas works from a highly specific and limited pool of cinematic references. For her, the act of videomaking is about reducing possibilities, making choices from within consciously self-imposed restrictions, and working within these sharply delineated parameters. These restrictions form part of a controlled methodology which is the artist's way to claim a certain ownership of material that is deeply embedded in collective cinematic consciousness and thus belongs to us all. The meticulous process of selecting specific scenes and the labour-intensive, time-consuming editing process are also part of an attempt to challenge the supposed 'ease' of working with found footage and to re-define the way we perceive existing images. The artist may well spend hours 'reading' into a film, looking for a particular frame, seizing upon moments impregnated with nuance or symbolism, shifting accents, and focusing on small or inconsequential gestures that otherwise might go unnoticed in the wider narrative picture. What to select and how to re-use it in a way that is not simply an act of appropriation or borrowing? These are some of the key questions underlying Cortiñas' work.

At the forefront of her investigations lies a preoccupation with female identity as well as the aura surrounding the female cinematic heroine – or anti-heroine as the case often is – with emphasis on impenetrable, struggling or unknowable characters. The artist often focuses on female archetypes, from the dysfunctional mother figure to the mysterious but dubious femme fatale. She fixes her gaze on women in trouble or women *looking* for trouble; women in the throes of inner turmoil, and women that are emotionally adrift; but rather than trying to offer answers she points to the complexities of the female psyche, reinforcing a sense of the ungraspable, the enigmatic and the inscrutable. At the same time, she willingly surrenders to the illusion of cinema and the medium's capacity to generate a sense of fascination and wonder.

Dial M for Mother (2008) – a play on the title of the 1954 Alfred Hitchcock film *Dial M for Murder* – is a two-channel video projection that combines footage from three John Cassavetes movies: *A Woman Under the Influence* (1974), *Opening Night* (1977) and *Gloria* (1980). Cortiñas 're-mix' focuses on the three films' female protagonist, Gena Rowlands, an icon of independent American cinema, known for her insightful ability to depict a wide variety of female experiences, and particularly women under extreme stress or personal duress. The video revolves around one single

female figure – Rowlands herself – a woman haunted and tormented by her relationship to her mother. The mother figure herself is actually absent from the screen but is aurally present, offscreen, in the voiceover which is comprised of fragments of telephone conversations that Cortiñas had with her own mother over a period of four years. This voiceover provides a new narrative framework that reveals an often-problematic mother-daughter relationship. Personal and fictional thus merge into a psychologically charged female portrait, which is based on the merging of three cinematic characters into one, plus the additional ‘ghost’ character of the mother. The resulting collage is an emotional *tour de force*, an often-painful look into the depths of the female psyche in which the struggle for identity becomes a kind of unresolved battleground. The sense of tension and unease is furthermore reinforced by the use of mirroring, slow motion, time delays and repeated close-up shots. The interplay between real and imaginary, private or personal and public, and the off-screen and on-screen elements create a filmic space in which borders constantly shift and remain unclear. Rather than offering a legible storyline the video operates intuitively, striking the viewer at a gut level, offering a barrage of emotions and generating a sense of affect. Indeed, Cortiñas emphasizes the exaggerated drama of certain filmic instances not only to zoom in on moments of heightened emotional tension but also to highlight the fine border that exists between the sublime and the ridiculous. Her filmic collage features successive scenes charged by highly-strung emotions – emotions whose limits have been stretched to the point of near breaking. The video plays both with reality and filmic memory and seems to intimate that the manner in which we archive memory, both our own as well as cinematic, is in itself a subjective idea just as cinema was a key medium of twentieth century subjectivity. *Dial M for Mother is*, in effect, a psychological case study that plays both with personal and filmic history, aiming to shift the cinematic conditioning that exists within each of us, but at the same time exploiting to the full film’s capacity to generate an empathic identification for the viewer.

The two-channel installation *Bird, Cherry, Lover* (2010) is loosely inspired by a book by the German phenomenologist and architect Franz Xaver Baier called “Der Raum: Prolegomena zu einer Architektur des gelebten Raumes” (Prolegomena to an Architecture of Lived Space) and bears the title of one of the chapters of the book. Baier’s book investigates the way we occupy and inhabit different kind of spaces from the abstract to the actual. Cortiñas’ interest in the book is in the more abstract domain of the ‘architectures of family and happiness’, issues that are reflected in her own videos. For the video she used fragments from two classic films: Luis Buñuel’s *Belle de Jour* (1967) and François Truffaut’s *La Sirène du Mississippi* (1969) both of which feature Catherine Deneuve, the videos’ female protagonist, as a character who is not what she seems. In *Bird, Cherry, Lover* the artist focuses on the erratic behavior of a woman who finds difficulty expressing herself in words, a woman trapped in a vicious circle which teeters between redemption and ruin. That figure is Deneuve who appears alone on both screens, at all times, almost like a Doppelgänger of herself. Different scenes from the two videos succeed one another so that threads of potential meaning weave in and out of each other and thus evoke an oneiric yet unsettling world. Cortiñas deconstructs the plot of the two films (the first is about a woman who decides to spend her days as a prostitute while her husband is at work, the second about a man who owns a tobacco plantation and cigarette factory on the French island of Réunion in the Indian Ocean, who sends away for a mail-order bride. Deneuve turns up as the potential bride but it turns out she is not the woman with whom the man originally corresponded) to arrive at an enigmatic, ambiguous narrative which, again, operates more on the level of the sub-conscious rather than in terms of a classic cinematic, linear narrative, and is close to what Giorgio Agamben has called ‘the hesitation between image and meaning’. The soundtrack, which always plays a very memorable and prominent role in the artist’s work, combines carefully selected music and dialogue from the original films and is used in such a way as to build up moments of heightened tension or mood. In general, Cortiñas refrains from giving too much information and chooses to focus on key moments of inner conflict, this time with an emphasis on the construction of sexual identity. She zooms in on specific gestures or moments that are ripe in symbolism and emotional charge (the unbuttoning of a coat, or the fidgeting of a wedding ring, for example) but always leaves the narrative open-ended. All scenes are thus impregnated with a sense of mystery and enigma and it is left to the viewer to put the pieces of the puzzle together. In *Bird, Cherry, Lover*,

the iconic yet cool screen presence of Catherine Deneuve (like that of Gena Rowlands) dominates the two screens; it is as if nothing exists outside this charged psychological space that is depicted upfront.

In that sense, both this video and *Dial M for Mother* share this sense of entrapment and closure from which the women protagonists seem to have no escape. Desire, neurosis, fear, vulnerability, anger, guilt are all evoked and exposed; Cortiñas' videos are thus more about inner struggles, unfulfilled existential quests, and the intuitive evocation of the complexity of emotions rather than about re-examining scripts or plots, even though she remains fairly faithful to the material she uses. Ultimately, while the female figures she focuses on are vulnerable and exposed, they remain at all times ungraspable and unknowable. At the same time what is striking with these two videos and particularly with *Bird*, *Cherry*, *Lover* is their intensely voyeuristic character – their capacity to distil precisely those cinematically mesmerising moments – and to highlight the sensual and the seductive. Cortiñas draws the viewer by fixing our gaze on the beauty of the selected images, while retaining our attention by creating this latent, unfulfilled sense of expectation. She certainly knows how to exploit the allure of the silver screen and accentuate the idealizing aura of female presence on film. Ultimately, she relishes in the sheer beauty and magic of cinema, and its power to transport the viewer into a different world. Moreover, however, there is a distinct painterly quality that underlies all of her works, in terms of composition, framing, perspective; in that sense one can discern that this is very much a *visual artist* making video.

The single channel video *FIN* (2010), on the other hand, is a short fragment from the end credits of François Truffaut's *La Sirène du Mississippi*. Something between an impressionistic landscape and a tableau vivant, it is a continuous loop which features a couple walking in a snowy, desolate, ghostly, winter landscape with their backs to the audience, while the sound of an eerie winter wind completes the picture. We see them walking hand-in-hand towards the dark forest ahead but nothing actually *happens* except at some point the women almost trips – a slight disruption in the dark, romantic but perhaps not-so-idyllic vista. This scene repeats over and over again as a kind of unsettling vicious circle. In effect, *FIN* is a slowed down version of an end that never ends. Though this is perhaps one of the artist's most simple pieces, it has a deeply resonating effect. It plays with the expectations of the cinematic end, and proposes perpetual expectation in the place of final resolution. The work is in fact a paradox as there is no cinematic culmination, even though it is, to all intents and purposes, and end. So the clip becomes a kind of empty container for imaginative projections into possible preceding storylines. *Lovers* (2007), is another very short video which was shot by the artist herself. It is a close-up of two women in bed engaged in the act of kissing which repeats in a loop; the image is as simple as it is captivating. Nothing happens, yet again, somehow the video – which is discreetly iconic – lingers in memory like the stanza of a poem or a song which one repeats in one's head. The pale, yellow flesh tones contrast with the blackness of the girls' hair and accentuate the video's sensual, voyeuristic character. In a way, *Lovers* is more of a kind of moving painting than a short experimental video; one could easily imagine it freezing into a still image and it would not lose any of its poetic resonance. In that sense, it is reminiscent of paintings like Gustave Courbet's *The Sleepers* (1866), which depicts two female lovers in bed, and also the candid, upfront eroticism of his *Origine du Monde* (also 1866).

Two or Three Things I Know About Her (2007), also a single channel video, is rather unusual in the artist's practice insofar as it includes both found footage from vintage home movies as well as footage the artist filmed herself. The title is borrowed from the 1967 Jean-Luc Godard film of the same name. Cortiñas' video bears little relation to the original film (which revolves around a character called Juliette Janson who is a bourgeois housewife and mother, as well as a call girl), except that it again focuses on unconventional women characters. *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* mixes real events that happened to unknown people with scenes from Cortiñas' own close personal environment, creating a video that is close to, but not exactly documentary. It begins by focusing on the figure of an elusive woman and builds a complex, layered narrative which brings together several women and their roles, attempting to combine them into a single person in what is a fragmentary attempt to create a portrait of the artist's own mother. Like in many of her videos this

one too is pervaded by a sense of the ungraspable and the unknowable. In effect, the video is also about the challenge of making a true portrait of a person – even of those closest to us. How well do we really know them? If there are two or three things one might be able to say about one's nearest and dearest, then that is already something, the artist seems to suggest.

There's No Place Like Home (2007), on the other hand, is Cortiñas' perhaps most surrealistic video and her only video-sculpture to date. The work is a two-channel video installation for two monitors stacked on top of one another. The footage used is taken from the 1939 film *The Wizard of Oz*, with Judy Garland. On the top monitor we see Garland's face and on the bottom the hem of her skirt, the lower part of her legs, and her shoes. The two images stitched together form a disjointed body, which is set in a black void. Garland can be heard continuously repeating the phrase "there is no place like home" in an almost trance-like state, while at the same time clicking the heels of her sparkling red shoes, which appear almost enchanted. The re-assuring title of the work here transforms into something eerie, bizarre and unfamiliar. Garland – the most real figure in the original story – here appears as an automaton, a figure lost in space and time, desperately trying to find a place. Cortiñas here takes a familiar scene from a popular oldie and through minimal manipulation, transforms it into a scene of anxiety and alienation.

In comparison to artists like Candice Breitz, Christian Marclay, Pierre Huyghe and Douglas Gordon, all of whom have worked with found footage at one time or another, Cortiñas is less concerned with cinema as spectacle, neither is she particularly interested in reflecting on popular culture *per se* and the mechanisms and effects of the entertainment industry. Rather she is more concerned with the *grammar* of cinema itself and the more existential dimension that exists in cinematic narratives. At the same time she is interested in exploiting the iconic power of the female *presence* on-screen while, on the other hand alluding to a world of inner instability and uncertainty, where female vulnerability is exposed and the fragile, often unstable psychological state of womanhood is highlighted, something that erstwhile feminists might be quick to object to.

In all her works she generates both a feeling of identification as well as alienation and succeeds in drawing the viewer into a game of soul-searching, mystique, and abstraction. Her work is perhaps closest to that of the Belgian filmmaker Nicolas Provost, both in terms of style, and in terms of the treatment of found material. Like Provost, Cortiñas too is concerned with the manipulation of time and form, with cinematic grammar, with the analysis and paring down of cinematographic and narrative language, with an attention to detail, with a specific point of focus rather than an overall 'broad view'. Like Provost she is interested in the enchantment of cinema and willingly surrenders to the phenomenon of cinema as seduction and what Provost himself has called a "*dream logic*". Moreover, following on Serge Daney's position that there is no possibility of cinema beyond cinema (beyond the history of cinema as such) Jean-Christoph Royoux argues that new beginnings can emerge from the *stopping* of cinema, to explore the 'other cinema', whose roots lie within cinema itself. It is in the light of this argument that Cortiñas' own work can be both positioned and read.

Katerina Gregos, September 2010

Katerina Gregos is a curator and writer based in Brussels. Recent and forthcoming curatorial projects include: Newtopia: The State of Human Rights, an exhibition for the City of Mechelen, Belgium, 2012; Manifesta 9 in Limburg, Belgium, 2012; Fotofestival Mannheim Ludwigshafen Heidelberg, 2011; Danish Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennial 2011. Previously, she served as artistic director of Argos - Centre for Art & Media, Brussels, and director of the Deste Foundation, Centre for Contemporary Art, Athens, as well as curator of numerous large-scale, international exhibitions.