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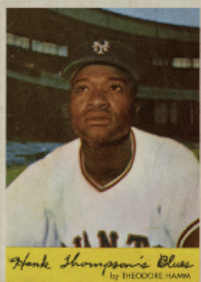
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Reflections on the Electric Mirror: New Feminist Video

by Kimberly Lamm

Brooklyn Museum of Art, May 1, 2009 – January 10, 2010

The mirror in the title of this modest, but thought-provoking exhibition of video art is not an allusion to the age-old link between femininity and vanity. It refers instead to the technology particular to video, which creates an illusory fusion of self and image. When the Portapak made video readily available in the late 1960s, women artists seized on its self-reflective capacities to scrutinize how pervasive ideas about women manifested themselves in private self-expressions. Lynn Hershman Leeson, a pioneer in feminist media art, coined the phrase “electric mirror,” and perhaps her video “First Person Plural” (1988) best exemplifies the medium’s potential for exploring the personal reverberations of gender politics. Narrating the artist’s history of sexual abuse, “First Person Plural” strives to construct a coherent self-image by making video a form of life-writing. Looking right into the camera, Leeson states, “I have scars as long as this tape.”

The work in *Reflections on the Electric Mirror* complicates this early feminist deployment of video by highlighting how the medium expands our experience of time and tests our habits of attention. The artists, all born in the 1970s, put themselves in front of the camera, but not for raw, autobiographical purposes.

Their bodies are conduits for the idea that the self is neither decisively composed nor thoroughly unraveled. In Cathy Begien’s “Black Out” (2004), the artist sits in front of a peach background wearing a grey polo shirt. With a bored, deliberately bland voice, she attempts to recall a night of debauchery that began in a sushi bar, moved to a surprise party for “some girl,” and ended in a sex club. To re-enact the events, a cast of characters enter the space of the screen, blindfold Begien, shower her with confetti, dance around her, and put drinks and cigarettes in her mouth and hands. Begien becomes a detached center around which the staged party swirls. After her friends pour beer over her head, it is hard to tell whether the artist is laughing or crying, which suggests that “Black Out” re-imagines the masochism of Marina Abramovic’s early work through the language of MTV’s “The Real World” to blur the line between victimization and self-parody.

Klara Liden’s “Bodies of Society” (2006) also challenges viewers to encounter muddled emotional states. In a small room with wood floors



Kate Gilmore, “Blood from a Stone,” 2009. Mixed-media sculpture with video, color, sound. 8 min. 9 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and Smith-Stewart, NY



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and white walls, Liden paces back and forth in front of a bicycle, a long metal pipe in her hands. She does not face the camera, and her gestures vacillate between adoration and aggression. First, the artist uses the pipe to trace the bike's geometric forms with something like erotic tenderness; then she seems to mime the threatening moments before torture. When Liden finally and methodically pummels the bicycle into pieces, she orchestrates a tough argument about waste, destruction, and physical vulnerability that connects the cool detachment of Marcel Duchamp's "Bicycle Wheel" (1913) to the ecstasy Pipilotti Rist unleashes in "Ever Is Over All" (1997) when she smashes car windows with a tough long-stemmed flower.

Martha Rosler's "Semiotics of the Kitchen" (1975) is perhaps the most well-known example of a feminist artist drawing on video's particular capacity for portraying repetitive tasks to expose and defamiliarize the work women are "naturally" expected to perform. The artists in *Reflections on the Electric Mirror* show that this feminist meditation on work is far from over, and a few of the videos are interesting explorations of the work women put into producing images.

In Kate Gilmore's "Blood from a Stone" (2009), viewers witness the artist struggle to lift ten one-foot cubes of solid plaster onto eye-level shelves. The white cubes are heavy—viewers hear Gilmore's groans and heavy breathing—and once she shoves them into place, white paint splatters and drips down the dark-grey wall. "Blood from a Stone" does more than bring Abstract Expressionism into physical contact with Minimalist sculpture, it asks viewers to reflect on whether they themselves imagine women contributing to these revered and canonical bodies of work.

As television's sarcastic half-sister, video is able to critique television's ubiquitous visual codes and story-telling devices. In "New Report" (2005), Wynne Greenwood and K8 Hardy create a fictional feminist news channel: WKRH, "pregnant with information." Wearing Patty Hearst berets, the artists appear as "Henry Irigaray" and "Henry Stein Acker Hill" (after Luce Irigaray, Gertrude Stein, Kathy Acker, and Anita Hill). The big pink papier-mâché balls they use as microphones give the video a Muppets touch. "New Report" manages to earnestly and enthusiastically stress feminism's continued pertinence while also mocking how the mass media trivializes its history. The Henrys report on two women burning their bras at the waterfront to protest how reality television depicts women "like meat." In another segment, they use—rather than reject—the tropes of reality television to interview Lisa on her bed after work. Lisa had a "really weird day" and tends to have anxiety, which Henry Irigaray speculates might come from "powerlessness." The work in *Reflections on the Electric Mirror* cautions against rehearsing clichés about women's victimization, but also exploits video's play with time and attention to ask whether women's powerlessness lurks unseen in the present.

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