

MOUSSE

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FILM MAKES TIME

by Michele Robecchi



Rosalind Nashashibi, *Bachelor Machines Part 2*, 2007

In 2003 Rosalind Nashashibi presented, at the ICA in London, *The State Of Things*, a film that illustrates the activities of a group of women in a sale organized by the Salvation Army, in romantic black and white, wrapped in an evocative soundtrack by Um Kolsoum. The great variety of the themes that converged in the work – from the supposed impermeability of ecosystems to the role of women – generated a powerful overview that convinced the Beck's Futures jury. Michele Robecchi met with the artist in London, on the eve of her solo show at the ICA, a return to the scene of her initial success five years ago. The exhibition is but one of her upcoming appointments, including the imminent collaboration with Lucy Skaer at Doggerfisher in Edinburgh, and a screening at Centre Pompidou in Paris.

When I went to see your exhibition at the Chisenhale Gallery in 2008 I was one of the few who could pick up most of the conversation in Bachelor Machines Part 1 (2007). I was bit worried about the idea of being distracted by the dialogue and consequentially projecting some kind of narrative that maybe wasn't intended to be there in the first place, but eventually it didn't happen.

I actually made some decisions with the knowledge of what they were saying. I edited it and then at the end I had this woman from Torre del Greco help me. So I could decide what should be there or not.

How long were you on the ship?

Thirteen days.

It must have been very intense. Unlike other films of yours, you couldn't explore the situation and escape at the end of the day. You were there 24/7.

Yes. I thought it was going to be awful. I was completely appalled that I would have had this feeling of being in prison, but it was the opposite. It was the most freedom I could have ever felt. In fact I still kind of regret not being there. Sometimes I dream about it. The constant motion is really a strong freedom element and even if you do get off the ship, you barely show your passport. Feeling that you are part of something that has the power to move through borders felt just incredibly liberating. But also it quite quickly became almost a family situation.

Where does this interest in parallel realities come from?

I'm interested in different layers of reality and being able to catch them on film at one time. I'm interested in the idea getting immersed in a situation for a time. Like getting into a role and having some pleasure with that and experiencing some constrictions and difficulties within that. I'm interested in the way that we organize ourselves into groups or institutions and how we negotiate those. The institutions I speak of are obviously inherited but also self-built and self-organized. And I think I'm also interested in the tension between self-imposed control and exterior control, which is not necessarily a theme on the ship, but comes up in other films.



Rosalind Nashashibi, *The Prisoner*, 2008

The Prisoner (2008) seems to be different from the rest of your work. It is entirely fictional, whereas in Bachelor Machines Part 1 or The State of Things (2000) you present a pre-existing reality in your own way.

True. I acted like a filter in those films, which are gradually more and more constructed. In between there's Bachelor Machines Part 2 (2007) which is partly set up and partly not. That was probably the first time where I set up a performed situation. The starting point for Bachelor Machines Part 2 was a film by Alexander Kluge, Artists under the Big Top: Perplexed (1967). And the starting point for The Prisoner was a film by Chantal Akerman, The Captive (2000). That's what binds them together. I was looking to get Kluge to be in this film but he was busy. And then I went to Oslo on a residency and there was Thomas Bayrle, and the idea of Thomas as surrogate seemed more right – he is from the same generation as Kluge, and there was this instant interest in each other's work, there was an understanding between us. Similarly in The Prisoner I wanted to use a scene from Akerman's film, which is about a woman being followed. When I first saw the film in 2001 the high heels of the woman made a really strange sound effect. And when I got the DVD in 2007 I watched it again and I realized the heels were dubbed badly, they were recorded at the wrong aural distance. They sounded as if she was close to you while you saw her far away. The unexpected effect of this was to exaggerate my awareness of the sexual tension in the scene, and to underline the sexually obsessive control scenario that was being played out. I thought it was really interesting how technically wrongly made sound could give this weird experience that enhanced the meaning of the film.

That was the starting point for The Prisoner. In that piece one 16mm film loops through one

projector, and then crosses a short distance to an adjacent projector and loops through there, and back to the first. The distance between the two projectors causes the six second delay between the two screens showing the film. Akerman wouldn't let me use her scene, again a problem leading ultimately to a better solution. I shot a woman being followed in London, and overdubbed the high heels, and I removed the figure of the man who followed her and instead used the subjective POV of the camera, of the viewer.

People being followed by a subjective camera seems to be a recurrent theme in films, from Yoko Ono's Rape (1969) to Michael Lindsay-Hogg's Guy (1997).

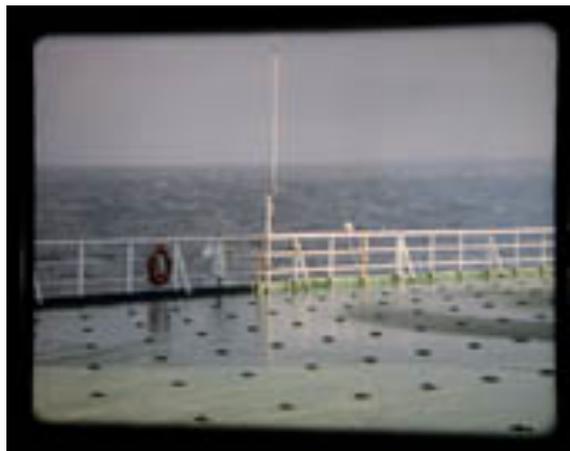
Yes. I'm interested in the idea that when you are shooting a film there's always some apprehension involved. I think that's part of the transgression involved in making work – the filming itself is the hidden performance taking place, there is performance fear – it lends itself to the film. I never hide; if I'm filming someone I'm visible to them. In any case I don't feel you have that much choice about what you do as an artist. You find something and you kind of follow that. I think the transgressive act of the film shoot must be important. Somehow it's in the work.

How much would you consider them documentaries and how much would you consider them films?

I consider them films. *Eyeballing* (2005) was actually a deliberate attempt to address the fact that there was a bit of a disconnect between the way I would like my films to be read and the way they were read up to then. I realized that this was my problem and not anyone else's. I was filming group interaction because I was interested in how we perform ourselves, the constant switching between simply being and enacting a role. The films were being read as documentaries about those particular people or places that I was filming, and that was getting in the way of the archetypes and collectivity that interested me then. With *Eyeballing* I decided to film people in uniform, and found faces in the city to explore the idea of authority, control, and this most reduced representation of the human face – the least individualistic possible. But at the same time every kind of stupid dumb face is different and more expressive than the next.

Do you think this interest in captivity and parallel realities could be somehow related to your personal history?

My dad asked me about that once. "Are you doing this because you're half Palestinian and half Northern Irish, and don't have a place?" On the positive side, I suppose there is a feeling of being constantly able to move into new situations; on the negative side, there is perhaps a need to do that. I think I'm drawn to a lot of different places and characters. I like people who invent selves; I'm drawn to Cicciolina for example. I like her because there's a way she dresses up and does different, almost archetypal versions of women – admittedly all intended to be sexy, but some of her characters are almost troubling, like one where she has her nose and mouth painted black. I find her interesting in a very simple way.



Rosalind Nashashibi, *Bachelor Machines Part 1*, 2007

That brings me to your photography work – which, as opposed to your films, is a bit on the

glamorous side.

That's because I use images from books and magazines a lot. I think I allow myself to get more into a fantasy element there. It was never meant to be about reality. Actually, of course it's a reality, but I think that piece Gumbi/Pasolini/La Cicciolina (Mythologizing gives existence a glamour we wouldn't want to do without) (2005), is the key. The subtitle is a quote from Jung. Perhaps playing at archetypal figures, rather than individual figures, enriches our experience – and like in the quote, the idea of mythology and glamour got tied together for me.

How did you get into film?

I did a degree in painting and when I was in second year I did some Super 8 films. And after that I stayed in the painting department but I made films and installations. It just worked out for me. When I was painting I was doing collages, and filmmaking seems to be the right kind of collage for me.

Anthony McCall recently expressed his concern about younger generations of artists being into the fetish idea of 16 mm film.

Anthony McCall's work is very technical, but for me, just as his analog beam of light made solid objects, his digital one didn't. He's not wrong, though. It is possible to use 16 mm film to bolster a lack of content, but it's also possible to use it in a way that you find appropriate. The analog aspect is important. The literal analogy between things is important as well. I'm not that much of an installation artist, but the reason why I did *The Prisoner* is not because I'm into the materiality of film, but because I'm into the idea of literalizing something which is a conceptual space, so in that installation filmic time becomes tangible and visible in space. Film makes time. It's a construct of our perception, of our imagination.

It's true thought that 16 mm film at times seems the equivalent of black and white photography – the easiest way to create a nice, powerful image.

I'm aware of this problem. I want to use a medium that for me really lives, and films look more like reality to me than video. Video seems more mediated – it relates more to television and documentation. I'm not interested in making a fictional space. Rosalind Krauss talks about the idea of a medium becoming utopian at the moment of its birth, and again at its obsolescence. In between there is this time where the utopia fades and the medium becomes more jaded. But then at the moment where it's no longer a viable medium utopia flashes back into it. It has some sort of criticality.

*When you represented Scotland at the Venice Biennale in 2005 you presented a work called *Men in Prison*. What's the relationship between *Men in Prison* and *The Prisoner*?*

I do have nightmares about being in a prison quite often. I've never visited a prison but I had some correspondence with a prisoner for a while. Prisons are the ultimate metaphor for some of the things I'm interested in. Like how we negotiate institutional society: the idea of external power, against the situation that we from the privileged first world found ourselves in, which is to do with self-discipline. The mantra is: you must be self-motivated and self-disciplined, you must be a creative and productive individual. This is how we set ourselves up, internalized control vis-à-vis external control that still exists.



Rosalind Nashashibi, *Bachelor Machines Part 2*, 2007