



À CORPS PERDU

AT CLOSE QUARTERS

CLARISSE HAHN INTERVIEWED BY CLAIRE STAEBLER

You've just finished a film about the daily existence and private life of a young woman of Algerian extraction named Karima who works as a dominatrix. This is your third film in three years. Following your adventure with Ovidie in the porn milieu, and your film on a geriatrics ward, what link do you see between these different experiences?

Each film has a logic and a series of concerns that are particular to it, but throughout all my works you can make out certain recurrent preoccupations which surface again and again. My work is always about filming the connections between people. The body, too, is brought into question, examined as both a place of mediation and a border state. It's hard for me to talk about *Ovidie* because it's a film that I've never been able to show. At the last minute, certain protagonists objected to its release. But I can say this, pornography does not appear in the film in its mass-media guise. It is conceived more as a reality through which I was attempting to perceive the complexity of relationships that are created between people. In that world, you find people who are not so different from other folks but who are simply more at ease in speaking about their emotions and sensations. You can say the same thing about the medical world and the SM sphere. There people are less likely than elsewhere to see the body as a mysterious, provocative domain that must be kept in the private sphere.

Would you situate yourself within a "Hardcore" art scene such as it appears in Richard Kern's work, for example?

I don't think that that artist, who is in the same gallery as me moreover, is part of my direct references. If I had to talk about the works that have nurtured my own art, I would mention Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* and certain films by Warhol, *Chelsea Girls* and *The Bed*. It's hard to answer your question. If we define working on realities that are part of a certain societal inhibition as "hardcore," then yes, I can see myself as being involved in that scene.

It's true that I don't aim to protect viewers from certain images, just as I don't protect myself from them. When I film a body, whether it's healthy or suffering, clothed or undressed, penetrated or penetrating, I'm not looking for the angle that will render that body more chaste. I've often been told that I film with a certain frontality. That may be. But that frontality doesn't prevent me from pursuing certain formal concerns in the image. In *Hôpital*, where I film the bodies of the elderly being handled by nurses, I tried to render the extraordinary formal power of those very pale bodies, the dramatic elegance of the slow gestures of the sick, and the rapid movements of the nurses sweeping this way and that through space. If I'm filming sex scenes, I focus not on the heroic moments, the violent accelerations, but on the gestures that let the body's fragile, precarious dimension come to light. Facial expressions, the slightest gestures, the quivers rippling across the skin are set in the foreground. Those revealing scenes don't form the main part of my films, which are constructed from spoken exchanges and interviews as well.

I think that radicalism is above all a demand with respect to oneself, a search at every instant, which takes shape in the quest for an individual absolute. If an artist affirms her intransigence with respect to an existing power, or by rejecting institutionalized ways of doing things, then the artist is in danger of seeing institutions, which are evolving structures, eventually catch up with her. The underground will then tend to take shape as a new academic art.

What is your connection with Body Art?

I greatly admire the early performances of Marina Abramovic. I'm thinking of a performance in which she placed herself at the audience's disposal. The audience could indeed do with her whatever they wanted to. Although certain people showed her tokens of kindness, most made humiliating gestures toward her. They began to undress her, wrote on her body, stuck a flower in her hand. I even think someone slapped her. Tears began to run down her cheeks but she stuck to the position they had put her in. A woman from the audience dried her tears. By assuming that passive position, the artist absorbed the emotions she provoked in the viewer. She took a great risk, both physical and emotional. The relationship she has with her own body is put to the test. Her relationship with others is questioned in a radical way. She pushes viewers to turn their gaze inwards, to reflect on their own violence, their own secret emotions and temptations and the way they can pose a danger to themselves and others. I'm also thinking about Chris Burden's *Bed Piece*, where he remained in bed for 22 days without getting up or speaking. It isn't a spectacular performance. The extreme nature of the experience in this case takes on its full force in the temporal length of the piece. My video works also evoke situations where the body confronts its limits, where it's tested in various ways. But I don't put my own body at risk. I need mediators. I record the daily life of certain people and I observe their experiences in a field that isn't directly linked with art.

In your films, one senses a disequilibrium between a very powerful content and a form that you put little into, the form of documentary film in other words. Where do you see your work with respect to the documentary genre, which belongs to the sphere of film and television?

It's true that I choose subjects that already have an intrinsic force. Sexuality and medicine are domains in which the affective, the cultural, the psychological and so on meet. They are crucial points in society that contain an enormous amount of information. I don't try to treat these subjects exhaustively; rather I aim to create the portrait of someone in connection with their surrounding world. In *Karima*, for example, the young woman is seen by turns with her family, surrounded by her friends and during SM sessions. Karima is part of several worlds and moves between them with great ease. That's the dynamic that I wanted to capture.

I'm often asked if I see a difference between my status as an artist and the status of a documentary filmmaker. I generally answer by reversing the problem. Certain documentary filmmakers (Raymond Depardon, Frederick Wiseman and so on) have an artistic approach, even if they're in a network that is different from the contemporary-art network.

If you consider the whole of their work, you will clearly make out a coherent line of development throughout. While they deal with a wide variety of subjects, definite aesthetic choices, along with concerns that are theirs alone, stand out all the same. So I wouldn't say that the documentary filmmaker puts little into the form. There are fewer choices of camera angles than in a fiction film, but they are far more fundamental. I spend a year making a film. So there are long periods of observation during which my view comes into focus. That view materializes the moment I pick up my camera. Then it's a matter of working in the moment. If I miss that moment, if the framing isn't right, then I've got nothing. Next comes a period of editing, which is akin to the process of writing. For a film lasting an hour and a half, I accumulate around 40 hours of rushes, which is not much. Then it's a question of putting those bits of interviews, that series of anecdotes, into some kind of order in such a way that you can evoke abstract ideas, which you accomplish through connotation, suggestion, succeeding shifts in the film...

As for the sphere of television, I know that it's one of the main means of getting documentaries to an audience. I'm not very qualified to talk about that because it's been three years since I stopped watching television, but it seems to me that people who are filmed are more reticent about confiding certain truths about themselves if they're told that the film is going to be shown on TV; in other words, their boss, their family and their friends may stumble on it by chance. The rapport you have with people is much more relaxed if they know they're going to be shown in a "private" network like the museum, the cinema or the festival circuit. In people's imagination television is linked to all the fantasies of success, and the worst humiliations and denunciations. It has replaced the village square of our ancestors. What happens there is truly "made public," i.e., placed at everyone's disposal. Thus, one has just as much a chance of being hoisted up in triumph there as being lynched. It's also a milieu in which people suspect that a lot of money is changing hands and nowadays they have a keen awareness of the financial value of their image. Because of all of that I think television is a hard instrument to handle.

How do you shoot your films? Do you work with a crew or completely alone? Are your films meant to be shown on television, or does the projection mechanism allow you to lend your production a specific plastic value?

I do my filming and editing alone. I maintain emotional ties with the people I film, and those ties are not limited to when the camera is rolling. That's why people manage to reveal certain private moments of their life to me. Would they manage if I imposed a crew, even a limited one, on them? I spend a lot of time with them and there are long periods when I don't take my camera out of the bag simply because I feel it's not the right moment. How can you impose that pace on a crew? I also think I like working alone. That independence obviously has a direct link with the lightness of the video equipment that exists nowadays, and with the fact that editing software has become accessible financially. I can make films with a very small budget. Economically, I am dependent on no one; the decisions touching on my film concern me alone... and the people being filmed of course. My films are shot to be shown in a cinema or watched on a television screen, not seen in a loop in an exhibition space. There is a narrative, a continuity that is important to follow. On the other hand, I've made videos that I reserve for installations, the series *Boyzone* and *Strepers*, for example. In those I study the male body and the situations of tension or fusion that can arise in a group. My installations lead to a degree of reading that is very different from the degree my films lend themselves to. The impact is far more direct. The installations don't lead viewers toward a progressive understanding. They spark within them a mode of understanding that is of a more visual or emotional nature. Given that the time spent looking at an installation is more concentrated, viewers may have to make a greater effort to unpack the layers of meaning that are built up in each piece.

I created an installation called *Ovidie/Hôpital* in which precise sequences from each film were juxtaposed. I was inviting viewers to make a transversal reading of those two works. The two worlds represented there (the world of porn, where young bodies walk around naked without the least embarrassment, and the world of a hospital's geriatric ward) no longer seemed to contrast with one other.

On the contrary, they revealed their similarities. The relationship the people in these films had with their own body or the body of another swings back and forth between extreme physical proximity and emotional withdraw. In *Hôpital*, the inert body of the elderly was moved, transported and washed by jovial nurses with quick, precise gestures. In *Ovidie* I chose the moment when the actors were posing for photographs. Following the photographer's directions, the bodies would mingle and penetrate one another, then remain frozen in ecstatic poses. The actors' complete attention was focused on the image of orgasmic pleasure they were constructing. When I speak of "emotional withdraw," I don't mean something pejorative or degrading. We all have at certain moments an aloof relationship vis-à-vis our bodies. It's an almost daily movement of withdraw, which is expressed with greater precision in medical situations, or when one does work related to the body. What's involved is a more or less powerful adhesion to the world and the self.

Your presence is troubling in those extreme situations, and although discreet, it isn't overlooked. To what extent do you influence those situations, to what extent do you take part in their extreme character?

The camera is a kind of prosthesis that thrusts me right inside certain situations and pulls me out of them at the same time. It spares me an overly direct contact with the various realities I film and thus enables me to get even closer to them. Even when I'm not using it, the camera is there to remind me why I happen to be at that place with those people. That role of mediator is especially useful early on when I'm discovering a certain world. When I'm used to it, I no longer need to look through the filter of a camera, and the tool of my trade begins to be an inconvenience. When I begin to know people well, they bring me into their discussions and I have a hard time answering these people while filming them. In *Karima* I shot a domination session, then I immediately showed the sequence to the two "actors" in the scene. I recorded them as they analyzed the session (verbalization and analysis are enormously important in S.M.). To be able to watch the film and question them, I set the camera on a tripod and sat down with them on the couch. You can see me on camera but at the edge of the frame. I only have to lean back to be out of the field of vision. That is indeed my position in the world I am filming, between participation and withdraw.

To turn the question around, how do the extreme situations that you witness influence you?

I obviously come out of these experiences changed, which is what I'm looking for.

You have voluntarily confronted violent situations. Isn't there in that personal, affective and psychological investment a quest for identity or a form of catharsis?

I think I find myself in the same position as viewers of my films, that is, I am located in a constant shifting back and forth between projection and distancing. I'm not physically involved in the action taking place in front of me, but it does concern me directly. I project myself in the bodies of the old people who are dying, or I project into that situation experiences that I have personally had in my life. I project myself into the sexual act I am filming because it forces me to reevaluate my sexuality with respect to the act. I wonder about how I experience the relationship with my lover or my family ties, in light of what I see with *Karima* or *Ovidie*. Their relationship to the world constitutes another possibility, another proposal for living. Those shifts toward adhesion and reflection are made visible by the process of editing. I alternate tight close-ups, which lend great intensity to the action and lead viewers to be a part of it, with broader shots, which encourage reflection, a stepping back. The relationships between the film's protagonists are then offered up to an externalizing, analyzing viewpoint.

Your "documentaries" can be seen as a double narrative, the story of Karima's life, for example, and at the same time the story of your life, of your choices and your ambiguous position, half distant and half immersed in the world you enter. To what extent is that double narrative a log or diary?

As my father used to say, "Understanding others and understanding yourself are one and the same thing," and that understanding is forever questioning itself and developing.