

Andrea Phillips essay for LUX web site, 2006

Katharine Meynell

Katharine Meynell's work bridges a divide between the overt and politicised psychoanalytic tendencies of 1980s and early 90s post-feminist image-making and an altogether more disenfranchised landscape – that perhaps of today – in which no such recourse to history and theory seems tenable and questions of art's criticality are paramount. This journey, or rather in Meynell's work, this quizzical dipping in and out of such grand narratives and their lack, has been both clear and prescient in her single screen and video installations since the mid-eighties. In these the artist utilised the skills and techniques of her milieu within the emergent British electronic art scene, exposing the technology at work, returning narratives of voyeurism to the viewer, underscoring the pathologisation of women, their relationships, their sexualities and their bodies (the main subject of her work). But watching the work is uneasy. It is spiky, promptly edited, staging social awkwardness with a sharp humour, and often deliberately over-exposing emotional subjectivity to the point of discomfort. It is, in an unsolicited sense, raw, thriving on embarrassment. As such, the artist domesticates the tools of her trade in order to produce a counter-narrative in which video is quietened as a tool. It becomes simply that **medium** which is at hand when a certain moment occurs **or** a certain event takes place. This matter-of-factness with the video camera is paired with a deliberate sense of scenography - again, often raw – in which the artist stages her own life and populates it with other, often mythical and fictitious characters. This staging is also domestic but not in the sense of the overt primal scenery celebrated and criticised by early feminist artists to whom the home/kitchen/bedroom was a place of horror and abjection. Instead Meynell's staging is tender, sometimes faltering, often funny and usually, in the lightest sense of the word, homesick.

A Book for Performance, produced and performed at the Air Gallery, London in 1986, is an early example of this tender relationship to the foundation of feminist video into which Meynell was schooled. In the work, the artist sits on a chair behind a screen and cuts off her long hair, the action relayed live to an audience on a small video monitor. The work has obvious references to Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* as well as to early works by Carolee Schneemann, but it lacks the overt drama of these previous performances. The event is accompanied by a book in which Meynell tells the story of a journey undertaken in her childhood, a journey from Mombasa to Paris prompted

by her mother leaving her family. The story is also about the artist's hair, long in Africa, cut off for schooling in Europe. The book contains delicate drawings of hair. What occurs is less a dramatisation of the relationship between young female sexuality and its incarceration at the hands of patrimony and more a funny, wry domestication of that process. The action is simple, and not necessarily at this juncture original, but Meynell is here displaying less concern with high drama and more with a certain relation to her own history, a lovelorn but unsentimental, quizzical relation.

Other works made around this time, such as *The Sisters' Story* (1984), *Untitled (Ectopic Pregnancy)* (1985) and *Hannah's Song* (1987 and the first in a long line of works made using the moving image of her growing daughter) all utilise stories and events from Meynell's own life. In *Hannah's Song*, filmed using a mixture of video and super-8, the young child is portrayed looking into a mirror. The obvious Lacanian reference to auto-eroticism is slightly disturbed by Meynell's narrative, which appears at the bottom of the screen accompanied by the sounds of a child's first noises, in which her daughter's subjectivity (and thus the healthy formation of such) is mixed up with her own: 'not knowing if she's her or me' says the mother, not knowing if the Lacanian line on identity presentation is quite so clear in practice. Connected, but as a corollary in terms of its lack of self-referentiality, is the *Blackstock Estate Tapes* (1987), in which Meynell worked in a GLAA/Islington Council-funded residency in a community centre on a North London housing estate teaching mothers, children and local teenagers how to use a video camera. Out of this she produced three video documentaries and an installation. **The ethos in this exercise was the** idea of video as a tool of democratisation, being made explicit at this time by a number of artists, **was the ethos in this exercise, and** out of which Meynell emerged with a pragmatic attitude towards such political potential and its affect. Working with young mothers, and being a young mother herself was, however, an experience that perhaps confirmed the frankness and openness of her work.

A suite of works produced in the late 1980s developed out of Meynell's engagement with reclamations and domestications of classical mythology. In *Her Gaze* (two-monitor installation, 1988), *Medusa* (20 minute film commissioned by the BFI New Directors Scheme, music composed by Sylvia Hallett, 1988) and *Moonrise* (three source video wall produced for Video Positive, 1988) various figures are characterised in an archly formal style. *Medusa* in particular, made for public broadcast, displayed an actorly performativity, influenced by experimental theatre

with its narrative loops and reliance on the legibility of still objects and images in juxtaposition. *Moonrise* played more loosely with this heavy signification, leaving the viewer to make connections between the characters on the screens – a man asleep as the moon rises over him; a child/mermaid; a bearded lady juggling with knives and pomegranates and surrounded by a ring of fire.

In *As She Opened Her Eyes She Looked Over Her Shoulder and Saw Someone Passing the Other Side of the Doorway with a Strange Smile* (10 minute film for BBC Scotland, 1990) Meynell takes stock characters from the lexicon of alternative feminist and circus imagery (a ballerina wearing work boots, an Edwardian 'neurotic' played by Daniella Nardini and Janet Beat playing a blown electroacoustic keyboard) and places them in the restriction of a stately home, from which they break free to drink whiskey and concoct magic in the back of a van in the highlands. The images, once again loaded symbolically, struggle to escape the constraints of televisual narrative. The characters move between overtly staged performance and moments of conspiracy in which they contemplate each other performing performance, allowing us into the game of fiction that they are constructing. In *Eat* (Kettle's Yard, 1992), similar concepts of femininity and displacement take a looser form. In a large video projection a young girl skips over and picks at a table of food, its contents revealed in detail on five video monitors to be redolent of cultural suppressions of maternal and childhood sexuality (fish, milk, raw sausages and black cherries, etc.). In the companion piece *Vampire S Eat* the seat of a domestic chair contains a small monitor on which a tongue, in close-up, licks the surface glass, blood mixing with saliva.

Drawing, its rhythm and practice, remains a constant in Meynell's work, along with the influence of the structures and rhythms of experimental music (especially the work of John Cage and Steve Reich). Meynell's exquisite and detailed drawings and watercolours, often small in scale, appear as part of, and influence the design of, many of her installations. As a parallel practice Meynell produces bookworks, often in collaboration with other artists and designers, which act to abstract otherwise narrative works. The foray into television, instigated by her 1988 BFI commission, sits interestingly in the range of Meynell's other work, which is formally and conceptually committed to notions of diversity refused by single screen work. The connections between drawing, writing, book production, electronic image-making, rhythm and collage run through Meynell's work as both conceptual and – it could be

said political - commitments to a practice that desires a structural and quixotic openness.

This commitment to open and fluid structures of perception was found by Meynell in the mid-1990s in the writings of Rosi Braidotti and Manuel de Landa, themselves influenced by Deleuze & Guattari's concept of 1,000 plateaus [sic] in which rhizomatic structures are offered as an alternative to linear (and for them capitalist) modes of thought and behaviour. This body of knowledge is hyper-critical of Freudian interpretations of behaviour, and as such undermines the political struggle of repression based on the Freudian yoke. Feminist video, so engaged with critiques of Freudian masculinity, now faced a new challenge: how to develop non-linear structures out of material essentially narrativised by personal history? Meynell's work developed at this point a series of oblique references to such a concern. In a series of works made in collaboration with Alastair Skinner such as *Water Work for Speckled Eye* (1996, a performance installation in which the artists peed, collected and measured their urine), *Light Water Power* (multi-screen installation for opening of Lux London, 1997) and the *Hygiene Show* (installation with two monitors, 2002) the technocracy of resource development and use was explored. Here Meynell, with Skinner, begins to develop biopolitical material, making explicit connections between the sexualised, reproductive body and its capitalist mechanisation. For the opening of Lux, Meynell and Skinner produced a series of videos that exposed the sewage facilities of the newly gentrified area of East London; images of local waterworks under construction were installed in monitors in the floor beneath the new Lottery-funded face of artists' film and video, equating the inputs and outputs of two types of production facility. In a similar vein *The Hygiene Show*, made for the premises of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, used footage of water filtration processes to suggest that simple science such as basic hygiene has huge impact. In both works the artists developed an edit aligned to the rhythms of serial music, working with composers to produce soundtracks. The works are light and take a straightforward humorous stance. They are disconcerting in their honesty and avoid artfulness. Meynell treats her viewer as an equal, someone who might share the same jokes and be made angry by the same things as her; someone sharing the same space and time with her politically **and** emotionally.

In *The Island Bell* (2000-3, various forms including installation and downloadable book), Meynell returns to storytelling, overlaying images of a trip to Venice, and the attempt to access the bell tower on a nearby island, with the story of her trip. But her

narrative is interspersed with references to her live writing, of her being there at the site, and as such returns the viewer (or reader) to the problem of non-diegesis; the artist's desire to have us with her and looking at what she produces. She says, at the beginning of the downloadable book, which is in itself a committed, time-consuming and so alienated form of reading (you have to print out the pdf, cut it up and assemble it following the artist's instructions),

'I decide that I will copy the recording and leave it for you so you can copy the file onto your desktop if you think you might want it later, or ignore it if it isn't what you are interested in. I would know that you would know, it was *there* for you anyway.'

The work in its multiform manifestations is on the one hand a small compression of the histories of non-narrative, specular thinking in which artists have attempted to divert or compound the time and space of mediated experience, and on the other a personal commitment to her viewer, suggesting friendship, equality, lateral relations.

It's Inside (made in collaboration with Alastair Skinner, 2005) is a large mixed-media installation that unites many of the lines of flight Meynell has chosen over the past decade and a half. Commissioned by the Wellcome Trust (the irony of whose sister Foundation's involvement in biopolitical governance was not lost on the artists), the work tracks the development and treatment of Skinner's bowel cancer. The installation included video and sculptural elements arranged carefully but in an understated manner. A tracking shot of Skinner's body with a Hickman line inserted in his chest was projected on a slow motion loop; a bronze cast of the Hickman line was mounted on a sheet of barely-visible anaglypta wallpaper. The work was an exercise in picturing illness, posing questions about the way in which artists and scientists might use and see images and objects in different ways. Two bowls of cherries in jelly, formed from the descriptions Skinner gave of how he pictured the cancer, were placed discretely at the gallery's peripheries. Watercolours of cells dividing and replicating revealed the curious patterns of the body. A series of Catalan 'shitting men' (caganer) were mounted in small vitrines on the wall. On the floor were large slates **engraved** with illustrated instructions for the use of surgical instruments found on the back of medical packaging. **engraved on them.** A bank of video monitors showed the performer Gary Stevens personifying a cancerous cell, dividing and replicating himself.

Meynell's concerns in *It's Inside*, with the body, its representation in medical science, and the contrasting ways in which an artist might visualise a medicalised state, might amount to a purely bio-political analysis of the mechanistic grip in which contemporary subjectivity is held in both illness and health. Yet this work, like those she has made previously, brings to the material a lightness and humour that distracts the singular force of information that is, of course, hard for anyone to stomach. Distraction, in this sense, is both a technique that dissipates the easy resolution of a concept, and a demand that we keep ourselves open to different ways in to the material.