

# *Body Language*



*Studies in  
Female Expression*

November 15, 1990

**Artists Space**

January 5, 1991

## Acknowledgements

With the presentation of *Body Language: Studies in Female Expression* Artists Space continues our commitment to exhibiting independent video by under-represented artists who often challenge our expectations of the medium.

We are grateful to artist Julie Zando for proposing and organizing this exhibition. Her curatorial premise is bi-polar: on one end of the spectrum these tapes explore the body as a medium of expression when language fails and at the other end language is the vehicle for expressing the predicaments of the body. We are pleased to publish her essay which elaborates these ideas and to have the opportunity to premiere her newest production, *The Bus Stops Here*.

Our thanks also go to the artists who produced the tapes in this program. Their explorations of difficult, sometimes disturbing subjects, evidence the struggle for expression encountered by those who are marginalized by social conventions. This work leaves no doubt of the importance of freedom of expression. Without such freedom, we would not have access to such thought-provoking and diverse work.

Finally we wish to express our gratitude to the New York State Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, whose support in part makes our video program possible.

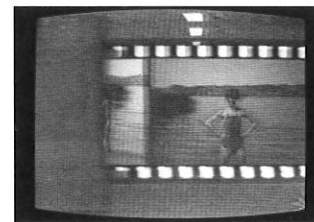
Susan Wyatt  
Executive Director

Micki McGee  
Film/Video Curator

# Pen to Knife, Paper to Body

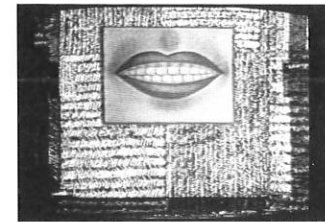
an  
essay  
by  
Julie  
Zando

*Body Language: Studies in Female Expression* explores the issue of the way in which women's bodies are inscribed in language—not only in the way the body speaks, but also in the way the body is spoken about. Interpreted broadly, "language" is like an agency—such as the government or the mass media—that is not accessible to most female speakers. True, women can elect a female politician (for example), but they do not control the government. Or they can become anchorwomen, but they do not exercise real authority to shape the mass media. Likewise, women speak, but are their voices heard? This program explores the varied ways in which women communicate (*Am I My Mother's Keeper?*, *Kugelkopf*, *La Grimoire Magnetique*), the ways in which their bodies are employed to structure meaning (*Exposed*, *Die Evidenz des Kalkuels*, *Identity Crisis*), and the strategies used to resist marginalization by dominant, male systems of signification—the law (*Prowling By Night*), the medical establishment (*Soma*), colonialism (*The Headhunters of Borneo*), rock and roll (*Laurie Sings Iggy*), and language (*We*, *The Bus Stops Here*).



*Exposed*  
by Ilse  
Gassinger

The body is an axis around which systems of signification revolve. From the Cartesian philosophy "I think therefore I am," to Jacques Lacan's specular identification with an image, the body is a vehicle for meaning. For Descartes the brain is a corporeal reference point for perception; for Lacan the body acts as a signifier.



*La Grimoire  
Magnetique*  
by Joelle de  
la Casiniere

Despite these different semiological functions, each theorist relies on the body to organize our understanding of the world.

How does the body act as a signifier? In Sherry Kromer Shapiro's *Am I My Mother's Keeper?* a woman literally uses her body as a kind of notepad. The woman communicates her fear and longing for companionship through the mutilation of her own body. She explains, "I could turn blue in the face, crying for help, and no one would listen. But, if I was bruised and bleeding, people could see my need and they would help me." *Kugelkopf*, by Austrian artist Mara Mattaschka, also addresses the relationship of body to text. In a room occupied by only a typesetting machine, Mattaschka shaves her head. Cutting it with a razor, she then proceeds to mark a glass wall with her own blood. These tapes literally cut through the theoretical problem of women's access to language, and assert the artist's right to self-expression despite theoretical and material obstacles. Although these women speak a "language of pain," which is extremely problematic from a feminist perspective, one cannot ignore the pleasure the women express from their self-mutilation. Disavowing their methods won't help to understand the psycho-social phenomenon that compels them to scar themselves. The woman in *Am I My Mother's Keeper?* attracts the sympathies of the outside world by her bodily inscriptions; the artist in *Kugelkopf* treats her body as unrestricted terrain for self-expression.

Freud suggests that the phallus/penis is the determinate of meaning in our unconscious. Is it there? Or is it

other (an obvious reference to Freud), Shelly argues against looking for hidden meanings and innuendoes. Her text states: "Everything is what it is, that's all. If we keep attaching meanings and mysteries to everything that



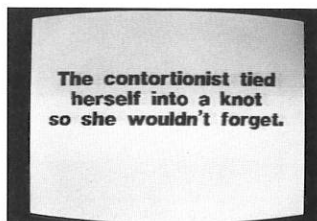
*The Headhunters of Borneo—  
A Recollection*  
by Azian Nurudin  
(photo courtesy of  
artist)

goes on inside us, we are bound to go crazy sooner or later." Although I question an existentialist approach to combat sexism, Silver's tape reminds us not to assume *a priori* the truthfulness of Freudian theory. We must not forget the power of touch, the knowledge we receive from surface contact, from that moment that Irigaray describes as "when our lips speak together."

Joelle de la Casiniere's *La Grimoire Magnetique* offers us such a moment. In *La Grimoire Magnetique*, the story of Ha-laj-Mansur, a tenth century mystic, is told in a fertile mix of speech, song, text, gesture and image. The power and complexity of the text and the richness of the imagery, propel the viewer into an ecstatic appreciation of the surface.

In Leslie Singer's *Laurie Sings Iggy*, the artist impersonates Laurie Anderson interpreting Iggy Pop's song *Rich Bitch*. This tape is one in a series of performances by Singer of flamboyantly excessive, usually fictional characters. Her longer pieces are intentionally assaultive to the viewer—funny, often offensive, they are irrepressibly energetic. This piece appropriates male language (the sexism of *Rich Bitch*) and subjects it to successive re-interpretation by female speakers. The sexist language is filtered through "Laurie," and then Leslie, in a signifying chain that renders it surprisingly powerless.

Under Ontario provincial law, it is a crime to "communicate"—a euphemism for prostitution. In *Prowling By Night*, a film by Gwendolyn, a Toronto filmmaker, stripper, and AIDS activist, prostitutes tell stories about harassment, theft and rape committed by the police. The film was commissioned by the National Film Board of Canada as part of *Five Feminist Minutes*, an anthology by English speaking, Canadian women artists. Gwendolyn began her film-making career three years ago, when a local art space invited groups of non-artists to do a Super-8 film on "what they found erotic." Gwendolyn emerged as the production leader of her group of sex-trade workers and produced two very interesting films that included a staged Roman orgy, exhibitionism, and bestiality. In her new production "all of the women in (the) film are working girls—we made the pictures and told the stories." On the day of the sound recording, the women waited in line for hours so that their stories could be told. Cut-out pictures were then constructed to illustrate the narrative. One contributor to the film project made a strong connection between her right to free



**The contortionist tied  
herself into a knot  
so she wouldn't forget.**

*Soma*  
by Barbara  
Lattanzi

speech and her right to engage in prostitution.<sup>2</sup> This woman was arrested and faces the possibility of imprisonment for prostitution. By their attempts to control "communicating," the police reveal their fear of an expressive female body.

How do native languages and rituals translate from culture to culture? Azian Nurudin offers us a provocative answer in her tape *The Headhunters of Borneo*. Nurudin, a Malaysian emigré, describes

"missing?" We are aware, he argues, of its presence or absence in our relations with others, and this structures our understanding of the world. This distinction, this binarism between the terms "male" and "female," initiates the model upon which language evolves.<sup>1</sup> Freud's privileging of the male organ above any other problematizes the relation of women to language. For if the phallus is the privileged signifier, the axis for signification, how can women participate in the struggle to communicate? From where do they speak? What is their point of reference and what gives them the power to speak with authority? Difficult questions, and whether one subscribes to Freudian theory or not, this theory must be acknowledged.

How do we articulate a "female" identity? No easy answer is available, and the theory is barely keeping up with the developments in role-playing



*Laurie Sings  
Iggy*  
by Leslie  
Singer

and gender-fucking so evident today. No sooner did Luce Irigaray theorize the concept of female "masquerade"—the mimicking of 'female' attributes as an act of deconstructing identity—than it is confirmed by the image of Madonna, who plays the role flawlessly. There is no simple reading of Madonna's text of "femininity." Alternately, the bodily image that Madonna projects can be appropriated by advertising and inscribed with exchange value, as the image of women propels commodity fetishism. Bodies—especially female bodies—are text that circulate within a larger cultural framework. They are inscribed upon by male desire, and/or capital, as depicted in Ilse Gassinger and Anna Steininger's tape *Die Evidenz Des*



*Prowling By  
Night*  
by  
Gwendolyn

*Kalkuels*. In this work, the male gaze is depicted by a series of arrows that flow from the eye of the man to the body of the woman. The female body is fragmented into an assembly line of images—torsos, hips, and legs are mixed and matched, relegated to objects of exchange by capitalism and male desire. While men drone on the soundtrack, women are silenced. Gassinger is an Austrian artist who has worked with the Media Workshop Vienna/Studio for Independent Video Projects. In Mindy Faber's *Identity Crisis* we see the development of female identity under the structuring influence of the male gaze. Faber directs her step-daughter, Kendra Scheuerlein, in a series of masquerades of stereotypical female characters. Kendra mimics an ingratiating "southern belle," a "tough chick," and simpering "housewife," among others. We are sadly reminded of the early age at which female subjects are indoctrinated with "feminization" through advertisements and commercial television. After the series of staged characterizations, Faber adds a string of out-takes, showing the young actress' mood swing from impatient to precocious. Her young female "self" is infinitely more complex and appealing than that of the cardboard roles she previously enacted.

Shelly Silver expresses her frustration with the exclusion of women's sexuality and identity in some psychoanalytic paradigms. In *We* the audience is encouraged to take a more tactile, or perhaps existentialist, approach to these theoretical problems. Against a split screen of male and female subjects on one side and a hand masturbating a penis on the



headhunting customs of Borneo, an island in the Malay Archipelago. Headhunting is described as a ritual that is deeply inscribed in the spiritual and religious life of the Dyak, a native tribe. A Dyak male must take a head before he is considered suitable for marriage. The custom was abolished since the Dutch colonized the region, although Nurudin says that it is still practiced today. The artist enacts a process of identification with the Dyak. She describes how many from the tribe have emigrated in recent years because of deforestation by corrupt timber companies. While posed naked in front of a glimmering TV set, Nurudin says, "The Dyaks have more life gods, spirits, and ghosts than anything else. We feel that when they outlawed headhunting, they take heroism from the Dyaks. They take away the purpose for life." By using the pronoun "we," the artist completes her identification with the tribe. She clearly disassociates herself from "them," the colonial powers that destroyed her way of life. Images from advertising fill the screen—exercising bodies, legs, trunks, heads—while Nurudin tells us how the Dyak leave the body behind and take the head to display in the village. How interesting that in both cultures the body is invested with exchange value. As the TV image switches to a program on native dancers ("...they move their bodies like wild animals..."), Nurudin leaves the house with her boom box playing a tribal beat. She searches the street in her four-wheel drive, looking for revenge from the colonial enemy. In a brief shot that looks like a bondage scene, Nurudin completes the ritual on a male victim. In this tape the artist appropriates customs and rituals



*Die Evidenz  
Des Kalkuels*  
by Ilse  
Gassinger &  
Anna  
Steininger

usually reserved for men to assert herself in an oppressive culture. The male ritual of headhunting is translated and empowers the artist to speak out against her condition as "other" in American society.

Sherry Kromer Shapiro's *Am I My Mother's Keeper?*, which uses the body as the site of textual production, is on one side of the scale of women's expression. On the opposite side is



*The Bus  
Stops Here*  
by Jo  
Anstey &  
Julie Zando

Barbara Lattanzi's *Soma*, which uses language to inscribe the body. *Soma* is a series of Holzer-esque texts that depict the body as deluged with illness. "Speech indistinct/with crampy drawing/and jerking of teeth." "Nostrils ulcerated/scurfy/glued up overnight." "Chancrous ulcers/in the tonsils." Medical jargon is a way of objectifying the body—it is "scurfy"—and needs treatment. Lattanzi's bodies are dying from excessive textual production. One more adjective, one more symptomatic description, and they will succumb. *Soma* reminds us (as women are acutely aware), that within the framework of a dominant male discourse, both body and speech make us vulnerable. All the tapes in this program offer some strategies to resist domination by language, while at the same time not giving up our rights to expression.

In my tape, *The Bus Stops Here*, I address these issues. The tape presents two female characters—"sisters." In fact—who confront the "problem of language." One sister is a chronic depressive who feels that she cannot express her grief over a lost love relationship. She retreats into silence, and lets the medical establishment (her male therapist and psychiatrist) speak for her. Her sister is a writer, who

refuses to give up her rights to self-expression, despite the fact that she is competing in a male-dominated field. In one scene, she tells her male lover of confronting an exhibitionist on a bus:

*Writer: On the bus today there was a man jerking off. He stared at me with his fly open and his cock in his hand.*

*Lover: What was your reaction?*

*Writer: I looked right back at him and said (angry) "What are you doing"? It made me so mad.*

*Lover: He violated you when he exposed himself.*

*Writer: Listen and let me speak for once. I didn't back down. He didn't gain a thing. In fact it's very easy for women to win these little battles. We try to make the man look foolish, or exposed—all we have to do is spoil his pleasure in some way and we've won.*

*Later, at home, I began to masturbate. I fantasized about the man on the bus. I don't know...it was exciting and I came, and for a moment I felt ashamed. Then I told myself to feel good, because why shouldn't I get some satisfaction out of it? If I can get something from him, I win again.*

Ana resists the man's uninvited sexual display by appropriating the scene and using it for her own fantasy. This is essentially her strategy for writing as well. For Ana, the act of writing is a way to gain access to male privilege, including access to representation (of her life and experiences) and to sexuality (her manuscript struggles to define the nature of her desire). However, a pivotal scene undercuts her power when the narrator of the tape, the man who ultimately controls the scene of representation, is revealed to be the man who flashed Ana on the bus.

The two strategies employed by the sisters in their search for language are not necessarily ideal. The depressive retreats into a state of madness. Her position is not unlike Lacan's "imaginary" phase, which is pleasurable, but

non-linguistic, while the writer enters the realm of the "symbolic," only to have her appropriated power usurped by the patriarchal forces behind narrative. *The Bus Stops Here* is not meant to suggest that access to language for women is impossible; instead it points to the pitfalls that trap women when they try to speak and be heard.

1. Language is understood to evolve from opposites. 'Good' is understood only in relation to "bad," "female" is meaningful only as "not-male," etc.
2. Interview with Julie Zando, Cyndi Cox, Gwendolyn, Sasha and Amy, Toronto, September 8, 1990.



*We*  
by Shelly  
Silver  
(photo  
courtesy of  
the Video  
Data Bank)

Cover photo: *Identity Crisis* by Mindy Faber; all photos by Micki McGee, unless otherwise noted.

## Program

*The Bus Stops Here*  
by Jo Anstey & Julie Zando  
27 minutes, 1990

*La Grimoire Magnetique*  
by Joelle de la Casiniere  
26 minutes, 1983

*Identity Crisis*  
by Mindy Faber  
3 minutes, 1989

*Die Evidenz Des Kalkuels*  
by Ilse Gassinger &  
Anna Steininger  
8 minutes, 1987

*Exposed*  
by Ilse Gassinger  
8 minutes, 1989

*Prowling by Night*  
by Gwendolyn  
12 minutes, 1990

*Soma*  
by Barbara Lattanzi  
1989

*Kugelkopf*  
by Mara Mattaschka  
6 minutes, 1985

*The Headhunters of Borneo—  
A Recollection*  
by Azian Nurudin  
10 minutes, 1989

*Am I My Mother's Keeper?*  
by Sherry Kromer Shapiro  
4 minutes, 1989

*We*  
by Shelly Silver  
4 minutes, 1990

*Laurie Sings Iggy*  
by Leslie Singer  
4 minutes, 1987

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