

KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS

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RUTH NOVACZEK Retrospective

Ruth Novaczek in conversation with KUNSTVEREIN GARTENHAUS

KG As a poet, how would you describe your work?

RN A mish-mash of heartbreak, aphoristic musings, stolen cinematic moments and psychogeography, bricolaged together into some kind of structure, probably a bit like songwriting, and a bit like working on film texts but without the film, so it has to stand there on the page and tell a story, naked. There's this voice that's both hard-boiled, and at the same time vulnerable, even wounded. Which also describes my films, they're totally related.

KG Your work encompasses film, performance, music, DJing and writing, associating different genres to generate emotional and poetic tales. How do these multiple strands collide?

RN I think the films are the culmination of all these elements, and separately they are those elements. When I was in my teens, I was interested in art, music, books, theatre, but I didn't know about filmmaking until I went to art school. I was already painting and DJing, I'd played in bands, written songs, and I'd started to make objects, and at the interview at art school they asked if I was interested in film, as they'd just started running a film and video course. I was frustrated by painting and I didn't know why until I picked up a camera. Film had it all, and allowed me to pull those elements together. I've always read a lot of novels and the way I read is cinematic, everyone imagines the scenarios, the protagonists visually when reading, I think—it's like a library of impressions that surfaces in the films. When I started driving I'd play music and that seemed like pure cinema, driving at night with music. I should also say there were many women I met throughout my formative years, who kind of pushed me into things, woke me up to class and race. So when I was DJing I was trying to make the lesbian scene more exciting and eclectic, same with the band I was in, I wanted to challenge the folksy feminists, I was sort of punk but not, I only liked the Slits and the Raincoats at the time. I also wanted to challenge the conservative lesbian disco scene.

KG You have suggested that in your work, low-resolution is a political choice and aesthetic, how so?

RN The aesthetic at Saint Martins, the art school I attended in the '80s, was quite punk, proudly low-resolution, maybe a kind of Arte Povera. Isaac Julien's early works were grainy, they suggested archive footage and maybe we were trying to make a new "archive" at a time when Thatcherism was a real threat to the world we imagined. I wanted to soften the hard edges of video, and I loved the quality of Super 8, I loved the work of Cassavetes and many new wave films with a raw edge. Sharp edges were aesthetically connected to something we considered fascistic. I hate Leni Riefenstahl's films which we were forced to watch, I walked out of *Triumph of the Will* (1935), it was so horrible in its production values. I don't love HD, I don't think hard focus is the point of film, I think it should resemble a dream, and really the frame, the cut, and the gaze are what makes a film great, not production values. There's a big difference between deliberate low-resolution and bad or inept film making, I think as women, it's really radical to make low-res films, men are expected to innovate or break rules, so it's

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courageous to break rules and innovate on our own terms. Betzy Bromberg and her *Soothing the Bruise* (1980) is a great example of a low-res collaged film that tells a big epic story.

KG The exhibition *Retrospective* focuses on your most recent films (2014–2019)¹ which are characterized by a fragmented language, a mix of found footage, video diaries, performance and to-camera discourse. Can you tell us more about this recent production?

RN They're a continuation of what I started sometime in the '90s when I went to New York; the people I met, the artists I knew, the work I saw, created this sense of hybridity, or layering which I'd begun at art school, and in New York that sense of a new vernacular emerging in my work took shape. I think it had something to do with the rhythm of the city, the language, the architecture, the tone of it. I think since 2010 or so I have been more consciously working with video diaries, and walking around filming things I thought were interesting or beautiful. In 2012 I organised a seminar with Chris Kraus and we came up with the idea of putting films together like a '70s singer/songwriter album, so the *Radio* DVD, which has an intro by Kraus, was really the beginning of films that were made mainly on a camera phone but had a sort of epic idea underneath the fragmented structure. The text sort of pulled the fragments together.

KG These films explore on one side a factual-fictional, yet personal, female gaze, mixing the history of cinema through the action of its protagonists, on the other diaspora and a moving gaze, from the urban land-scapes of London, NY and Berlin to a detective story set in Jaffa and Tel Aviv, and finally a dance across Europe. We are thinking of the relevance of the diary in the feminist work of Carla Lonzi and wonder if this diaristic approach is for you a tool of consciousness-raising (*autocoscienza*)?

RN Certainly, and I'm very interested in Lonzi's ideas. I think my work has evolved from my early feminist days where *autocoscienza* was an important element, as was journaling, which was really about noticing oneself away from the patriarchal gaze. Then again, maybe I mean something like Fanon's double consciousness, and that takes on a whole new psychological layer. I consider myself a cosmopolitan and that involves travel, I don't like being confined to a single nation, film is moving, so I am moving, and there's a psychogeography to my work, the hotels, bars, taxis and cafes in my films reflect a kind of transience that I probably learned growing up Jewish in England, I was Jewish at home, and trying to be English outside in the world. I failed! I grew up with films and early television so my own memory and gaze is punctuated with cinema, (which in itself is cosmopolitan) and my queerness maybe forces me to recast women as both desired and desiring, but they're also in the wider world. Since all my work is more or less improvised, it's automatically a tool for consciousness-raising. I have to interrogate my own imagery in the editing process, I like to let the images tell me a story I didn't know was there, the meaning emerges in the process and becomes a story.

KG Many of your narratives revolve around fantasies of revenge, orchestrating a cinematic space where women take ownership and control over their images. How important is resisting the fetishisation of the cinematic gaze but also resistance in a wider political sense?

¹ *Eat the dust* (2019), *Crime Scene* (2017), *Footnote* (2016), *A woman returns from a journey* (2014) and *The New World* (2013)

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RN I'm not sure I understand what you mean by revenge or maybe I'm in denial, I think there's a part of me that wants to say unsayable things, or maybe I wrap unconscious motives in something that's a bit violent, or maybe there's an edge of ambivalence. But most of my films come out of sadness and loss, so perhaps that's where the revenge comes in, a sort of rescuing of myself. I've thought a lot about the fetishism of my own gaze, that I'm as bad as male directors, getting beautiful women to stand in for my own desires, overlaying them with my own voice. But that's not really it, when I started out I just wanted to make films where men weren't in the picture at all, but without making overt lesbian statements, so those protagonists are whole, conscious, desiring women. Or just a facsimile of how I see the world, true to my own gaze. There is a resistance there, but it's kind of hidden because I'm not interested in representing Jews or lesbians or women in general, I'm doing what feminism taught me to do, show the world as I see it. Or maybe I try to recast the women of that era through a feminist lens, I'm very interested in women as actors, as performers in the fantasies of others, so my own fantasies are of course something I wonder about. Like every-one knows Hitchcock was a talented but sexually pathetic man who enacted some kind of fantasy on these amazing women actors, Ruth Roman, Tippi Hedren, Ingrid Bergman. I think the master's tools can be repurposed, should be.

KG You talk about a "mystical" element in your practice and express it as channelling. Could you expand on this method and way of working in your performances?

RN I sometimes get the feeling that someone else made my films or wrote my poems. On the one hand they are eclectic, my influences are really broad, so there are lots of voices that go to make my filmic voice, but also there's my less conscious self, and I let the films have the logic of dreams where things clash and seem to make no sense until suddenly they do. Could it be that the rhythms and tones of the synagogue I attended in childhood have found their way into my work, like some kind of incantation? It feels like something I tap into, and writing or playing music or making films is like something that comes out of the ether, or that I'm in some kind of trance. I think it was Abraham Heschel that said Judaism was a religion of time, where past, present and future collide. Or maybe I mean that I'm often bowled over by the vastness of nature and human experience and somehow that not-atheism finds its way into the process of making work.