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THE “SWEET CREATIVITY”, BETWEEN ELECTRONIC ART AND EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

1. A STARTING POINT

Brazen, asserting their independence, supporters of self-determination: the presence of women connected with electronic art and experimental cinema, between the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, is expressed through their creative activity in parallel with the demands put forward by the second wave of feminism¹. All this stems from a reflection which has at its core the investigation into the body, interrogated as the “original place of formation of the sexual identity, the hub of the cultural construction of genders”², real and ideal at the same time, concrete in its physical dimension and metaphorical in its peculiar diversity³. The origin of the relationship between women and electronic audiovisual means is developed in the context of Body Art and becomes blurred with the experiments by those artists who still used the camera, in an attempt to define “another” cinema, engaged in the assertion of a female identity free of the stereotypes imposed by the dominant male culture⁴.

Starting from the performances by the cellist Charlotte Moorman, several independent and original paths branch out, which identify in Body Art an extreme way to accomplish researches for self-knowledge and revelation. Macrì writes in this regard: “By unblocking the productive forces of the unconscious, they are triggered off into hysterical dramatization, conflicts between desire and defence, between licence and prohibition, between a drive for life and a drive for death, between voyeurism and exhibitionism, between sadist flows and masochistic pleasure, between nihilist fantasy and

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³ From the very large amount of literature on the subject, reference has been made to B. Koenig Quart, Women Directors. The Emergence of a New Cinema, New York: Praeger Publisher, 1989; Foreword, introduction to V. Pravadelli, Performance, Rewriting, Identity. Chantal Akerman’s Postmodern Cinema, introduction by B. Klinger, Torino: Otto, 2000, 1-3; A. Trivelli, L’altra metà dello sguardo, Roma: Bulzoni, 1998.
⁴ On Valie Export, one example amongst many, Teresa Macrì writes: “Her cinema is unconditionally tactile, it caresses a corporeality in rebellion and hers is a form of cinema that disintegrates her syntax with which she tried to break down the barriers of difference. Her performance Touch Cinema, in which the artist, with bare breasts, rubbed herself across a box with holes where the audience could slip in their hands, was of 1968. ‘This is a cinema, my body is the screen. This cinema is not made for looking, it is made for touching’, she would say. It is the idea of a reversal of vision, not only through the retina but which provoke a sort of other visual flooding’. T. Macrì, Cinematriche del desiderio, Genova-Milano: Costa & Nolan, 1998, 69 (my translation).
It was in this mood that artists such as Gina Pane, Marina Abramovic, Valerie Export, Joan Jonas and many others, worked at first, identifying in video a means free from consolidated and standardized traditions, a fluid means with a transversal character, which was offered as a more favourable territory for research in the creation of “a style and identity of their own”\(^4\). Women who worked with and on the body, constantly testing their limits of supportability, pain and provocation\(^5\). Due to the urgency of self-assertion, women artists used the electronic mirror as a means of narcissistic display\(^6\), but above all as a means to consolidate their existence in the cultural and social context, trying to recast the opposition between the reflective and reflexive, as Rosalind Krauss said, and to recompose their intimate selves against the masculine panorama. Using alternative recording means such as video or the formats of more experimental cinema meant carrying out an act which was simultaneously creative and political in which Body Art became entwined with forms of expression and story-telling which could even be documentary\(^7\).

However, there was a paradox in the violence of that creative gestures, i.e. a desire for feminine entrenchment which was accomplished through a masculine type of language that the artists mimicked, almost wanting to show that they could compete in a fight between “equals”\(^8\).

Determined that they no longer wanted to occupy positions on the sidelines and determined to emerge from a forced passivity, women artists used their bodies as an instrument to release their violent force, rejecting the traditional role of remissive and welcoming mother-body. Thus the search for emancipation erroneously took place through standardization with the masculine-patriarchal system, so unpopular and hard fought\(^9\).

2. THE “SWEET TURN”. A FEW IDEAS

But why start off from such a distant period, with apparently distant presuppositions, to propose the idea of a sweet creativity as a mark of style of artists who today, speaking about femininity, work with experimental languages, bridging cinema and electronic art?

The vehemence of the feminist urge has undoubtedly been losing power at political level over the years, thanks also to the acquisition of rights (at least in developed countries). Hand in hand with this, as maintained by Cardone and Fanchi, there was also a weakening of the cinematographic theories linked to the reflection on female identity in the 1990s\(^10\). Despite the gradual impoverishment of the political-social struggle and

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\(^10\) The famous performance by Marina Abramovic and Ulay \(AAA AAA\), of 1978, is paradigmatic in this sense.
\(^11\) “The first impulse of female rebellion is usually the imitation of the virile model, with the illusion of reaching equality through identification. However, this also means playing the man’s game and taking on his problems and his type of neurotic dissociation”. E.C. De Miro, “Miti e riti del cinema: gli erotici fantasmi dell’immaginario”, *NUOdwf*, 8 (luglio-settembre 1978), 17; (my translation).
\(^12\) L. Cardone, M.G. Fanchi, “Nota delle curatrici”, in *Genere e generi. Figure femminili nell’immagina-riv cinematografico italiano*, Comunicazioni sociali, XXIX, 2 (maggio-agosto 2007): 155.
the critical-theoretical interpretation of the cinema, female audiovisual production, as far as electronic and experimental languages are concerned, grew, becoming enriched and diversified thanks to the progressive evolution of technologies and those hybridization processes between media which were of great significance for the construction of new and original forms of expression, the common denominator of which is definitely intermedia.

If, on the one hand, over the years some artists have continued to follow a path of creative production linked to claiming feminist demands, over time, female paths of audiovisual experimentation developed towards heterotopic territories, finally independent from logics of confrontation-collision with the masculine, in which the body often remains at the centre of the discourse, but not solely and, above all, not with the same harsh tones of the origins. On the contrary, the body is claimed as a poetic and musical instrument and that primordial need to show real scars leaves room for the urgency to open, through physicality, a door towards the interiority out of which emotions, free thought and affectivity can flow to the outside.

Further: these are territories where the desire to construct a female discourse on women or on the world observed through the eyes of women is fulfilled with a sense of vicinity and empathy, where sweetness is no longer experienced as a paradigm imposed by the dominant masculine culture but is experienced as a strong point, a symbol of freedom, an inclination innate in women for comprehension and welcome.

Giulia Fanara writes: “Shattering the binary logic which for a long time had been one of the epistemological fundamentals of Western philosophy and culture, the poetic word of a woman is proposed as an experience of translation: between desire and thought; between unconsciousness and awareness; between politics and ethics; between home, departure and return; between the day and the night; between death and rebirth; between becoming his/hers; between the daughter and the mother”. The logic of translation, which Fanara indicates as a peculiar attitude of the present day of the feminine poetic discourse, is distinguished from the logic of opposition which characterized the experimental audiovisual path of the origins.


14 I am thinking, for example, of the activity of the Austrian Eveline Stermitz and the web TV she founded, ArtFemTV (Art and Feminism TV, http://www.artfem.tv).

15 To complete these feminine creative frame, it’s important to remember several women videoartists and filmmakers, very active during the Nineties, who certainly are reference points for the development of the young artists’s work I am going to write about. I am thinking about the fragmented narratives in the works by artists such as Ejia-Liisa Ahtila, Tacita Dean or Grazia Toderi; I am thinking about the theme of culturally divined identities as in the work by Shirin Neshat or Kara Walker and also about the provocative and colorful work on the body developed by Pipilotti Rist.


17 Regarding sweetness: “If sweetness were a form of weakness, if it were only the opposite of violence and if the ignominious sign of impotence, it is difficult to understand how it could have survived all its enemies for so long. And yet sweetness is not translated into a power. […] Some could think that this represents a guilty weakness, but I do not agree. Simply, the vehemence, the intensity, the power of sweetness are on another level. […] Sweetness cannot only inevitably be in the minority: this is its secret appeal. In my opinion, it is also the reason why the various political, social and moral forces do everything to misrepresent it. Every reactive force hates sweetness and tries to replace it by odious surrogates: syrupiness, stupidity, infantilism, consensus. I propose calling sweetness all the capacities of a free existence […]”. S. Audeguy, *Piccolo elogio della dolcezza*, Milano: Archinto, 2010, 5-6 (my translation); original edition *Petit éloge de la douceur*, Paris: Gallimard, 2007.

Having abandoned the roles of victims, martyrs and witches, the artists operating in the context of intermedia audiovisual creation have translated their investigation from the concreteness of a physicality exhibited as a political instrument into a more subtle and symbolic investigation of themselves and the relations they have with the world, filtering everything through an introspective capacity, a poetic thought and a loving and compassionate gaze which transits through the eye of the camera.

The *sweet creativity*, therefore, is accomplished on the one hand through some peculiar characteristics of the female nature and attitude, such as being capable of listening or being able to mediate, being able to wait or patiently observe, reflect and re-elaborate. On the other hand, it is accomplished in the objects of attention and narration dear to women whose inspiration for the video-works, as Anne-Marie Duguet maintains, “is nurtured by literary genres called minor, such as the diary, the essay, the autobiographical story, the pamphlet, the letter or [it is nurtured ] by the pictorial portrait, the collage or musical composition. New forms of audiovisual expression, as in certain experimental films, are the result of these hybridizations and these openings”[19].

Women artists have learned with time to feel and experience the right to be free narrating voices, outside the grids that have been imposed and suffered, outside logics of revenge, and have become fully-fledged audiovisual professionals-protagonists: authors, directors, screenwriters, editors, set designers... By developing languages and aesthetics that draw on various media, today they offer their own direct accounts, revealing them gracefully, or becoming delicate narrators of the life stories of other women, adopting the registers of confidential narration, at times on tiptoe, with gentle tones and images, at other times not sacrificing the scream of release, but using a light and intelligent irony and/or self-irony.

Reflections on the intimacy of private life and the urgency for the recomposition of identities through paths of exploration in family and social memories become the cardinal points for a *corpus of works* in which sweetness and love are the keys to interpret a production where the authors reflect on being mothers, sisters, partners, friends, small girls and teenage girls.

In this perspective, even if Krauss’s idea of narcissism still remains at least in one of the works I am going to present, I think the implicit soliloquy of narcissism, as studied in the Seventies, is nowadays overcome when women artists analyse themselves in their family and social contexts.

Without the fear of leaving “male” positions of force, many of the leading figures on today’s intermedia scene, between electronic art and experimental cinema, offer new images of themselves, proposing visions which come from inside their worlds and their stories. It is therefore no longer a question of representing themselves in opposition, by contrast, but to present themselves in the authenticity of their experience and their feeling.

3. CASE STUDIES

The choice of the works which I present here aims to be paradigmatic of the tones and thematic of *sweet creativity* as pre-announced so far, through recent work representative

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of those dialogues and intersections between the media following the digital revolution\textsuperscript{20}, which has encouraged the fluid and unexpected development of audiovisual languages and aesthetics, as well as the creation of new narrative forms.

I would therefore like to present Despertar (France, 2012, 4’23”, Engl. Awakening)\textsuperscript{21}, directed by Maria Cifuentes Caruncho, a young Spanish author. I find it interesting to start from this work to highlight a link with the discourse on the body and on Body Art which opened my reflection. In this video-poem, the naked body of a woman, apparently asleep, emerges from the darkness to become the living and vibrant screen on to which images are projected, which show the beauty of nature and of life. Almost as though it were the transposition of the young woman’s dreams or desires, metamorphic and symbolic images flow over the sinuosity of her body like gentle caresses: precious gems and corals decorate her body, it is lulled by seascapes, swans skim over it, the leaves of trees and ears of corn tickle it and the moon and fire illuminate it.\textit{Awakening} takes place slowly, looking on to real life once again after a dreamlike journey suspended between the radiance of the world and the sleeping grace of the young woman, accompanied by a joyful and light soundtrack. The performer’s body becomes a work of art on which the wonders of the world are reflected, a soft, physical and metamorphic space which receives and produces poetry. The author kindly lays her gaze on the young woman through the camera and slowly takes in her features, folds and skin through a kind of haptic visuality\textsuperscript{22}. It is a gaze of empathy, complicity and confidence which celebrates femininity as a powerful repository of life. This body which looks at the world and which is the object of a gaze becomes the treasurer of experiences, emotions, hidden desires, dreams and the final awakening becomes a metaphor of the awareness of women who, as Lea Melandri writes, “aspire to be both mother and child, empty and full, absolute abundance and absolute loss, heat and frigidity, wealth and penury, the origin of life and its essence”\textsuperscript{23}.

I would now like to continue with a work situated on the border between self-portrait and autobiographical diary, produced by putting together two hundred and fifty photos taken with a smartphone: it is Berlun (Germany, 2008, 6’30”)\textsuperscript{24}, a video made by the Turkish artist Ezgi Kiliçaslan (1973, Besny), who emigrated to Germany and where she’s active in the intermedia sphere. In the video, the private dimension and the sphere of intimacy unequivocally become public and the radius of vision of the surrounding area slowly narrows on top of the author who becomes the main object of enquiry. The artist shows with free and spontaneous gestures the most intimate and private dimensions of her daily life, where the domestic and public environments where she lives and weaves relations are marked by the almost constant presence of her body: first her feet,


\textsuperscript{21} The video can be seen at: http://vimeo.com/46109387, last accessed 14.06.2014.

\textsuperscript{22} For the concept of haptic visuality as a “tactile” way of seeing and knowing, where the eyes metaphorically function as organs of touch, see L. Marks,\textit{ Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media,} Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002.


\textsuperscript{24} The video can be seen at http://www.bielefelder-kunstverein.de/en/exhibitions/subjective-projections/ezgi-kilincaslan.html, last accesses 14.06.2014.
then a hand, her legs and as far as the whole body, stretched out, huddled up, all through an autonomous self-portraying gesture, holding the video-phone, a prosthetic third eye curious about life.

In the text that accompanies the video and which she recites in Turkish, Kilinçaslan talks about being a woman and a migrant, speaking about herself with immediacy and in confidence, as though she were writing a page in a diary or a letter to a friend. There emerges the painful internal fragmentation which comes from being in limbo between the desire to assert her identity and nationality in the new host country and the desire for renewal, as though personal evolution implied the need to cut the umbilical cord that is the connection to the origins. The difficulties in recognizing the place of the past (Istanbul) or of the present (Berlin) as home act as a subtext to the video which is gradually revealed as the attempt to reconstruct a familiar environment, a place where to recognize herself and assert her physical and ideological identity. In this way the notion of the biological-genetic family is recreated, replaced by the portrait of an extended family to which friends, their children, close ones and loved ones belong. Through the self-portraits of the artist, we observe the reiteration of a measured and empathetic gesture of social relocation, as though the self-portraits composed a specular Lacanian image in which to find oneself, despite the sensation of disorientation and interior scission. Joyful, thoughtful, sleepy, engrossed or bored, Kilinçaslan portrays herself truthfully and naturally even in the moments of intimacy in her couple and the self-portraits are often taken on the bed, between the sheets. Doubts and uncertainties leave room for a final awareness of having to continue one’s personal evolution and revolution, giving free vent to and shouting what comes from her heart. It is precisely through the recomposition of herself in the Berlin panorama that, photo after photo, Kilinçaslan creates a photo album of her own of the present that, in the future, will represent the past of certainty and loves to which firmly anchor herself.

It is in a more suspended and impalpable atmosphere that the themes of emigration, distance and family love become the subject of the poetic experimental portrait Coriolis (Finland-Benin, 2013, 13’48”), made by the Finnish artist Milja Viita. Shot on 16mm...
film and then transferred and edited digitally, the work reconstructs with an evocative and symbolic language the emotional link between two twins from Togo, Martine and Marthe, the former having emigrated to Finland where she is a carer for the elderly, the latter a dressmaker who has remained in the land of their birth.

Landscapes and colours are opposed: alongside the warm tones of the African soil and its songs, there are the cool notes and darker musical punctuation that reflect northern Europe. It is a story of gazes and voices that flows on the theme of the wind: the barely mentioned re-evocation of the mother whose off screen voice recalls the day of torrid wind when the twins were born is followed by Martine who, writing a letter to her sister, in almost a little girl’s voice, seeks comfort in childhood memories, remembering that all the winds in the world arise in the village where they too were born.

It is with the same force that moves the planet’s winds from Africa, to make them return to the point they started from, that Martine feels the call of her land and her loved ones, addressing her sister with few, evanescent words, from which melancholy and love seep out.

The director uses an elliptical and rarefied narrative register, staying distant from the traditional documentary and translating the story of the two sisters into very brief narrations and with blurred and metaphorical images: flapping fabrics in gusts of wind, aerial views of the environments where the two women live, Marthe working at her sewing machine on a beach close to the sea, Martine with her warm breath trying to melt the ice on the twigs of a plant. The viewer sees nothing of the social context where Martine lives and works, nor is there an investigation of the village where Marthe has remained. The real landscapes look flaky, remaining in the background as the essential geography of a story that is completely interior. The close-ups of the camera often seem to linger before resting delicately on the hands of the two women, one intent on writing, the other busy sewing. The few African views often correspond to a grainy consistency of the film, at times apparently burnt, but also slow motion sequences, as though to mark the link with the past and with a childhood that is always alive in the memory of the sisters and of the mother. The African songs and the musical pieces are sewn together by the continuous blowing of the wind which becomes the symbol of affective continuity and ever-lasting bonds. The central figures of their story, Marthe and Martine become actresses and evoke an experience and feelings that make them universal and shared, activating those processes in which “testimony appears as a place of the memory, where they can re-enact their lives” as an antidote to being uprooted, disoriented, dispersed and the emotional void.

4. CONCLUSION

I think some common points emerge from these three examples, which take us back to the concept of sweet creativity anticipated earlier: love for physicality, understood as a sacred place, the repository of delicacy and power, the place of contact with the world and life; love for the others, experienced as an essential and unconditioned bond, for the

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31 This is in line with the narrative modes typical of videocreation, cf. the chapter Trame elettroniche in S. Lischi, Visioni elettroniche. L’oltre del cinema e l’arte del video, Roma: Scuola Nazionale di Cinema, 2001, 52-92.

family, for friends and for partners; lastly, love for themselves and for other women, observed, listened to, understood and represented with their own experiences, hesitations, desires and certainties. This is a creativity which starts off from an empathetic spirit, from a gaze which can receive with gentleness, recount with spontaneity and soften the harshness of life.

There is a light that always stays on in female audiovisual creativity, between electronic art and experimental cinema: a light full of grace for a discourse that is never totally stated, a suspension of images and words, an intimate atmosphere portrayed with nuanced vibrations and indefinite visions.

Whether it is about speaking of one’s own existence, giving light to the experiences of other women or simply showing the beauty of bodies and the power of feminine gestures, the discourse developed by the artists mentioned, as by many others who have not been included in this dissertation, often has the sung rhythm of poetry, in a rhetorical and symbolic attitude full of meaning, where the pleasure of navigating in new forms of narration highlights the fine relationship that women establish between concrete reality and the interior emotional sphere.

SUMMARY

Far from the vehemence of the creative gestuality of women connected with electronic art and experimental cinema, between the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, I would like to propose the idea of a sweet creativity as a mark style of artists who today, speaking about femininity, work with experimental languages. Over time, female paths of audiovisual experimentation developed towards heterotopic territories, to use a term coined by Foucault, other territories, finally independent from logics of confrontation-collision with the masculine. The choice of the works I present in the paper aims to be paradigmatic of a feminine poetic discourse where women-artists investigate themselves and the relation they have with the world, filtering everything through an introspective capacity, a poetic thought and a loving and compassionate gaze which transits through the eye of the camera.