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The Ties that Bind: Women Artists at documenta 12

Documenta 12 was special in a number of ways but, most importantly, from a feminist perspective. For the first time in the history of this influential international exhibition, the representation of female artists was on a par with that of their male counterparts. Numerical equality was not, however, the only thing at stake: if documenta 12 was anything at all, it was because of the presence of these draftswomen, sculptors, photographers, video artists, installation makers, weavers and needlewomen. Their contributions were fundamental to the conception of the show as a whole; the work of women formed both the basis upon which the exhibition was built and its (perhaps subliminal) leitmotifs. These leitmotifs, in turn, make reference to discussions within feminist thought from the movement's earliest years, giving these a new, 21st-century interpretation and a contemporary actuality.

Documenta 12's organizers, Roger M. Buergel and Ruth Noack, made a concerted effort to orchestrate the interpretation of the exhibition, carefully laying out the themes of the show in lectures, discussions, interviews, forums, internet platforms and, of course, the three volumes of the *documenta magazine*: 'Modernity?', 'Life' and 'Education'. Wide-ranging perspectives were supplied by the participation of international journals and critical thinkers, but the principal curators determined the fundamental questions. Given Noack's longstanding interests, it is not surprising that feminism and feminist art were on the agenda, or that a large number of women artists were invited to participate (around 46% of the contributors were female). This was the conscious effort: a drive towards parity as a political statement and, as such – in terms of statistics at least – it was highly successful.¹ But there was more to the choices than merely an effort to remake documenta into a kind of ERA² for women artists, as important as this may be (and it is, undoubtedly, still very important as women artists continue to be under-represented not only in international exhibitions, but also in museums and on the market). On closer examination, it seems that, consciously or not, it was the work of three women artists that in some sense determined this major display of contemporary art – an absolute historical first.

The three women artists on whom documenta 12 appears to 'hang' are the Americans Trisha Brown and Martha Rosler, and the Pakistani Nasreen Mohamedi. It is the forms of their work that 'migrate' (as Buerger has dubbed transcultural formal correspondences) throughout the exhibition, creating an intercontinental, interracial and intergender dialogue between the past, the present and the future. Significantly, the determining works are all of the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s, the period of the first wave of feminist artists and the most heated debates regarding the possible existence and parameters of the so-called 'feminine aesthetic'.

Bound and Unbound: Trisha Brown

Immediately following the encounter with oneself in the hall of the Fridericianum, and with Klee's *Angel of History* (pace Walter Benjamin) in the stairwell, it is Trisha Brown's dance performance *Floor of the Forest* (1971) that sets out the exhibition's first underlying motif. The figures weaving in and out of pieces of clothing hung on a network of ropes, freeing themselves only to be caught again, can be seen as a metaphor for the individual in society, exercising free will but also bound by rules and systems that determine all aspects of identity.

Projecting back into the past, Tanaka Atsuko's *Electric Dress* (1956) similarly binds and hides the artist's form, but paradoxically also frees her from the domineering male gaze, literally and figuratively: as a painting in motion, *Electric Dress* challenges the traditional position of the (male) viewer as master over that which is seen (Silvia Eiblmayer, in Buerger et al., 2007: 52). Mira Schendel's *Droguinha* (c. 1966), while appearing to be a purely formal elaboration on the rope theme, might also be associated with personal trauma, the unbounded exile's desire to create ties that will put an end to a floating existence. In their visual play on the umbilical cord, the freely arranged dark red ropes of Sheela Gowda's *And Tell Him of My Pain* (2007) conjure up associations with birth pangs (Buerger et al., 2007: 252) and with enslavement and sadomasochistic practices, commenting on the condition of women in both the Third World and the West. That bondage can be liberating as well as subjugating, however (depending on who's pulling the strings) is the subject of Hito Steyerl's *Lovely Andrea* (2007), which explores the notion of tie and network in the creation of identity and even of reality itself.

Threads, Weaves, Strokes and Stitches: Nasreen Mohamedi

The graphical art of Nasreen Mohamedi, with its references to both the artist's private life and the 'universal' vocabulary of modernism, forms the second feminine pole around which the exhibition revolves. In the *Diaries* series, which began in the late 1960s, the delicate strokes of the pen are like threads that weave in and out of the fixed grid of the calendar pages, creating a carpet-like effect. The linguistic interventions, highly personal in nature, recall the stitching of a sampler, while the abstract shapes access the heroic language of modern art only to then incorporate it into the private sphere.

Calligraphy, spinning, weaving and embroidery are found everywhere throughout documenta 12. In the form of actual craft objects, of course – among them Hadji Maqsud's 1573 sheet documenting his journey to Mogul India; the famous *Garden Carpet* of circa 1800; a set of 19th-century Tajik bridal veils; and a more recent wedding arras from Mali – but also as 'feminine' techniques for the creation of autonomous works of art. Agnes Martin's *River* (1964), like Mohamedi's diary pages, is a calligraphic but also woven meditation on the grid, while Olga Neuwirth's . . . *miramondo multiplo* . . . (2007) pits the rigidity of the staff against the unruliness of handwritten musical notation. An Indian watercolor of a woman spinning (1820) finds its echo in Běla Kolářová's photographs of skeins of hair (*Lesbos*, from the *Hair Cycle* of 1964). Threads hang from Cosima van Bonin's *Löwe im Bonsaiwald* (1997), a reflection on Greenberg's modernist dictum of flatness (Juliane Rebentisch, in Buerger et al., 2007: 146); here, however, the masculine idiom of abstract painting is turned into 'feminine' swatches of fabric. Hu Xiayuan's *A Keepsake* of 2005 connects the traditional female art of embroidery even more closely with the personal by using her own hair as thread, while *The Times* (2006) transforms objects belonging to herself, her mother and grandmother into monumental wall hangings, making the private and intimate into a public display akin to the narrative tapestries of medieval monarchs. A similar reference is also made in Mary Kelley's fabric-like *Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi* of 2001. And there are literal carpets, too: in Ahlam Schibli's photographs *Goter* (2002–3) and *Arab El-Sbaib* (2007), and in Lidwien van de Ven's video work *Damascus, Ommayyad Mosque* of 2007.

Troubled Media: Martha Rosler

In 1974, Martha Rosler created what remains both one of her own most significant works and a milestone in conceptual art: *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems*. Important in the context of documenta 12 is not only the piece's status as an icon of political engagement, but also the questions it raises about representation and the constructed nature of reality in general. Neither pictures nor words can adequately address the problems posed by poverty and dereliction; neither can be trusted, both are subject to manipulation, they mask rather than reveal the truth; the image they present can only ever be partial. Even taken together, they fail to tell us anything about the reality of the Bowery and the people who live there, but they nonetheless draw us into deeper reflection, creating a desire to look beyond the verbal and visual rhetoric and encouraging an active response (Elizabeth Ann McGregor, in Buerger et al., 2007: 98). A third current running through the exhibition is thus the theme of the descriptive inadequacy of all systems of representation and the socially (linguistically, visually) constructed nature of the real and of individual identity. The transposition of signifying elements from one representational system into another – like Rosler's use of slang to denote the Bowery drunks – creates an alienated effect that jolts the viewer into various kinds of political awareness.

Rosler and her project have many sisters in the show, some playful, some deadly serious. Among the former are Eleanor Antin's *Blood of the Poet* (1965–8), where each poet is (imperfectly) represented by drops of his own blood, arranged as in a medical archive – an ironic meditation on the Romantic myth of the artist; and her *Angel of Mercy* (1977), the story of Florence Nightingale reenacted in a diversity of media, none of which, however, is capable of providing an accurate picture of who Nightingale really was (Howard N. Fox, in Buerger et al., 2007: 64). Jo Spence's collaborative work *The Picture of Health* (1982–6) is grimmer: here, the artist's body is fragmented and analyzed, the breakdown into parts and linguistic signs signifying its transformation from healthy whole into an object of the medical gaze. The piece asks us to think about the oppositions 'sickness' and 'health' and the way society constructs these terms and through them our identities, forcing us into categories, each of which is oppressive in its own way.

But Rosler's most immediate heiresses seem to be in the present. Imogen Stidworthy's *I Hate* (2007), for example, performs a literal separation of signifieds and signifiers that radicalizes and makes plastic the inadequacies suggested by Rosler's photographs and words in the *Bowery* series. In *Mach doch heute Lobby* (1998–2007), Alice Creisher, too, separates and reassembles words and images, presents facts and critiques language while nonetheless remaining aware of its collusion with the phenomena it purports to describe (Clemens Krümmel, in Buerger et al., 2007: 148). Linked both formally and ideologically to Rosler's work is Andrea Geyer's *Spiral Lands* (2007): referencing 19th-century photographs of the American West the way Rosler references Walker Evans, and incorporating texts that call into question any singular interpretation of the territory's history, Geyer – like Rosler – reveals the multivalency of both media and their inability, both individually and collectively, to represent truth. In so doing, she makes us acutely aware of the violence these systems mask, and the complicity between photography, the archive and power. Hito Steyerl's *Journal no. 1 – An Artist's Impression* (2007) seeks to recreate a destroyed document in both words and images. Based on memories that diverge, which are rendered visible by a third party, the inability of these means to represent what once was is the work's true subject; much like Rosler's work, it is a reflection on the mediated, paradoxical and ultimately unreliable nature of the documentary. Similar questions are examined in Lidwien van de Ven's *Document* (2007), which looks at the themes of politics and religion and their transformation into images by the press. Her works search for the codes governing verbal and visual figuration, exploring the borders between pictures and language, the real and its representation, news and contemporary history, and in so doing reveal the complexity, the incomprehensibility, of the situations she photographs.

All this would be of rather limited consequence were it not for the fact that these leitmotifs are found not only in the work of the women artists at documenta 12, but also in that of their male colleagues. J.D. Okhai Ojeikere's *Headgear Series* of 1974 deals with the theme of binding and identity; the notion of the woven is echoed, among others, in León Ferrari's *Passarelas*

(1981) and Gerwarld Rockenschaub's fabric installation (1991), while Abdoulaye Konaté's *Gris-gris pour Israël et la Palestine* of 2006 employs embroidery; the fragility and instability of representational systems is explored in the work of Haroun Farouki (*Deep Play*, 2007), Halil Altindere (*Dengbêjs*, 2007), Allan Sekula (*Alle Menschen Werden Schwestern*, 2007) and Simon Wachsmuth (*Where We Were Then, Where We Are Now*, 2007). There is a proliferation throughout the show of small-scale and very personal, delicate works involving drawing, collage, needlework and the use of everyday objects – techniques which since the 1970s have been strongly associated with an explicitly feminist aesthetic. The concern with systems, networks and the constructed nature of identity and history found almost everywhere in Kassel has its roots in the radical rethinking of the individual's place in society that played such an important role in the work of first-wave feminist thinkers and artists. Women artists thus form not only the statistical backbone of the exhibition but the intellectual and artistic concepts formulated by feminism also permeate documenta 12 at all levels. This is more than just advocacy, however: if nothing else, documenta 12 demonstrates quite clearly that the margin has now well and truly become the centre. Will this last longer than the exhibition's proverbial 100 days?

Notes

1. In terms of the critical reception, however, one has to ask if the negative response to documenta 12 as a whole, particularly in the conservative press, might not have had something to do with the large volume of female participants, which, although not even explicitly mentioned in most of the reviews, in art-critical discourse is generally thought to have a negative impact on any exhibition's quality. This issue was discussed by Katie Deepwell, editor of *n.paradoxa*, at a lunch lecture held in Kassel on 30 August, available as a podcast at http://d621461111.lipx.core002.streamfarm.net/17000hr/ondemand/3435hronline/mp3/podcast/documenta07/lunch_lectures_-_folge_76.mp3?tl=html
2. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was first introduced into the US Congress in 1923 and is still not ratified; it was designed to ensure that constitutional and other legal rights are not denied on the basis of gender – in other words, to protect against legal sex discrimination. The campaign to ratify this amendment reached its zenith in the mid-1970s, coinciding with the first and most intense wave of feminist political and intellectual activism.

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