

Martha Rosler once remarked that people can't see the formal concerns in women's art because they can't get past the content. In the course of this essay I will focus on certain formal developments in my video work which highlight more general issues that we encounter when we tackle personal subject matter in our work.

But first a little contextualisation. In the mid 70's I took part in a debate at Leeds University entitled *Is the Personal Political?* Numerous objections were raised to the feminist dictum upon which many of us based our work throughout the 70's and early 80's. The principal objection, centered on our use of particular women's experience which, it was said, duplicated the hierarchical individualism of the art world - the male 'golden nugget of genius' replaced by its female equivalent. I felt then as I do now that to repress women's lived experience in favour of theoreticians' theorising was surely not the answer. But a more lasting conviction emerged from that debate which remains with me to this day.

Much of women's art operates on a one-to-one basis and that is its strength. Men's art deals in generalities. In the 70's it was structure laid bare. Now it is structure dressed up in the most elaborate post-modernist period costumes. With a few notable exceptions men remain afraid of content, of the specific, the personal.

When women artists draw on their own experience they mirror the effects of early consciousness-raising. Individual women spoke of their lives to others who then contributed their own stories. From the aggregation of all these testaments, a political analysis was built. There was no hierarchy, no sense of my experience being better, more valid than yours. Similarly, when I speak of my own experience through my work, I do not attempt to impose my views on another woman. Rather, I offer my tapes as an invitation to examine her own life and add her perceptions to the collective voice of women's creativity.

In women's art the address to a female viewer can be highly focussed, often to the extent of speaking directly to specific groups - young women, old women, lesbians, mothers and daughters. For a long time this was considered to be structurally impossible. But in the context of a 30 year feminist history, the viewer can no longer be ascribed a fixed masculine identity any more than the canvas or the camera automatically represents a masculine point of view. Women can speak to each other one-to-one in art as they have always done in life.

Not only does the address of women's art speak one-to-one, but the content of the work often describes an individual experience of another human being - a mother, a son, a lover, even a specified oppressor. The political and economic forces of our society are still experienced by women through their individual relationships both inside and outside the home. The exploration of the personal, of one-to-one within a work of art, remains a potent expression of the feminist enterprise.

This conviction is central to the videos I make around my son Bruno Muellbauer. As our relationship has developed, my work has undergone a formal transformation that I have only recently attempted to analyse. In the course of Bruno's seven years, my almost agit-prop use of narrative and the spoken word has given way to a more poetic exploration of visual language. The conventional storyline now plays a smaller role, whilst the multiple narratives of sound, image, tempo, representation and abstraction interact and combine to create the meaning(s) of a tape.

I have been able to identify four main reasons why this shift has taken place. The first is maturity. When I was younger and in the throws of a feminist awakening, years of suppressed material demanded a direct and uncompromising form of speech. I was afraid of being misunderstood or reappropriated by the patriarchal readings I was attempting to challenge. Now I am both more confident in my ability to create meanings and less certain about drawing final conclusions. I find myself exploring contradictions and ambiguities. I accept inconsistencies and draw freely on the mixed emotions of motherhood. This has necessitated an opening up, a loosening of the language I use. Paradoxically I must now exercise greater precision in the manipulation of the various formal elements of video. There is no voice-over to tell the audience how to interpret the work. The second impetus behind these formal shifts comes from my son - from the love I bear him. I don't want to exploit Bruno. Since it would be impossible to collaborate with him on an equal footing and it will be many years before he can exercise his right to reply, I cannot fairly represent him as an individual, nor truly give him a voice within the work. So I avoid his speech, his drawings, his little habits and idiosyncracies. They belong to him and he may use them now or later in whatever way he chooses. When his image appears in my work, it is an abstraction, a phenomenon, a force that elicits a multitude of confused responses from his mother whose own identity remains the central theme of each tape. My son's tears and laughter, his playfulness and his beauty, are re-presented as sound, gesture - time-based sculptural space. In this way he becomes a symbol of child - any child onto which my very specific experiences of motherhood are grafted.

My retreat from words and conventional narrative has a third root: a very real sense of words failing me in the face of 'unspeakable' experiences such as childbirth. The words just don't exist. Colour, light, tempo, gesture, collision and flow speak more eloquently of the smells, the sights and sounds, the emotional extremes of motherhood. This is no pre-lingual 'feminine' chaos outside the comprehension of a masculine culture. It is a highly structured formal language that already exists in the everyday organisation of small bodies in space, the balancing, the smoothing and the correcting that is a mother's stock-in-trade. Making order out of chaos is hardly a male prerogative. By giving the multiple narratives of sound, time, space and colour as much weight as any suggested storyline, I am exercising my 'natural' ordering abilities.

Finally I come to the fourth and most hidden motive behind turning my videomaking in a more painterly direction. Quite simply, I want to make something beautiful. I don't mean pretty and acceptable, but strong, emotive and visually compelling. I'm not looking for a place in the pantheon of male masters, but I need to affirm my own creativity. It is beautiful, not ugly, wrong or unfeminine to make art. We are not bad mothers when exercising our creativity in a public arena as well as in the home. Perhaps it is characteristic of my generation that our creativity is still experienced as an act of defiance that makes us ugly in the eyes of the state, the church, our fathers and indeed our mothers. I am aware of the fantasy of fashioning the most beautiful visual object and converting that collective disapproval into a gasp of delight so that I can at last say to myself - "its O.K. to do this."

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