

## BLACK BOXES AND ART IN TIME AND MOTION

Marina Benjamin on an Kate Meynell's *Eat and vampire s eat* for the catalogue of an group exhibition held at Kettles Yard, Cambridge 1992

To claim our age as the age of video has a ring to it that is faintly ridiculous; it fails to resonate with the kind of 'new world' possibilities that are elicited by the mere mention of microchips or superconductors. Video technology has been a victim of its own functional success - a success that has allowed it to be tamed and domesticated, removed far from the cutting edge of scientific discovery. The video now comfortably takes its place in consumer culture beside the washing machines, televisions, hi-fis and other sundry electricals at Rumbelows. Even its magical power as generator of illusions has been harnessed to serve the fantasies of a mass culture hungry for escape from the mundane world. A genuine living-room opiate, it pacifies and mollifies, sugaring rather than sweetening our daily lives.

Because video is overwhelmingly identified with the pulp end of mass culture using it creatively is almost by definition to subvert. The domestication of video has thus lent video art a revolutionary edge that throws the medium back on itself and makes the familiar unfamiliar. When video art was in its infancy it suffered all the restrictions of novelty; the new can shock and challenge but it cannot circumscribe meaning. When video artists made installations that deconstructed the medium they ran all too often into the limitations of self-conscious self-referentiality and obsession with the technology. The domestication of video by contrast has given video art an 'Other' against which to define itself, a context to address even through denial, and a culture to reclaim.

The video installations in this exhibition reappropriate video from the mass-market by denying us our culturally-determined expectations of the medium. They disturb and disorientate by making us aware of the illusions we crave; by using multiple monitors they offer us fragmentation where we expect unity; and their repetitive loops of concept-led imagery tease us with non- narrative sequences where we expect a story. Each of the three installations deftly weaves multiple view points and multiple contexts into a thematic unity that is truly postmodern because it is heterogeneous. In Frankensteinian fashion they forsake the integrity of the whole for a creation hewn from dispartes with its sutures still visible.

Forging a further link between video art and postmodernism the artists fully exploit the power of video to violate the disciplinary categories of traditional art. They all contain classical elements; Monika Oechsler

tackles portraiture, Katharine Meynell takes on still life and Judith Goddard negotiates abstract art. Yet they all remould these elements in time and motion - an alternative context that allows portraits to depict shifting identities, still life to accommodate movement and abstract art to form a backdrop for the intermittent intrusion of precise form. Continuing in iconoclastic vein the exhibition nurtures video art's potential to undermine the Romantic myth of the artist as spontaneous creator. The solid presence of video monitors makes visible what is generally concealed in art, namely, the manufacturing process. The monitors draw attention to the cultural and technological components of art; they enable, mediate and communicate the artist's vision; they are part of the art and simultaneously artefact; they sculpt the spatial terrain of the installations for which they are vehicles and they insist that the artist's relation to the art is that of director rather than creator. In one fell swoop Classical ideals and Romantic deification of creative genius are put to bed.

### **Katharine Meynell**

Katharine Meynell's *Eat* Video is extraordinarily powerful at a gut level, indeed it is centrally concerned with all that is visceral, carnal and illicit in the world of flesh and sexuality. Meynell uses the symbolic power of food to contrast the rituals of cleanliness and formality that attend the preparation and display of food, evoking images of the protective mother, with the taboo connections between food, flesh and contamination. The dinner table wall projection is eloquent in its formality, dishes are neatly laid on white cloth, all is pure. This is the realm of manners and taste, of bourgeois codes of behaviour and politesse. As the little girl skips across the table, picking at the foods, the viewer senses that a transgression is occurring, that the untouchable is being touched. As innocence personified, the girl is blissfully unaware of overstepping an invisible line; the tension arises because her presence alerts the viewer to their own hypocrisy, to their everyday denials of the visceral and sexual resonances of food.

Facing away from the projection these carnal connections are made explicit. Five monitors foreground the five dishes in the projection against a background that teases out their metaphoric connotations. Some are overtly sexual, others more textured. The sweet potato resting on a folded pile of laundry overlays images of fast-moving trains and highlights a contrast between the homely, feminine aesthetic of domestic quietude and the relentless, hard and fast pace of the public sphere identified as masculine by the train-phallus. On another monitor

a bottle of sterilised milk is ringed by brain-like walnuts as if to enhance milk's promise to nourish growth. Behind this a child attempts to pull out a milk tooth - the first rite of initiation into adulthood - and bloodies its mouth. Blood and milk become synonymous as vital juices of life and growth.

The naturalistic soundtrack, uncomposed and discordant, is particularly provocative in *vampire s eat*. As the viewer approaches, a seemingly innocuous chair, sounds of slurping and squelching can be heard. These are the sounds made by a mouth licking and sucking the glass screen of a small monitor sunk into the seat of the chair. The inarticulate lips that mouth no words, that literally speak in tongues, confront us with the zero of nothingness and remind us of the silencing of women in patriarchal culture. When the mouth becomes bloodied, the symbolism begins to operate at a more primal level; instead of desiring rational speech, the mouth seems simply to hunger. The need to consume, to ingest, carries sexual overtones; woman as blood-sucker, lamia and castrator of men are all prefigured. The mouth becomes confused with the vagina and anus. vampire s eat is a groping but not grasping seat of unlearning.