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PIPILOTTI'S PICKLE
Making Meaning From the Feminine Position

Elizabeth Mangini

Female artists continue to confront a central contradiction in their practice since the traditional place assigned to women in representation is as the bearer of symbolic meaning. As objects of representation, women are denied the specific agency required to create meaning as an artist. While the question of a woman's place in relation to the symbolic is a larger issue over which much ink has been spilt, we have examined less those women who are artists and who do, ostensibly, make meaning. How do they accomplish this impossible task? Put simply, a woman who desires to be a maker of meaning must transgress gender in order to create from a stance that is not dominated by the controlling patriarchal system. She cannot merely appropriate the male position for her own, nor can she reject the other entirely, since the first underscores her own lack and the latter is essentializing. To take the opposite stance in a binary relationship is really to take the same side, since each is only known through relation to its opposite, and in delimiting the feminine as that which is not masculine, the woman is putting herself right back in the place of other. The woman artist must therefore see both as subject and object, a splitting that allows her to view the system of patriarchy with a critical eye and simultaneously to envision a new concept of woman as the subject of representation. It is this double-vision that drives the work of Swiss video-installation artist Pipilotti Rist. Her work is one small eruption in the expanding feminist discourse, but when seen in its trajectory, it serves as a manifesto for creating new forms outside of the patriarchal system.

Rist struggles with the same problems female artists from Vigée Le Brun to Cindy Sherman have faced: transgressing her gender role in order to establish herself as an agent of meaning. Rist's early work suggests that she looked to the feminist writings of Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray for a mode of creating from a female stance, exploring the purely feminine incarnations they espouse in motifs such as fluid and the body. In Pickelporno (1992) Rist intersperses clips of the female body with shots of various fruits, intimating an innate connection between the female body and natural processes. Nancy Spector proposes that the body of water in Rist's Sip My Ocean (1995) can been seen as a metaphor for the female body, mastering its own desire by giving it tangible, if fluid, form (Parkett 48). But even female desire is a concept still tied to the binary opposition of gender differentiation. It requires a
reciprocal response in order to be fulfilled. Rist must work beyond or transgress that opposition in order to create a non-essentializing and therefore truly feminine work. In *Ever Is Overall* (1997), Rist discovers the double-vision that breaks through the barriers of gender differentiation that anchors *Sip My Ocean*. By subverting symbolic language in the video-installation, Rist demonstrates the relative ambiguity of gender roles. Rist must first establish the terms in which she encounters the traditional symbolic order. To construct her own paradigm outside of the essentialist paradigm, Rist implements the flower, one of the heralded symbols of the feminine.

Central to the visual arts throughout its iconographic development, the flower is now the most recognizable symbol of so-called vaginal iconography. Via a relatively simple path, the flower motif came not only to allude to the feminine but to signify it directly. The metaphorical structure of language has fostered the association of woman and flower through visual correspondence with the female genitalia. The association of woman/flower became flower/vulva, and therein the woman was reduced to her sexual function. When feminist artists in the 1970s followed Cixous’s call for the purely feminine, they fervently claimed the symbols that they had already been apportioned by the patriarchal system of language. Tracing their lineage to twentieth-century artists such as Georgia O’Keeffe, these artists clung to such sanctioned feminine imagery. Judy Chicago’s much debated *Dinner Party* (1979) represents this trend to celebrate women’s sexuality vis-à-vis a feminine symbolic order. Most notably in the ceramic plates created as an homage to great female figures in history, we can see Chicago responding to O’Keeffe’s flower imagery.

Unwittingly, artists like Chicago could not escape the fact that by looking to the past to find a symbol for woman, they looked deeper into the patriarchal abyss. Furthermore, by emphasizing their absolute difference, these symbols still tied them to a binary opposition under the unitary (male) subject system. Worse still, the limitations of these symbols are essentializing to the feminine as a whole, reducing the feminine to one symbol instead of many. These early feminist artists were not actively trying to essentialize the female body, but were looking for a simple way to translate the politics of feminism into visual culture. The ease with which these early feminists fell into essentialism points to a fundamental problem. Post-structuralist/psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has discussed the inseparability of the images and symbols of the woman from the images and symbols for the woman. It is this thread that Laura Mulvey picks up in her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” of 1974, which also discusses the impossibility of woman’s separation from the images of woman presented in language and visual culture. Today, however, the critical stance for a feminist artist is gained by subverting the unitary subject system through doubling. This insistence on doubling has been discussed by many writers, including Naomi Schor and Julia Kristeva. Perhaps Rist recognized the limitations of Cixous’s feminine imagery used in her early works and turned to doubling for a new solution. The first instance of doubling in *Ever Is Overall* is performed by a flower which retains its recognition as a symbol for the female and simultaneously takes on significance as a source of power, or phallus.

This flower appears twofold in *Ever Is Overall*. One projection oscillates between a roaming close-up view of the flower, the structure of the petals, stalk, and leaves, and a wider view of a whole field of the same plants. The second, more narrative projection follows a young woman skipping along an urban sidewalk. She swings a long flower stalk at her side, seemingly rapt in a moment of solitary pleasure in the object. In installation, there is a slight overlapping of the two frames—the close-up view interpenetrating the narrative projection. Thus, Rist’s first instance of doubling is purely technical: the presentation of the flower as object of our fetishistic gaze in the close-up view and the object that is providing pleasure to the character we identify with in the narrative. In a moment, however, this flower, the acknowledged sign for woman, becomes totally unrecognizable as a signifier in the traditional symbolic order. In the midst of the arc made by the flower, the woman swings it around to shatter the windshield of a car parked along the sidewalk. Clearly this is no ordinary flower. When the sign (flower) no longer signifies what we expected it to, the symbolic system begins to break down.

This transgression of symbolic language is necessary for the female artist to escape the binary system. We can locate this breakdown at the joining of the two opposing sign systems, male and female, that results in what Bakhtin refers to as an ambivalent sign. (See Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*.) It is precisely in this ambivalence through doubling that Rist finds the answer to the problem of essentialization. Rist dodges the inevitable trap of the binary relationship in *Ever Is Overall* by deconstructing both her sign and the other. In fusing or confusing the feminine symbol with the masculine, she not only deconstructs the symbolic structure of “woman,” as defined in patriarchal language, but also of “man,” as defined by phallic function. In fact, what Rist has done is join the two together according to the purity of the sign, because flowers are a model of ambivalence in nature. They are organisms containing both male and female reproductive parts, a point which Rist underscores by fusing of vaginal and phallic iconography.

The blurring of the gendered signifier relies on its framing in traditional symbolic language. The viewer is instinctively seduced by the original meaning of the sign, and believes the “natural order” to be in state. The transgressing sign then becomes most dangerous, at the moment when the critical guard is down. The emergence of such slippage at this most vulnerable point throws rationality into chaos, rending a fissure in the symbolic structure that short-circuits the system. The success of this transgression can perhaps be best understood in terms of the carnivalesque. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the carnival marks the temporary lapse of rationality and order, which includes freedom from traditional symbolic systems. As a whole, Rist’s video gives temporary license to the subversion of the patriarchal system of representation, while technical and iconological details lend support.

First among these formal aspects in *Ever Is Overall* is the manipulation of the speed of the soundtrack and the projection to leave the viewer slightly disoriented, off-
balance. Just as there are two projections, there are two soundtracks in *Ever Is Overall*. One is a heavy, attenuated track that parallels the slowed action of the narrative projection, suggesting dream-like actions that take place outside of presence. The other is a light melodic humming, a vital sound foregrounding the presence of the subject. The layering and interplay of these two sound tracks underscores the opposing but interpenetrating doubled projection. Physically positioned between two views and aurally struggling to reconcile two opposing melodies, the viewer is lulled into a techno-sensory-inebriation. Moreover, the manipulation of sound is itself a transgression, since it deconstructs musical hierarchies and the binary relationship of musical opposites. Rist accomplished this same deconstruction in terms of visual language with the flower. To support that subversion of binary linguistic structure, she alters the cadence of the sound and, accordingly, the speed of the visual projection. The adjustment to her altered speed that occurs after a few minutes of viewing implicates and includes the viewer in the transgression, extending the carnivalesque to real space.

An integral part of this temporary freedom from, or transgression of, societal codes in the carnival is, of course, the masquerade. In *Ever Is Overall*, the feminine sign (flower) is masquerading as the masculine sign (phallus), or is it the other way around? Again one finds the ambivalence of the sign, its double recognition as flower and phallus, parallels the carnivalesque, where reality and its transgressions coexist. The carnival participant, the one who joins in the masquerade, is both object and subject, actor and spectator.

Problematically, creating within the carnivalesque has its limitations. The carnival is constructed to allow transgressions to occur without actually changing the prevailing rational order. It allows temporary, finite transgressions while implicating a return to order after the carnival has ended. How can one rescue the carnivalesque from its doomed marginalization as a temporary dream world? How can one transgress the carnival and make it real?

Althusser provides a metonymic model for the struggles between ideological men and women that proposes one mode for extending the carnivalesque. In his investigations of social structures in essays such as “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser theorizes the existence of the State and its apparatuses. These apparatuses fall into two different categories, the (Repressive) State Apparatus, which contains the government, military, police, prisons, etc., and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) that include religious systems, educational systems, communications, and cultural structures, namely literature and the arts. Althusser argues that because the ruling class has power over the (Repressive) State Apparatus, it also controls the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). He reasons that in order to gain control of the Ideological State Apparatuses, “the proletariat must seize State power in order to destroy the existing bourgeois State apparatus and . . . replace it with a quite different proletariat state apparatus.” By analogy, in order to take control of the symbolic structures of language and the arts (Ideological State
Apparatuses), women must control the (Repressive) State Apparatus. They must wrest it from the patriarchal State and replace it with a “quite different” order.

Returning to Pipilotti Rist and shifting our focus to a second character in Ever Is Overall, the police officer, we can see how she intends to extend the carnivalesque. The woman smashing car windows could be said to exist in the temporary dream state of the carnival, where standing rules and social codes lapse. As the scene progresses we see this dream coming to end as a uniformed police officer approaches from behind. As the officer surveys the damaged automobiles the viewer feels the dawn encroaching on the carnival, realizing that this flower/phallus fantasy is about to end with the woman’s punishment for her transgression. At the moment of climax, when the officer reaches her, Rist delays the end of the dream. A glimpse of red lipstick—the police officer is a woman. She smiles, tips her hat, and walks on. The transgression of the flower/phallus, and woman/artist is not suppressed. Indeed it is acknowledged and sanctioned by the authority (or Repressive State Apparatus). The female officer also has the privilege of double-vision. On the one hand she sees the patriarchal system which is signified by her uniform, and on the other she, as a woman, can transgress the symbolic meaning of her role. Since gender transgression exists in multiple spheres, it can support and feed itself going forward. She therefore condones Rist’s carnival, finding pleasure in the continuation of the subversion. She is a harbinger of a new order, the quite different system prescribed by Althusser.

The question that immediately arises is how do we know that the new order is not just an inversion of, and therefore identical to, the old? How can we believe that the policewoman is not also a part of the temporary masquerade? A specter of the carnival? In short, I believe that the answer lies in Rist’s formal choices. In contemporary western culture, the carnival as it existed before has faded, but the same effect is found in almost all films. We have come to accept the images presented to us on the screen as our own, the screen reflecting to us an image of our carnivalesque doubles. When the film is over, the fantasy ends and we return to our own lives. This inherent fantasy aspect makes film the perfect medium for latent transgressions to occur unnoticed by the patriarchal authorities. The extension of the carnival or dream space to the viewer is evident in the projection of the images on the walls. The viewer is visually and physically enveloped in Rist’s transgression. The inability to draw clear boundaries, to separate dream from reality, is central to the success of Ever Is Overall. Both technically and ideologically, this incapacity to distinguish the real from simulation is at the core of Rist’s subversion.

This confusion of boundaries is supported by Rist’s technical choices. Her choice of video over film lends a real-time edge to the scene presented. The mobility and accessibility of video as a medium suggests a real-life event caught by an amateur’s camera. The projection containing the close-up of the flower field wavering between a documentary on flowers and flying dream sequence. The narrative loop, while using the grainy, color-saturated vision of a dream-sequence, is reigned in by the banal nature of the street and its pedestrians. Our inability to draw clear lines denotes a
slippage. Furthermore, because video is not, like film, comprised of distinct frames of images, it has a certain resonance with the panoptic scan.

What the medium suggests in itself is what the narrative has already told us. Surveillance is a major theme in the narrative, represented by the police officer, and is an integral part of the formal aspects of video as such. The transgressing women have used the language of surveillance to subvert the panopticon. The ironic smile of the police officer frees Rist from the panopticon by acknowledging the fact of the transgression without punishing the transgressor. Double-vision is a concept that is not supported by the panopticon. Again, the viewer is implicated in the mutual acknowledgement of the transgression because by her smile the police officer addresses the viewer's recognition of double meaning. Since the viewer recognizes that two opposing paradigms exists, but cannot clearly distinguish reality from its masquerade, masculine from feminine, authority from renegade, the panopticon as all-seeing regulator is undermined. The confusion of the carnivalesque with the real has created a crisis of doubling through which the system of patriarchal control, the panopticon, is undermined.

This collapse of the panopticon has a profound effect on the structure of the State: the boundaries between the (Repressive) State Apparatus and the multiple Ideological State Apparatuses is complicated by its destruction. If art has the agency to affect world order, then it should perhaps be considered a part of the (Repressive) State Apparatus. The artist, symbolized both in the flower and in the woman who wields it, may in fact have more power to undermine the patriarchal authority than the policewoman. Perhaps it is the female artist, smashing windows, who perpetuates the carnivalesque by laughing in the face of authority. Again this relationship, between transgressor and authority, between the (Repressive) State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatuses, collapses under scrutiny because the signifiers have become ambivalent through their double significance.

This collapse is important not only for locating an answer to the problem of representation in excess of the binary separation of male and female, Repressive and Ideological, but in recognizing that this implosion restructures the dissemination of the politics of feminism to other realms. If feminism is truly a politics then it is found working in the combined symbolic systems of language, the unconscious, the body, the landscape, and the social structure. It is only by looking at a combination of these domains that we can truly see the effects of subversion. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White maintain in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Cornell, 1986), the effect of a transgression is not limited to the sphere it occurs within, and may in fact have a greater secondary effect in another domain. Rist's example, a symbiotic connection between authority and artist, illustrates a transgression in art that can feed the politics of feminism into the various apparatuses of male-dominated social order.

The carnivalesque provides the conditions of double-vision that allows female artists such as Pipilocti Rist to reconstruct traditional signs as ambivalent signs. The politics
of feminism working in other social spheres acknowledges and supports artistic transgressions by providing multiple instances of double-vision. The new situation arising from this double-vision is the failure of patriarchy’s panopticon because the real has merged with the simulation: the masquerade is indistinguishable from the real, the feminine has interpenetrated the masculine, and the woman has claimed status as maker of meaning.

NOTES

1. In his essay “Whose flowers? Reflections on the Image of the Western Woman,” Paul Vandenbroeck offers some thoughts on representations of flowers and images of women as they develop from the thirteenth century to the present. He locates its beginnings at the height of Mariolatry, the same period in which women were confined to interior spaces: cloisters, gardens, and the home. In the seventeenth century, when a larger number of women began to take up painting, they too were confined to representing interior spaces, and most often focused on still life paintings that consisted largely of floral arrangements. Vandenbroeck also follows the etymology of the word “flower” in Indo-European, Germanic, and Arabic languages, and extends his discussion to uses in contemporary language such as “deflowering” that perpetuate this metaphorical relationship. See P. Vandenbroeck. “À Qui Les Fleurs? Quelques Réflexions sur L’image de la Femele en Occident” from L’Empire De Flore: Histoire et Représentation des Fleurs en Europe Du XVIe Au XIXe siècle, Sabine van Sprang, ed. (Bruxelles: La Renaissance du Livre, 1996).

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