

MEASURES OF DISTANCE

LEARNING & DOUBT

Critical Distance?

The first time I watched the video *Measures of Distance* by Mona Hatoum it seemed like a revelation. I was a BA student and had been reading around the history of video art, particularly in relation to feminism and identity. *Measures of Distance* was often cited as a key example of a work at once personal and political so it had accrued an aura of importance for me as an apparently crucial, critical work.

As a Fine Art undergraduate in the early 2000's (incrementally coming to understand the term 'postmodernism') I had already learnt that we cannot look at artworks innocently. I still have a copy of 'The Pursuit of the Personal in British Video Art' by Catherine Elwes. I know I encountered the work elsewhere too, in books, journals and perhaps tutor recommendations, sources lost to me now.

I stumbled across it in an exhibition called 'Self Evident' at Tate Britain in 2002 having gone to see the more publicised Turner Prize. The title of the exhibition probably caught my attention because I am interested in artistic explorations of self and subjectivity. My own artwork is concerned with the impact and agency of representations in self-understanding and our relationships with others.

I had forgotten the title actually, and searched out 'Self Evident' by trawling Tate's archives online. I also retrieved the exhibition press release. It states the exhibition examined "how artists have presented themselves as the subject of their work, either by using their own physical presence, or by drawing on their personal or shared experiences... [reflecting] a noticeable shift in artistic practice since the late 1960s, when... artists began to portray themselves as active participants in the world, as opposed to detached observers." This blurb does not question the nature of the 'self' proclaimed to be evident in the exhibition's title, however (as far as I remember) the artworks in the exhibition troubled notions of authentic identity and the artist as bearer of meaning for an artwork.

Other works in the exhibition included *Belshazzar's Feast* by Susan Hiller and something by Mary Kelly, though I can't remember if it was *Post Partum Document* or *Women and Work* (with Margaret Harrison and Kay Hunt). I do recall that, in spite

of understanding Hiller and Kelly to be important artists too – also involved in questioning how we become who we are – their works failed to interest me. I couldn't be bothered to spend time with them.

Mary Kelly is a writer on whom I once had a bit of an intellectual crush. Her 1981 article 'Re-viewing Modernist Criticism' helped me write my dissertation and gave me an idea of the 'self' that might be problematic. She discusses Modernist discourse as it is produced by practices surrounding art such as reviewing, exhibiting and publications. Although Modernist artworks were often theorised as presenting a blank slate of self reference, the predominant mode of Modernist criticism privileged the expression of an essential (usually white male) subjectivity, recuperating and homogenising work within an authorial, expressive narrative.

Measures of Distance, on the other hand, ignited me. I stayed to watch it through twice. All the same, when *Measures of Distance* came to Leeds Met Gallery, where I work as a part-time gallery assistant, six and a half years later I was stand-offish. I didn't want to watch it in case it didn't live up to my memories and expectations. Would it make me doubt my earlier self?

To be honest I can't really remember *Measures of Distance* from that first time, not its content anyway. Nothing beyond the fragmented images of a female body obscured by Arabic writing and its structuring around correspondence (aspects I was familiar with anyway from reading about it). But I remember it dissipated my lethargy, it made me forget my tired feet and gallery fatigue.

Care/Proximity

I lived with *Measures of Distance* in 3 hour shifts for around 4 weeks. I didn't watch it. It became an object, a plinth and TV that I switched on and off at the start and end of the day, checking up on it occasionally in between times. Its plinth was painted deep red (a remnant from a previous show) and each morning I opened up the back and reached into its guts to set it going. The video was housed in the upper gallery; I sat beneath it at the invigilator's desk on the lower floor. Looking up at the ceiling I would imagine it there above me, looping repeatedly through its narrative. I spent the interludes between visitors reading, writing and looking at the other artworks, avoiding *Measures of Distance*.

In a book I haven't read yet W.T.J. Mitchell asks 'What do Pictures Want?' Subtitled 'The Lives and Loves

of Images,' this volume is about a viewer's strong, emotional relationship with images such that pictures themselves seem almost alive wanting to be held, hugged and kissed.

This time it was in an exhibition called 'It's not the end of the world,' put together by a group of 16-18 year old young curators, reflecting their concerns as they enter adulthood. Works raised issues such as climate change or international relations. I found myself irritated by another video, *Make Art Not War* by Bob and Roberta Smith, that seemed to bear no critical relationship to Hatoum's work yet stood back to back with it on another crimson plinth. I lamented, why did the dear, gentle *Measures of Distance* have to stand by this brash and garrulous work?

I actually had a piece of work in this exhibition too. Called *Dream Home* it was a mock estate agent's window display. Gallery staff who mentored the young curators were keen that they should meet some artists rather than only selecting works from the Arts Council catalogue, by artists who would not attend the opening of the exhibition. I was less worried about the curatorial placing of my work than I was excited to be billed alongside Hatoum, Sophie Calle and David Shrigley.

On the last day of the exhibition I bit the bullet and watched.

Later, I was disappointed to find that the exhibition publicity did not name exhibiting artists and prioritised instead the names of the young curators.

Love Letters

A pause and then 'My dear Mona'. This is how each letter begins. Not 'Moana', as I would say it, but 'Muna, the apple of my eye'. The quality of the voice gives me a shudder, it conveys proximity, a sense of intimacy emphasised by listening through headphones. I know that for the moment this is just between you and me.

It reminds me of when I first met my boyfriend and his voice on the telephone - a resonant North East accent diverging his pronunciation from mine - made me swoon.

The letters however aren't for me. I am an interloper on a conversation between mother and daughter. Hatoum reads out letters sent by her mother whilst she (Hatoum), was living abroad, apart from her home and family for several years. She

reads in English and across the screen are fragments of Arabic probably from the same letters. There is a second, digetic, soundtrack of mother and daughter talking and laughing which I do not understand. On the image track the fragments of Arabic text, appearing like barbed wire, overlay close-cropped photographs of Hatoum's mother naked.

This reminds me of photographs I took of my mum to help with my A-Level figure drawing. Unlike in the video, it was not a particular moment of intimacy between us because mum often wandered around in her pants whilst dressing anyway.

The video was made in 1988 from photographs and tapes recorded in 1981 yet here these women are, electronically present for me now. Grainy images, recorded voices and handwriting. I empathise with aspects of their absent lives. Spanning topics from growing up and the role of women, to war in Lebanon - where Hatoum's family is in exile - their familial relationship is located within a broader political context. I find myself seeking points of identification and difference with the work.

The first time I watched the video I saw it mainly in terms of family and gender relationships. Six years later, as a result of reading the news and listening to BBC Radio 4, I understand better the conflict in Israel/Palestine that exiled Hatoum's family to another conflict in Lebanon. It saddens me to think about the cruelty of circumstance, how lives can be shaped by political turmoil or violence. I consider how lucky I am.

It still moves me.

(I am sorry I doubted you)

Old friends

I come across the video for a third time just a couple of months later at Graves Art Gallery in Sheffield, in an exhibition called 'A Picture Of You? Identity in Contemporary British Art.' It is unexpected but a nice surprise, like meeting an old friend. I almost don't watch it because - like a friend with whom I've caught up recently - I know already what it has to say.

But I watch and again I am absorbed.

The title draws attention to the self of the viewer but asks how individual identity sits within a broader frame. Graves can claim Hatoum's work as British since she studied and worked here. This makes me think of an exhibition

I saw last year in Abu Dhabi (where my boyfriend's parents live) promoting a new art museum being built. One section profiled local achievements in the international art world. Here they claimed Hatoum for the U.A.E.

So long... for now

Then, in the course of writing this, I discover *Measures of Distance* is available to watch online.

I am torn between pleasure because the work is accessible and an absurd sense that this virtual encounter is elicited (a casual encounter or one night stand).

It has tallied 822 views.