



Wishing Well, 1991, Cate Elwes

TELLING TALES

the irresistible excavation of the Other

Cate Elwes on her work as videomaker and critic

Every child is stamped with an identity that helps the adult world contain its dangerous potentialities. My older sister's anarchic laughter and wild dancing became 'grace'. My younger sister's rages were tempered by her turning, swan-like into the 'pretty one' and I was only half-affectionately nicknamed 'spikey'. This was not a comment on my uncontrollable mass of hair but a criticism of my personality, my sharp tongue and my incessant probing into family history, skeletons and all. But most of all, my family dreaded my antisocial habit of saying what everyone else was thinking.

Growing up in the artistic climate of independent film and video in the late '70s, I was able to satisfy my probing instincts and enjoy a context in which to say more or less what I wanted. It must be some kind of perpetual adolescence and a stubbornly combative nature which led me to disagree with most of the 'Other' ideas and personalities that rose and receded around the educational institutions of the Slade and RCA as well as the burgeoning 'avant-garde' institutions of the Film Co-op and London Video Arts which distributed my work. In retrospect, I can see my fights as



Sleep, 1984, Cate Elwes

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displaced forms of grudging admiration for those pioneers of experimental art I so fiercely challenged. But it was within

feminism that I found a haven of counter-cultural clarity and at the Women's Arts Alliance that I began to rediscover the sense of

community I had enjoyed as a child with my sisters and in the convent where my parents saw fit to incarcerate us. Many years down the line, my vision is blurred with nostalgic memories of student sit-ins, 'alternative' video-performance events, and feminist art calling from the halls of the ICA1, but I can begin to tease out what characterised the times and why it proved such fertile ground for one who was irresistibly drawn to telling tales.

One big story of the late '70s was performance art. The cry went up that easel art was dead, life was now art when the artist said it was – Gilbert and George proved it when they sang *Underneath the Arches* standing on a pedestal and drowning in critical approval. At the Slade Stuart Brisley advocated the 'authentic' moments of the body, isolating the extremes of endurance and the object as the key to both the unconscious and an essential humanity freed from the shackles of western capitalist culture. I was horrified by his ritualised games of violence testing the limits of his body and revelling in its products, the blood 'n' guts that maketh the man. But his influence freed me from my struggles with representational painting and brought into focus the feminist attempts to reclaim the body and its functions as sites of creativity as opposed to conduits of masculine fears and desires. With the arrogance of youth, I dismissed Brisley and his followers as men aping the physiological functions of the female body – the blood-letting, the monthly psychological descents into chaos and the drama of childbirth and proceeded to demonstrate how I didn't need to cut myself to bleed. But the *Menstruation* performances I did at the Slade owed a great deal to Stuart's insistence on the mutability of the flesh and its paradoxical ability to free the individual from the symbolic order s/he submits to in exchange for a place in the western world.

Like many women artists at the time, I began telling tales of the body, of the feminine psyche with its connections to deeper forms of knowledge, the outlawed voice of the 'Other', now the self as other, seeping through the cracks of visual and verbal culture. But here already, there were divisions. The



The Boy Scout Soldier, 2000, Cate Elwes

combined influence of Lacanian psychoanalysis and structural linguistics identified language itself as the key element in the construction of femininity. Filmmakers like Lis Rhodes and Laura Mulvey and videomakers like Tamara Krikorian restricted images of the body, and avoided narratives that might reinforce conventional representations of women. But performance depended on the display of the body and as I have argued elsewhere, the live presence of the woman performer can produce disruptive readings of femininity.² However, my work on *Menstruation* drew criticism from women who viewed any reference to the functions of the body as an affirmation of biological determinism or of hysteria, woman defined by the workings of her womb. To my mind, effacing the body was no better than demonising it or reifying it and I continued to work with biology, later examining pregnancy and the early years of the infant.

By now I was working with video and had experienced the RCA Environmental Media department where I listened to Peter Gidal and his radical view of the moving image. As Brisley had stripped the body of its cultural encoding, so Gidal pared the filmic image down to its purest material existence of light passing through celluloid frames of varying degrees of opacity. The construction of meaning was something that now became the major responsibility of the viewer. Although it took me nearly a term to understand why he wanted to do this, I concluded

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that the theory driving structural materialist film was correct, but fundamentally Utopian. If this isn't too simplistic a characterisation, materialist film aimed to create a viewer who, deprived of her narrative fix would suddenly realise that all cultural productions are ideological and constructed by the powers that be for their own ends. The newly radicalised viewer could at last transcend the passive consumption of dominant narratives and start a revolution. My six years in the convent had shown me that the withholding of pleasure does little to radicalise the subject, and only programmes her for over-consumption once conditions improve. But I now believe that the urge to absorb, create and exchange narratives is fundamental to the human perceptual system.

It is a way of understanding and connecting to the world and as such is linked to the survival of the individual. In *Filmwaves 7*, Gidal confesses his own terror of being drawn in to the most banal of



The Liaison Officer, 1997, Cate Elwes

narratives, and restates his commitment to the denial of “recognition” in his films.³ Gidal’s greatest contribution is his refuting of the idea that language is neutral but perhaps the most interesting comment in his article relates to the telling of stories: “I never could figure out why interpreting someone’s story should be anything but the way to hold you – or a – power, its ideologies...”⁴

It is curious that the only kind of narrative Gidal can recognise is one determined by a power relation in which the teller autocratically imposes his view on a passive and helpless listener. Is this a function of masculine conditioning that every exchange is viewed as a confrontation, a fight for dominion over the other? Whatever happened to the gentle art of conversation? Perhaps I should understand his position, since I spent much of my student days locked in verbal battles with anyone I could lure into my space. My levels of testosterone must have dropped since then as I now view stories, the telling and exchanging of tales as one of the most democratic practices in moving image culture.

Gidal’s own words offer a clue to this view. He refers to interpret-

ing a story. That is precisely what we do; we interpret narratives, test them against our own experience and prejudices, compare them to other stories and ideologies and create the meaning of the piece. It is a happy illusion on the part of speechmakers of every kind that they are in control of the meaning of their words. Tony Blair’s recent pronouncements on football drunkenness were beautifully transformed by his son’s post-exam celebrations. Perhaps I am wrong and popular culture continues to feed beer-sodden couch potatoes a steady diet of cotton wool for the eyes and ears promoting mass political apathy. But my faith in the active viewer is reinforced by my experience of feminist politics and the culture of story-telling from which it arose.

Casting back to the ‘60s when feminism was reborn, women came together in what they called ‘consciousness-raising’ groups. Here they exchanged autobiographical stories which were affirmed and re-interpreted within a wider analysis of patriarchy and its oppression of individuals. It may seem faintly absurd now, but these groups often deliberately sat in circles and like many Quaker meetings, no-one assumed the role of leader or principle speaker.

Perhaps Gidal would argue that consciousness-raising was just a substitution of one ideology for another, but the process of exchange, of meaning existing in the social space between, within the interaction of two or more individuals has remained a powerful element in my work and reinforces my natural urge to tell and listen to stories.

I am currently editing the second in a series of video works based on accounts of the last world war. It began naturally enough with an interest in my father’s war, but researching the stories he never told us led to friendships with a number of veterans including Paul Robineau, Marie-Claire Chamings and Roger Hourdin who then became the sources of further stories which I am now trying to retell. Jez Welsh has argued convincingly that *The Liaison Officer* (1997) is a film whereas I think of it as a video artist’s documentary, different from the broadcast variety in that it grows out of a stated relationship between myself and my father, that relationship and my search for his story being as important as the tale of daring-do.⁵ This concern with relationship goes back to the analysis of the personal and the one-to-one of

consciousness-raising and indeed the more formal work I did over the years with my son Bruno Muellbauer.

In my new video installation *The Boy Scout Soldier*, I am moving further from conventional documentary in that I am allowing my subject to speak uninterrupted for over an hour – if anyone cares to stay with him that long. On television, an individual is never allowed to speak for more than a few seconds and the overall impression of a documentary remains the maker's undeclared point of view constructed out of the atomised testaments of numerous infinitely forgettable contributors.

Jayne Parker's video *Almost Out* (1984) taught me the importance of duration in the creation of a relationship between the viewer and a depicted individual – I listened to her mother for the full ninety minutes and fell in love.

As I work through Roger Hourdin's testaments for *The Boy Scout Soldier*, I am aware of how our voices mingle even though mine exists only as an indistinct interrogator. Roger is speaking in French. I have translated his words into English looking all the while for idioms and expressions that recreate his age and class, yes class in an English context. At the same time, my own voice creeps into the translated text displayed on the screen and in it I recognise my turn of phrase, my age, my gender and my class. I am similarly inscribed in the rhythm of the text, the interruption of images, the aesthetic arrangement of the piece. The relationships between Roger's story, my fascination with him and my reinterpretation of his words for an English audience create a balance which, for me, is the central challenge of the work. I don't see it as a struggle for dominance, but a fusion of personal motives and creative interpretations of the past. John Berger allowed Rembrandt's painting of his wife Saskia to escape his criticisms of female objectification levelled at the history of painting because of the implied relationship between the painter and an individual woman. I wonder if these war stories might also speak of the relationships that inspired them and reveal the works for the labours of love that they are – telling tales from both sides of the camera.

It isn't an accident that these and all my works have been shot on video. I should probably confess that the only time I tried to shoot a Super 8 film, I turned the camera on its side hoping to accommodate a tall subject and was surprised to find her lying on her side when I projected the result. This returned me to video in which I could see what I was doing as I went along and record over any other evidence of technical ineptness. But with video I was also able to bring together many of the skills I had picked up along the way, including the use of voice from performance, make-up from the BBC, narrative traditions from feminism, the emphasis on the arrangement of space within a frame from painting, the use of stillness from sculpture and even a certain feel for pacing which I didn't know I had. The intimacy that instant video feedback allows and the potential reinvention of the self in the encounter with one's moving mirror image both added to the attractions of the medium. The obvious portability of the technology (not always, I could hardly carry a Umatic portapack), and the possibility of working alone with a subject contributed to my final decision to abandon performance in favour of video.

Peggy Gale has commented that video is associated with television, the medium of putative truth whereas film is linked with entertainment and the large screen elaboration of the imaginary.⁷ She also emphasises the physicality of video: "...we see video as emanating from a source of light. It is not 'over there', projected away from us onto a wall or screen as in the case with film. Rather it is 'here'; it projects its message from within, as would a person who is interacting directly with us."⁸

This physicality of the image, calling for an individual response in the viewer is another element of video which continues to fascinate me and which remains unchanged in spite of the digital age. *The Boy Scout Soldier* will play on monitors incorporated into a projection in which the images reflect and match the monitors. The work tells a story about the past recreated in the present, filtered through the artist and her relationship to the subject and by extension the viewer through a



Postcard, 1986, Cate Elwes

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technology both modest and domestic in nature, a technology for the telling of tales.

Catherine Elwes

1. In 1980 I was one of a collective of women who staged, *Women's Images of Men* and *About Time*, two exhibitions of women's art at the ICA.
2. See "In Real Time, an account of feminism in video", the introductory chapter to my book *Video Loupe*, KT Press, 2000
3. "Peter Gidal", *Filmwaves*, n. 7, Spring 1999
4. Ibid.
5. "Kensington Gore and *The Liaison Officer*, two Video (Film) works by Catherine Elwes", Jeremy Welsh, *Video Loupe*, ibid.
6. "Video has captured our imagination", Peggy Gale in *Video re/View*, eds. Peggy Gale and Lisa Steele, Art Metropole/Vtape, Toronto 1996
7. Ibid.

Catherine Elwes is a videomaker, and curator. Her recent book Video Loupe is published by KT Press and her new installation The Boy Scout Soldier opens at the Centenary Gallery at Camberwell College of Arts on October 10th and travels to the Art Gallery of Mississauga in Canada in 2001.