

# THE BODY AND THE MIRROR: ANXIETIES IN THE PRESENTATION OF THE SELF

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## Preamble: Pola Weiss in *Blind Spots*

Pola Weiss and her video art—the subject of this text—are in dialog with the general title of this symposium, *Blind Spots*, and of this section in particular, *Feminism, Performance and Video*. In keeping with a recent interest in re-reading artistic expressions from the 1970's and 1980's that had a certain marginality to them, Pola Weiss' work is being re-updated in contemporary critical debate. It was a time of creativity that transgressed the limits of visual, textual and performance media, a creativity anchored in politics, operating on the margins of the market, of official culture, of established circuits, and interested in new imaging technologies like analog magnetic tape, giving rise to a new medium of expression: video.

These *blind spots* do not necessarily appeal to the memory of how to reconstruct that moment, an archaeology in which I only half believe, insofar as all reconstruction brings together data and fragments in search of a meaning that cannot evade the critical perspective that displaces the object of the image from its old place and re-thinks its pertinence.

Any text about visuality, from my point of view, includes a visual diary that registers the different moments of the relationship between the eye turned toward the material world, and the latter's reappearance on the spiraling stage that is the mind. There, in that other archive of images and processes there occurred to me a thought in parts—in fragments, if you prefer: the problems or the suggestions posed by some of the self-presentations in Weiss's video: voice and place, eye and heart, the city as a body, the body as self-knowledge, the camera as a mirror and the anti-technological use of video that builds on the observation of technical errors in the television image: the trembling or the vibration of the double silhouette moments before a signal is lost and the effects of this on a fragmented narrative.

Weiss makes us aware of her identification with the medium by recording her face and her signature in several of her videos. In one work, *Autovideoato*, we see her partially cover a surface in front of the lens with violet colored paint, allowing her to capture, by means of signifiers, various elements at the same time: superimpositions and encounters, simultaneities that are pre-figured in the mind: I am here but I think in layers, with my eyes, submerged in different memories, successively and simultaneously. Weiss achieves this by superimposing recording sequences, adding color to put the thinking subject that floats between her body and her voice in relief. She speeds up the camera and contradicts gravity and normality through linear or circular approaches, shot overhead or from the ground, interspersed with documentary material. She keeps adding layer upon layer of color, which does not obscure that thin divide

<sup>1</sup> As can be seen in the monograph *Pola Weiss, pionera del videoarte en México* [Pola Weiss, video art pioneer in Mexico] by Dante Hernández Miranda, published in 2000, which, through research, gives order to the data and volume of her work. Other approaches like *Arqueología videográfica* [Videographic archaeology] by Fernando Llanos signal that the beginnings of video art in Mexico are not restricted to Weiss; there are also Ulises Carrión, Andrea di Castro and Felipe Ehrenberg. It should be said that she is mentioned with a certain brevity in panoramic visions of contemporary art in Mexico, such as the exhibition and catalog *The age of discrepancy*, which provided a larger circulation of her work. Today there is an interest in her videos among young students of the contemporary as well as women artists close to her generation.

between her and the spectator, emphasizing that we see her through an opaque window, and as she erases what now seems to be a spastic substance, expanding and contracting, she signs her signature with a certain gesture of enjoyment. She has stamped what is hers, her singularity in the image, and she presents herself as secure, but with a certain vibration of uncertainty; to be herself or to learn to be herself in front of the mirror; camera, lens, eye and at the same time cutting that moment with the insertion of the Other, what is outside, the natural world, moons and eclipses, luminescent games with flowers and the world—built up and unmade—ruins and cities.

Her body, which is at the center of feminist debate, is presented not as a dispute between separation and difference, but rather as an ability to work with the feminine. This is revealed especially in what she designates as her *Autovideoatos*, a correction of the self-portrait [*auto-retrato*] and at the same time a relationship between words that suggest the Self in the camera and the dialectic between a transparency that never comes into being and the *ato* [tie, hitch] as an exercise of bringing together pieces, cuts, phrases and constructing herself on screen. In her own words: the *Autovideoato* was a way of advancing her self-knowledge after having tried different psychotherapies. It leads us to think about the meaning of the family album as something that unfolds like a body with a good memory that is at the heart of these autobiographical fragments, and that indicates with a certain sharpness the immersion of the feminine in the constrictions of kinship, and its process of rebellion and self-affirmation in a melancholy and sometimes violent tone.

The body and technique form a wide and interdisciplinary binary within the theoretical and the visual-material, and within which the dismantling of modernism's artistic disciplines is interwoven with the proliferation of new gazes that might contend with a new medium of reproducibility that provokes or suggests in some women artists other means of expression and other ways of undoing the conventions of the body under surveillance that has neither orifices nor biological functions: this other body, which from Marina Abramovic to Mary Kelly, from Orlane to Cindy Sherman to Maris Bustamante, is deformed, masked, displays its genitals, bleeds, hurts itself or practices untold operations on itself to accentuate its resistance to a system of valuation of the feminine.

Although Weiss's work has spurred more interest in recent times, on occasions—I should point out—there is only a vague or perhaps incomplete familiarity with her work, a certain reaction of hesitation and discomfort visible in the reserved tone with which the person and the work are considered, to establish the proper distance from her shout and her thirst as she expressed them in the text of her video *Ciudad mujer ciudad* [City Woman City].<sup>1</sup> This distance is perhaps related to the fact that hers is a liminal case in the field of video

and performance—between feminism and the feminine, between theories of the visual and the intentional use of accident and error—and to her texts and her corporality, which are at times presented from an intense, raw subjectivity. I would go so far as to say that hers is a complex case insofar as she sometimes simplifies her ideas: she wants to communicate them, familiar as she is with cultural TV, but curiously, as she unwraps that intimist portion of her works, her videos are charged with greater density. The camera is an instrument of her own intimacy, as well as that which is established with the other characters she includes in the *Autovideato*, penetrating the sensibilities of ballerinas, writers and visual effects producers, how they experience and feel their creativity, questions that flow into an everyday and—perhaps the contradiction is worthwhile—unspontaneous approach, in a more solemn voice, by introducing and unwrapping a certain existential trace of the meaning of what these creators do, which then flows into a sort of meditation on art, death and happiness.

The case of Pola Weiss invites the excavation of the subject's entrance to the artistic field in the most literal sense: to be or to substitute the object and to be at one and the same time author and character; to displace herself through the image within an image and the act of multiplying the Self by way of the camera as mirror; an illusion of herself interfered with by sexuality as self-knowledge, but also as a confrontation of different codes. To show herself and to denude herself, to reveal origin and limits, and to give a convincing voice to feelings: it is that voice which provokes anxieties in Weiss's self-presentation. In her works, she says directly that she is here to speak about herself and searches with her camera for the solid bodies of the pyramids or the movement of cars, people, public transport in Mexico City, which began to change relentlessly in the 1970's, to be modernized and also to destroy an urban panorama that had been, in a time not very distant from hers, contained and controllable. The majority of Weiss's oeuvre consists of unfinished work, explorations, notes, but there is also a legacy of better rounded, more significant works, in which her body navigates around the city, that interferes with the theme of bleeding, of the blood that falls from her own body, or from the filmed body of another woman in *Ciudad mujer ciudad*, in which the pubis is opened like a great mouth to hint at the city, and the woman with a body that seems to have come out of a Renoir, or the sense of the civilized body interferes with a certain primitivism embodied in her frenetic dance, and in a sudden metamorphosis from woman to victim as she appears ultimately like a Christ crucified with psychedelic, acid colors.

*Blind Spots* is also in some ways a critical title, and at times it occurred to me that it also addresses the blind oracles of today that emerge from the cellars, or the most intimate chambers of Greek temples, provoking a broadening

<sup>2</sup> These videos were completed possibly as a result of a cycle of conferences dedicated to the Viennese psychoanalyst in the special courses traditionally organized by her department, Political and Social Sciences.

of the discursive horizon. These *blind spots*, the oracles and Greek mythology formed part of my first incursion into the theme influenced by a desire, both evasive and at the same time present, to fix a prism that would open the theme of the body in art and in life, or vice versa, and the notion of the uses of technology as an instrument of other ways of speaking. Today, Latin American artists are using information systems, networks, Web sites, images and other forms of narrative like the blog as ways of contravening the control and censorship of global counterinformation and some proposals for a single world. The location of this conference today (Mexico) contributes, in a violent global environment, a high quota of degradation and disintegration of the body.

### **An Ellipse: The Return of the Greeks**

Oedipus arrived first in modern Western thought. Through analysis, Freud and his dazzling prose made sure to bring analysis the relationship between infancy and desire to consciousness, along with the dysfunctions of women subject to phobias and hysterical paralysis caused by contradicting and repressing the strict conceptualization of the laws of kinship and assigned sexuality as these functioned in the patriarchal structure. Two of Pola Weiss's works were dedicated to Freud: one produced for the university television station TV UNAM and another that bears the logo of her independent company ARTV (founded in 1977).<sup>2</sup> With them, Weiss produces two documents: one more biographical and the other ironic. The first begins with the arrival of Nazism to Vienna, and the psychoanalyst's departure for London. By way of flashback, the young Freud appears with his father in the middle of a natural setting, and like an imprint from the films of Alejandro Jodorowsky—in particular *Fando y Liz*—we see a woman from behind as she walks naked in that forest where minutes before we had found father and son. The second satirizes the problematic of Freud as a voyeur. We see paintings of naked women. Some are lying on a couch, and the psychoanalyst does not place himself behind the patient but rather in front of her.

It was a time of great discussion among feminists about whether Freud was the enemy, a discussion that appears in Juliet Mitchell's first edition of *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: Freud, Reich, Laing and Women* (1974), in which she discredits the feeling of a movement against Freud's work that would paint it as a prescription pad for the patriarchal domination of women, in which the difference between man and woman would intervene as an opposition between active and passive, penis envy, feminine masochism and the place of the father that displaces the mother-daughter relationship. At stake, rather, as Mitchell argues, is the analysis of women and their position in patriarchal

societies. Men and women in physical and social terms are not born with fixed, separate identities, but rather these come into being. In *Autovideato* Weiss begins with a letter to her father in which she shows herself as caring but strong. She knows he is sick and decides to speak about her growth as a video maker, rather than becoming an intellectual as he would have liked. She also records the moment when she receives news of her mother's death. She cries and screams and complains at having been treated like a doll: "You wanted me to feel and not to think," Weiss says. That process of assigned and contravened roles is developed in this work through voice, writing, cuts, the presentation of childhood and the act of expressing and revealing feelings and situations that present the process by which difference is structured.

In another tenor, from another perspective and on the threshold of the twenty-first century, Judith Butler performs a reading of anatomy in Freud's theoretical corpus, which she titled *Antigone's Claim*.<sup>3</sup> In this text, Butler emphasizes the fact that Sophocles wrote his tragedy about this woman, who has been so renowned over the course of the literary tradition of the West, before the text about Oedipus. Echoing George Steiner's observation, she asks herself why Freud chose to develop psychoanalysis along the path of Oedipus and not Antigone, and she attempts brilliantly to redefine this famous feminine character as challenging the State, defying the greatest authority and following her own desire to bury what she cherished most, her brother Polyneices. Her challenge, which is repeatedly qualified in this classic tragedy as a masculine attitude, results in her being sealed up in a tomb, where she takes her own life.

The feminine condition unfolds in Butler in two ways: on one hand, the feminist challenge should re-functionalize its goals outside the normativity of the State and its protective armor which both bends and changes its deepest, most intimate intentions. On the other, Antigone makes us re-think the constrictions of kinship on which the idea of family as we know it still rests. Antigone's suicide is the wound in the plot; it would seem that the price of disobedience to the State's canons must end in death, or worse still, in suicide. In a 2008 video recording of Judith Butler in France, it seemed to me that her face with its fine features and short hair, the shape of her body and her minimalist taste in clothes were in a sense the incarnation of that other (her) theoretical corpus. Butler is neither feminine nor masculine, she underlines her humanity and her sensitivity, her way of defining and perhaps predicting a society that reinvents the one-dimensional family and the kinship relations in which condemnation for a sexual preference for the same sex and the medical language that qualifies this as a disease would be subject of reflection and repudiation. Finally, in the interview she announces a turn in her work that is really, I think, the conclusion of her exegesis on gender: the violence of the State.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, *Antigone's claim: Kinship between life and death*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000.

While I was attending to *Antigone*, the missing member of the trilogy, Tiresias, appeared before me in a 2003 film by Bertrand Bonello, and in the novel *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides (2002). As we all know, Tiresias or Teiresias was blind and clairvoyant. His origin is split across various myths and his blindness was either a result of looking at the forbidden, naked body of Athena, or of contradicting Hera in an argument with Zeus about which of the two sexes is subject to greater sexual pleasure. Hera asserted that it is the man, while Zeus maintained that women have greater pleasure. Tiresias, who is both man and woman at the same time—the origin of the explicit hermaphroditic cult to Dionysus in the secret museum of eroticism in Pompeii, overflowing with images of different copulations and allusions to the minor god Hermaphroditus—opines that out of the ten parts of the body, men only enjoy one. Hera punishes him with blindness for disagreeing with her, while Zeus, to counteract his wife's rage, bestows him with the gift of prophesy and a long life. The Tiresias in Bonello's film refers to a third version of the myth, that of Tiresias' transformations between man and woman by observing and whipping two copulating serpents, on various occasions and with different consequences for his sexual transformation. Tiresias offers a liminal figure in lieu of oppositions or binary pairs, a mediator between the gaze and blindness, between the masculine and the feminine. This explains his modern reincarnation, which preserves, as in *Madame Bovary*, his tragic fate: blind man and prophet. (He is the blind beggar that accosts her with his presence and his song, the song that Emma hears when she gazes upon herself in the mirror for the last time, certain of her self-inflicted death.) In Eugenides' novel *Middlesex*, meanwhile, Tiresias is baptized as Calliope, who finally in his/her masculine phase adopts the name Cal, main character and carrier of a rare gene that makes him/her both man and woman. We are dealing with a critique of difference, a metaphor of globalization in the body that is not lacking a celebratory tint. But in Bonello's film, which mixes the theme of Tiresias with that of Brazilian migration to Paris and the theme of prostitution as a mode of survival, Teresita-Tiresias is the object of violence, locked up by the persecution of undocumented immigrants and repudiation by the Court of Rome. In this film there is an expression of contemporary tragedy and of the binary of State power and Church power that is immersed in the reflection of the opposition between sexual liberty and the real repression that ends by annulling what seems to be Butler's utopia, present in what I interpret as her redefinition of humanity.

An example from Mexico of how the new perspectives on gender are linked to the violence of the State is the federal government's posture today in its power and its pretension to regulate the bodies of the citizenry through a

curious interpretation of the Constitution and its sense of obligation to and questionable interference in the preservation of the family. Insofar as normativity appears in the form of protecting rights related to the body and gender, the State recurs to defamation and punishment to justify anti-Constitutional lawsuits while it ignores the gravity of the genocide of children being burned, the sexual abuse of minors, and the torture and disappearance of women who are recorded in snuff films, those infamous documents of the reduction of the body to suffering flesh, a powerful theme in feminine art today.

Thirty years before, when surveillance over the body had other characteristics, marked by a repression wrapped in censorship, Weiss was part of a movement in which new visual, actional and discursive strategies emerged, affecting the dismantling of internal and external restrictions on the body. In *Mi corazón* [*My Heart*], it all begins with the movements of the mouth and the dripping of blood, as a sign of procreation and sterility and the beat of the city that crumbles, a reference to the political body personified in the ruins left by the 1985 earthquake—which registered an intensity of 8.1—and the absent image or the ethical incapacity to react from the place of power.

### Body Art or Representation

The earliest examples of the body's appearance as a medium and subject in visual arts are by now more than well known. I am referring to Hans Namuth's series of images (1950) that bring the spectator back to the mythical moment when Jackson Pollock attempted to lose himself in quick and apparently uncontrolled gestures over the canvas. There is also German artist Wolf Vostell's attack on a painting that seems to bleed, and a member of the Gutai group's leap in 1955, breaking the canvas. A more direct case more relevant to our discussion is the moment when, in 1963, Carolee Schneeman wrote in her personal notes something that resonates in *Mi corazón*:

That the body is in the eye; sensations received visually take hold on the total organism. That perception moves the total personality in excitation... My visual dramas provide for an intensification of all faculties simultaneously [...]. My eye creates, searches out expressive form in the materials I choose; [...] a mobile, tactile event into which the eye leads the body.<sup>4</sup>

That same year Schneeman presented a performance with the name *Eye Body*, in which she covered herself with grease, paint, chalk, cords and plastic. As Amelia Jones has observed, drawing on the artist's own very articulate texts, Schneeman established her body as a visual territory "within a dramatic environmental construction of mirrors, painted panels, moving umbrellas, and motorized parts."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Amelia Jones, *Body art/Performing the subject*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Janet Wolff, "Reinstating corporeality: Feminism and body politics," in *Feminine sentences: Essays on women and culture*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990, p. 120-141.

Prior to the articulation of a feminist movement in the visual arts, Schneeman used her sexualized body as a response to the masculine hegemony of Abstract Expressionism and more radically showed the signification of the body and performance in the sphere of the arts. *Interior Scroll* is a second production of Schneeman's from 1975. In this performance she painted her face and her body, and she pulled a sort of long, thin paper spiral out of her vagina, unwinding it to read the text thereupon inscribed to the public: "I met a happy man, / a structuralist filmmaker... he said we are fond of you / you are charming / but don't ask us / to look at your films / ... we cannot look at / the personal clutter / the persistence of feelings / the hand-touch sensibility."<sup>6</sup>

It is true, as Amelia Jones argues, that with this act Schneeman integrates the occluded interior of the feminine body, and that the vagina operates like a translucent intimate space. But there seems to be more, a *mise-en-scène* of empowerment by way of an inversion of the phallic as hollow and banal. At this juncture in her discussion on Schneeman, Jones opens the debate about the oftentimes interchangeable terms which she prefers to differentiate: body art and performance.

The body is the somewhat elusive place of the subject in relation to all of its implications. Performance is associated more with the theatricalization of the body, and is addressed toward action and more active, direct exchanges with the audience, while the notion of body art provokes reflection on subjectivity and meaning. Without wanting to impose the notion of body art in the terms with which Amelia Jones defines it, these function in Weiss's self-presentations as she delves into her psychological formation as a woman. In the videos in which she fragments and disperses her body amidst vibrations and video cuts, she then unifies these fragments, and her body emerges whole from out of the dance that she inserts in the video and that she also performed in public spaces. Her movements come from modern dance, which, by contrast to classical dance, is not caught up in a commitment to the line, weightlessness or an ethereal presence that privileges the appearance of ghosts, swans, etc., which collude—according to Janet Wolff—to favor a decorporealized body, while modern dance, which works with strong women, myths and histories, abandons the purity of the line and the negation of weight, introducing angularity, pelvic movements and the relationship between the body and the ground.<sup>7</sup>

An inventory of Pola Weiss's dispersions and fragmentations relating to the body could be defined as a game of opposites that begins with the eyes. Her notion of the eye is strongly linked to Schneeman's, insofar as she repeats that the function of the eye and its veins is the beginning of everything, of the image and of her body, of her heart that beats from her eyes.

## Technique, Technology, Working Processes: Style or Signature

The accepted origin of video art, as is well known, is Nam June Paik's filming from the back seat of a taxi upon running into the paraphernalia of Pope John Paul VI's arrival to New York. What is not often recounted is the subtext of the arrival of a Pope who was considered to be progressive and very intimately related to the feminine condition and the future of the planet to the seat of the United Nations. On that historic day in October of 1965, there was a lot of naïve speculation about whether the Pope would accept the international community's demands for birth control. His negative after an elegant recognition of the problem was: "You must strive to multiply bread so that it suffices for the tables of mankind."

Neither fate nor the UN's security measures would allow Paik to record that much-anticipated speech in that emblematic building, but he showed his video with the extended image of the Pope's arrival at a bar, before TV could. That independence of the media could allow for simple documentaries or materials of counter-information, the luminescent utilization of television technology or filmmaking or video-actions of bodily interpretations.

## TV Versus Video, or Vice Versa

In a precursor to video art, Wolf Vostell's *Sun in Your Head* films and deconstructs the pretense of a coherent image, destroying any narrative option whatsoever: he uses the rays that cross the television set when it loses a signal. In a filmed performance, the artist-prophet Joseph Beuys sat in front of a powered off television set, then put on some boxing gloves and had a bout with the TV, and then used what seems to have been a rubber hybrid between entrails and a sausage to measure whether the television set had any energy. He ended by leaving it in a corner. Perhaps this was an anticipation of the discourse on a mass media society dominated by the visual information that molds mentalities and produces an erasure of the differences between the technological agent and the message that is meant to be transmitted. The box with its image as a sign of evil equivalent to the instrument of supreme vigilance is the emblem of 1984, Orwell's dystopia.

Weiss lived this conflict in another way. She came out of university television, for which she filmed rural life, indigenous populations, forms of life and social relations, images of women of many different ages, as well as works about archaeological zones, one of which, *Sol o águila* [*Sun or Eagle*] is memorable for having introduced in her videos kitschy images of indigeneity prior to *neo-mexicanismo*. Things changed when, as I have mentioned, she founded

\* Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón, "Ideology and counterculture at the dawn of Mexican Super 8 cinema," in Olivier Debroise, ed., *The age of discrepancies: Art and visual culture in Mexico, 1968-1997*, Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México and Turner, 2006, p. 62-65.  
\* [T.N. The Spanish title of this film is a pun that turns on the homophonic pair *tasa/taza*: rate/cup.]

her own company. It would seem that she met Paik around that time, as he had been invited to the 9<sup>th</sup> International Video Festival, held in 1977 at Mexico City's Carrillo Gil Museum of Art. The arrival of an international video festival caught Mexican artists off guard. At the time, work in that medium was hardly different from the more intense activity with Super 8, as Álvaro Vázquez Mantecón has documented.<sup>9</sup> We could say that this was a typical case of a paradigm shift in young artists that did not catch on as cause-and-effect; cameras were expensive and art schools hadn't the slightest idea about the matter. A situation of neocolonial lag: the showcase was there, just not the tools.

Peruvian critic Juan Acha contributed to this international video event; surely he is a case worthy of *Blind Spots* had there been a section dedicated to art theory in Latin America. Among other things, Acha was convinced of the necessity of more abstract thinking among critics and artists, and he established early relationships with the Buenos Aires Center of Art and Communication, headed by Jorge Glusberg, who understood his role to be that of an art impresario within the new media. Glusberg, whose ambition was to make Buenos Aires a center for international discussions on contemporary art, was charged with a complex theoretical apparatus about the effects of new media on knowledge and epistemological transformation, which he took particularly from Abraham Moles. He came to Mexico and set himself up as the organizer of a video exhibition that many were not open to receiving. Pola Weiss, however, was prepared to make video art and to write about it. She had managed to transform her television apprenticeship into an independent medium that contravened the technical resources of television, which, despite other precursors, made her the first video-maker in Mexico insofar as she could develop a corpus of images and ideas that addressed the feminine from different foci, such as psychoanalysis, as described above, and also the relationship to and the place of women within the Marxist categories so present in the university setting of the 1970's. She had a sense of humor, and one of her short videos, *Las tasas de interés* [*Interest Rates/Interesting Cups*] is nothing more than an animation of porcelain cups that rise and fall, intermingle and dance together.\*

Pola Weiss did not adapt her work *sensu stricto* to feminist militancy in the field of art. We could say that her work has points of contact with Magali Lara's performance *Infancia* [*Infancy*], given Lara's manifest interest in the shaping of the subjective and the intimate, and in the interference of texts in visuality. It touches as well on Lourdes Grobet's work *Striptease*, if only by its opposition to her use of photography, through which Grobet sets up a sequence wherein body and technique form an identity and mutually re-signify each other, while Weiss submits to technique as a vehicle of subjectivity.

## The Camera as Mirror

Weiss, with her attractive body, large eyes and long hair, felt both confident and tense in front of the camera. There is a sensation of permanent documentary surrounding her. Her, dancing, clothed or unclothed; her, sobbing; her, motionless in front of the camera, almost a trail superimposed on the landscape. Something begins to happen after observing her self-reflexive videos for many hours: less and less do we know who she is, insofar as that is not her intention. This is rather to discover the limits of the camera and its self-reflexivity. In front of the Other who is and is not, the camera is her mirror and her memory.

## Eyes: Second Time Around

Eyes have a second significance in Weiss's work. She looks her interlocutor in the face, with her large eyes open as if it were a camera, as if they could capture what is outside the projection. This position in front of the eye and the gaze is linked to her idea of the camera as a glass door, that allows entrance to and reflects onto the Self. Only in *Inertia*, her last video from one year before her death, her body and her face compose a shadow lying in black and white with her eyes closed as if she had broken the link with that eye-camera-speculum. Mieke Bal, in his essay "Reading Art?,"<sup>9</sup> develops the theme of the position of the gaze and its variations, using as an example Caravaggio's *Medusa*, a sort of self-portrait of the painter masked as a Medusa-woman capable of killing with her gaze but also of dying just from seeing herself. Perseus, whom we do not see but who is on our side of the painting, alongside the spectator, has blinded Medusa with the brilliance of his shield, reflective as a mirror, and is about to decapitate her, an action that is visible in the horror reflected in Medusa's face. If the armor we do not see is a mirror, Medusa loses her power in front of the belligerent image of Perseus: absent but imagined, it is the spectator facing the representation of Medusa's averted gaze (her eyes) that would seem—according to Bal—to break that pact with the spectator-mirror\* and with the subject. One way, perhaps, to understand Weiss's notion of the eye is as that which makes the body beat and, by presenting herself lying down and inert, she seems to announce her break with the spectator-mirror.

Weiss was born in Mexico City in 1947, and died at the age of forty-two. Some have propagated the idea that her untimely death by suicide is the theme of her last work; that is, that she took her own life in front of a camera. Nevertheless, in the work dedicated to her oeuvre and its biographical aspects, this has been clarified, and the possibility of what seems to be a desire for a filmed image of her death has been erased. Indeed, it did not happen that way,

<sup>9</sup> Mieke Bal, "Reading art?," in Griselda Pollock, ed., *Generations and geographies in the visual arts: Feminist readings*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996, pp. 25-41. \* [T.N. Eder's phrase is "espejo-espectador." The Spanish word for mirror more clearly retains an etymological relationship to the term spectator than its English counterpart.]

<sup>10</sup> Hernández Miranda, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

but in *Inertia* the image of closed eyes anticipates the end of her work and of herself. For Weiss, there was no difference between her intimacy and the camera. We could speak of a fusion of the medium and the person; it was her notebook, it held her texts and her self. The anxieties of her self-presentation come from the tension in her muscles and the visual rhetoric in her work in front of the glass door, as she used to call the camera, something that allows you to enter from all sides. According to Lacan, from whom Mieke Bal's analysis of Medusa does not seem far off, the mirror is the perennial structure of subjectivity. The paradigm of the imaginary order is a state in which the subject is permanently trapped and captivated by his or her own image, which marks the libidinal relationship with the image of the body. The mirror stage in its second phase encloses an imaginary relationship, that of the psychic projection not as a developmentalist account of how the idea of the body comes to be, but suggestive, rather, that the capacity of projecting a form onto a surface is part of the physical and phantasmatic elaboration of the body's contours. The mirror illustrates the conflictive nature of a dual nature that is linked to narcissism by way of a suicidal attraction to the erotic and aggressive infatuation with the specular image.

Linked tightly to her idea of the eye, there appears in Weiss the notion that her body is double: body-camera-instrument and affective entity. She nicknamed the camera "*la escuincla*," a Mexican regionalism synonymous with little girl, or daughter. Sometimes she would portray herself with the heavy, sizeable camera (held at the level of her womb): "I handle video—she used to say—with the same equipment I've had for forty years and nine months. It was born in my mother's womb."<sup>10</sup> This was her way of saying that the medium was really not the producer, but her very nature. It would seem that the eye of the camera at times became a sort of Priapus, a Greek fertility god with a large phallus, when she would superimpose it at the level of her uterus in a desire to confuse the machine with an apparatus that reproduced images. The camera seems to be her other body, her womb, her phallus, her daughter, her companion, her other Self.

## Something More, or, By Way of Conclusion

In this presentation I have posed, from a perspective that I shaped throughout the text, the changes that the notions of sexuality and body have undergone in the last three or four decades, which I have grasped not only in texts, but in the images that involve my subjectivity as a spectator. In these readings I understand the close relationship between body and the political body, (not as the body of the king, but rather as *polis*) that changes its physiognomy—the place where the city

# AN OVERDOSE OF “ME”

and the metropolis is and was, passing through Weiss's work, where the urban body-landscape seems to be just one of its constant changes. In a certain way Weiss's body is a composite entity, perhaps a hybrid: a camera-body, a self-sufficient body that if it so desired could take the place of the man, as she shows in a short video entitled *David 1*, in which she places her camera over the genitals of Michelangelo's David, and with simple editing, supplants him. At first Weiss plays with making shapes like she were composing a kaleidoscope; shortly thereafter she develops an anti-technological strategy, as I have mentioned, in which her projects are made by taking advantage of the shortcomings and accidents of early television. She intervenes not just in the images, but also in the audio track, into which she splices scratches of sound. Hers is a position of resistance, producing anxieties that vibrate between her voice, her visual discourse and her urgency.

Since the return of the Greeks, curiously, the body has been linked to forms of global discussion in which other bodies question what constitutes the new difference, and whether this is necessary in the skein of an already departing normativity before the rules of kinship and of the assignment of sexual roles.

I have wanted to mark the difference in the global atmosphere between those who can enunciate and advance their visions of the future, and the factors that introduce the delay in the discussion of which body is valid and which to be protected. In this vein, video in Mexico —more stable now, and digital— has given rise to a new book and two long videos with 5000 interviews, called *Las muertas chiquitas* [*Les petites morts*], a project by Mireia Sallarés. Mexican women of distinct ages, professions and social classes discuss, showing a wide range of emotions, such feminine subjects as the orgasm with its accompanying pleasure, fear and hesitations, interfered with by histories of pain and of the disappearance of women's bodies, which had been identified in the morgue, disfigured and with their teeth missing. In other, more brutal words, the body returns in a reverberation of images that is at once document, testimony, knowledge and expression of forms of feeling that bring us (me) to ask ourselves about other ways of recording simpler and simultaneously more sophisticated images, while the problematic of the body keeps augmenting its signification as a complex political knot. ●

## SILVIA GRUNER

Program erratum: in the program, my presentation is entitled *Una sobredosis de mí* in Spanish. Being faithful to the title would imply talking about what's mine or belongs to me, which is the self invested in objects, and thus talk about my possessions, my work, my friends, my house, my dog, my practice, my boy-friends, my trips, my photographs, my experiences, my exhibitions. In the digital age all of this has become information that makes us feel like it enriches our lives and our communication. What is mine is all displayed on the Web, on my blog, on my Facebook page, my e-mail and my iPhone.

We think that external wealth is inner wealth and we all do yoga and breathe deeply to balance out the twelve hours we spend at the computer keyboard.

My presentation's title is *Una sobredosis de 'yo'*, and with *yo*—"I," "ego" or "self"—I am referring to the self electrocuted by so many visual stimuli, a self filled with panic unleashed when stimuli overload the body's and the mind's capacity to decipher them. This self refers to the psychosis caused by excess energy or information that leads to systemic paralysis. Symptoms of discomfort in our environment are related to the imperative of "enjoying oneself" (the new superego); this imperative of being happy is associated with the imperative of being productive and consuming. When the self panics and becomes paralyzed or enters a state of euphoric hyperactivity. When all the fuses blow at once, the only thing that's left dangling like a severed cable is guilt: the guilt of not being happy, of not enjoying oneself, of not being productive, of not consuming and of not being part of the world that surrounds us. This overdose of self is indeed lethal.

### 1. A Story

I press the button to the elevator in the small hall outside my grandmother's apartment. While I'm waiting for it to arrive I look at myself in the mirror hanging on the wall. My grandmother comes up to me, hugs me lovingly, looks at her reflection in the mirror and says to me, "What you see is what you will see." Alarmed, I ask her, "What do you mean?" while I silently pray for the elevator to come quick and for the door to the fifth floor to open. When it does, I run in and watch the door close between us.

### 2. An Overdose of “Me”

We are everywhere and other people see us. Mirrors reflect and multiply us *ad infinitum* at gyms, malls, airports, on escalator railings or doors. All those surfaces reflect us and other people aren't outside the mirrors' frame but rather