

Kristin Oppenheim's Circular Paradox

by
Al Harris F.

*I would swim the coldest oceans
I would walk in burning sands
I would crawl across the desert
With my heart held in my hands*

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Kristin Oppenheim's installation, *The Spider and I*, offers her audience a pop-spiritual experience in which images of ecstasy and torment occupy the same space. Walking into the installation with its empty gallery and soothing soundtrack is like walking into the calm in the middle of a hurricane. What at first seems serene and meditative can become nightmarish.

As the audio loop in *The Spider and I* constantly repeats four lines appropriated from a '50s torch song, the recitation can evoke conflicting images. Initially the sound track might seem like a meditative mantra, promising serenity and transcendence, or the lyrics might elicit an image of a single melancholy lover. But as the repetition continues the mantra can easily become a siren's song, luring you to destruction, or a lone lover, transforming and multiplying into an army of marching horror-movie zombies holding their bloody hearts in their hands.

The conflicting images which Oppenheim's soundtrack elicits reflects the artist's interest in "paradox" and "in finding the twists in things."¹ While you don't have to look far to find twists in *The Spider and I*, you do have to look with a skeptic's faith in doubt to find that the twists in Oppenheim's work end up, not in the transcendence promised

at the end of the mantra or modernist trail, but in a circular paradox, like a cat chasing its tail.

The first and most apparent twist is that Oppenheim's installation has a minimal amount of visual stimuli. The only visual elements in the otherwise empty gallery are four speakers mounted on the gallery's walls. The effect of the bare bones installation is to shift your attention from the usual art gallery experience of contemplating objects, to one in which you are made to feel self-conscious as you move through the austere setting.

The second twist is that, even though the installation is visually bare, it is rich with visual associations: the combined effect of the graphic lyrics and the constant repetition. With each new recitation of the lyrics, the soundtrack seems to elicit yet another doomed lover, until your head is virtually filled with a legion of lovers swimming the coldest oceans, walking on burning sands, crawling across deserts with their hearts held in their hands.

A third twist, mirroring the psychic state of our own late-capitalist culture, is that Oppenheim's work blurs the line between reality and fiction. She notes that, due to the image glut and sound bite nature of contemporary culture, "it's hard to separate the real from the fictional." This is also mirrored in the fact that Oppenheim uses appropriated lyrics from pop songs to express what she notes is the emotional texture of her personal life.

The fourth twist in Oppenheim's work is how the narrative implied by the lyrics references the unsatisfied desire of unrequited love ("I would swim the coldest oceans," if.....), while the work's formal quality, repetition, references mantras and

chants along with the goal of transcendence on which they are based.

While the first four twists seem apparent enough, delving deeper one can speculate on how *The Spider and I* references a paradox basic to our lives. According to Sigmund Freud, language both masters the world for us and distances us from it. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,² Freud describes a child's game in which a child holding a string attached to an object throws the object out of sight, saying 'fort' (gone or away), then pulls the object back into sight, saying 'da' (there). Freud speculated that the repetitious game allowed the child to deal with the absence and reappearance of its mother, a process which he claimed eventually gives birth to language, which in turn distances us from the lived experience of the real (nature). In *Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*³, Madan Sarup notes that "Freud describes the child's actions in the *fort/da* game as an attempt to diminish the unpleasure caused by his mother's absences." The implication is that repetition and language is a way of mastering displeasure, even though it contains the tragic side effect of distancing us from nature.

A more skeptical view of Freud's *fort/da* game is offered by Jacques Lacan. According to Sarup, Lacan "identifies the toy reel with which the child plays as an *objet petit autre* — that thing the loss of which had resulted in a sense of deficiency or lack." Sarup claims Lacan defines the subject as "lacking because it is believed to be a fragment of something larger and primordial," and notes that Lacan dates this lack from the "moment of sexual differentiation within the womb."

Sarup clarifies this by noting that Lacan often references the subject of love in Plato's *Symposium*, in which Aristophanes speaks of beings who were once androgenous but were split in two by Zeus.

According to Sarup, Lacan sees love as based in the desire for "ideal representations which remain forever beyond the subject's reach." This striving for love is what brings us back to Oppenheim's lyrics, and the circular paradox of transcendence and unsatisfied desire that her work implies. The lyrics in *The Spider and I* are appropriated from Leslie Gore's 1950s popular torch song. The very name of the love song's genre, "torch", implies the intensity with which the desire to love and be loved burns in our minds.

What is important about the specific lyrics Oppenheim has appropriated is that they carry with them an implied "if." If my love was complete, the lyrics imply, I could and would be able to do impossible things like "... swim the coldest oceans.... walk in burning sands... crawl across the desert with my heart held in my hands."

According to Freud, Oppenheim's use of repetition might be seen as a form of mastery. Repetition has the effect of separating a word's meaning from the word's sound, as in the childhood game of repeating a phrase like "electric refrigerator" over and

over again until the word loses its meaning and becomes a strange sound. Similarly, Oppenheim's repeating soundtrack can be seen as a way of reexperiencing the prelanguage state, a state in which experience is not mediated by representation.

On the other hand, according to Lacan, the prelanguage experience offered by repetition can never really be consummated, nor an ideal representation achieved. Instead, Oppenheim's work can only make us aware of the circular paradox of love based in the narcissistic desire to achieve an ideal representation of the self. While the cat in Freud's model, like the modernist, thinks it's making headway in catching its tail, the postmodern cat in Lacan's and in turn Oppenheim's model is conscious of the inescapable spiral of its plight.

Another way of seeing how Oppenheim's work is part of the evolving project of postmodern art is in how her use of repetition is different from modernist repetition. Modernist repetition as materialized in the grid allows us to believe that we are dealing with the metaphysical through the material. The modernist grid provides us with the illusion that we are scientifically measuring reality and making progress, eventually, toward authentic knowledge. While modernist artists like Mark Rothko or Agnes Martin

might be seen as using the grid as a window to the metaphysical, the early postmodernist artist Andy Warhol, who loaded the grid with time-based photographic images of car wrecks and celebrities, can be seen as turning the grid into a mirror reflecting the material world.

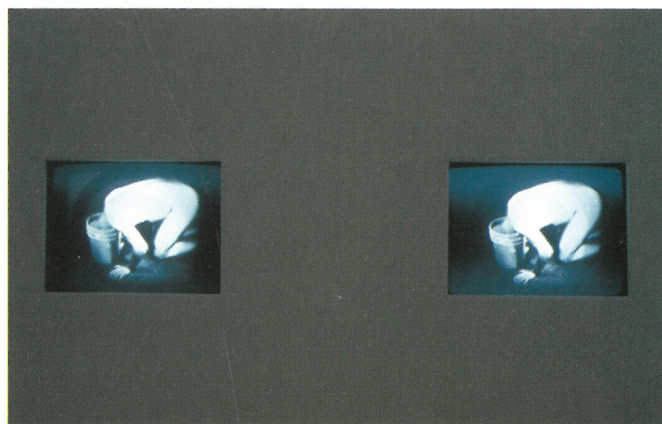
Oppenheim's use of repetition creates an audio grid similar to Warhol's, but while Warhol's close proximity to modernism might have forced him to reject any aspect of the metaphysical in order to create a space within which he could maneuver, Oppenheim's distance from the conventions of modernism allows her to allude to the ineffable without having to profess the modernist's faith in being able to make it speak.

NOTES

1. All quotes not otherwise attributed are from a series of conversations with the artist during November and December, 1994.
2. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Standard Edition, vol. 18, London: Hogarth Press, 1955.
3. Madan Sarup, *Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, Second Edition, The University of Georgia Press, 1993, p. 23.

COVER: Detail of *Sail on Sailor*, 1994, sound installation. Courtesy 303 Gallery.

BELOW: *Hack Actor, Silent Partner* 1990 by Kristin Oppenheim, Video and two monitors.



Postscript:

Kristin Oppenheim has been using repetition in her sound works since 1992, but the obsessive repetition which marks her current sound works can be traced to a video installation she created in 1990 titled *Hack Actor, Silent Partner*. The installation consisted of two video monitors playing synchronized video loops featuring a man dunking his head under water for an extended period of time, then suddenly popping back up. While the artist notes that the work had a "dark side" referencing "obsessive behavior such as drug addiction," it was also "funny, in a twisted kind of way because of how the head kept popping back up out of the water like a jack-in-the-box."

Her actual use of sound repetition began during a time she was living and working in what the artist describes as a "claustrophobic studio." Leading up to this time she had been making "text pieces in which a few lines were repeated over and over again." In response to the size restrictions imposed on her by the studio, Oppenheim began experimenting with a tape recorder, which, when combined with a tune that had been "stuck in her head" for some time, led her to turn her text pieces into sound pieces.

To create these works Oppenheim initially works by herself, simply recording herself singing the lyrics until she feels she has captured just the right sound. She then works with an engineer in a recording studio to

cut out and arrange these sections into a final sound loop.

While some of her works are adaptations of existing melodies, others represent the artist's own musical arrangements. *The Spider and I* was adapted from the music and lyrics of Leslie Gore's *This is What I Would Do for You*. The title, which is her own, "loosely refers to how a spider's web is similar to human relationships."

The Spider and I has been exhibited in France, at FRAC des Pays de la Loire in Mayenne, Palais des Congres et de la Culture in le Mans, and in New York City at Elizabeth Koury Gallery.

Selected exhibitions:

Oppenheim has exhibited extensively in Europe and the United States, including:

Villa Arson, Nice, France.

Studio Guenzani, Milan, Italy.

Soros Center for Contemporary Art, Ljubljana, Slovenia.

1993 Aperto, Venice Biennale, Italy
Foyer Teatro Carlo Felice, Genova, Italy.

Galerie Meile, Luzern, Switzerland
303 Gallery and Nichole Klagsburn Gallery, New York.

In 1995 she will be exhibiting at Kunsthalle, New York, Studio Guenzani, Milan, Italy, and the Serraluas Foundation in Oporto, Portugal.

Selected bibliography:

Kristin Oppenheim
Born 1959, Honolulu, Hawaii.
1984 San Francisco University, BFA.
1989 Hunter College, MFA.
Represented by 303 Gallery, New York, NY.

De Ceco, Emanuela, Review, *Flash Art* (Italian edition), Anno XXVI - #177, 1993.

Cottingham, Laura, "Christine Lidrbauch, Kirschen Mosher, Kristin Oppenheim," *QW*, June 14, 1992.

Flash Art/Aperto (exhibition catalogue), Milan: Giancarlo Politi Edition, 1993.

"Les images du Plaisir" (exhibition catalogue), Mayenne, France: FRAC des Pays de la Loire, Chateau Gontier, Chapelle du Geneteil, 1994.

Smith, Roberta, "Kristin Oppenheim, 303 Gallery," *New York Times*, April 1, 1994.

Stepanic, Lilijana, "Kristin Oppenheim, Soros Center for Contemporary Art," *Ars Vivendi*, December 20, 1993.

"Utopia Del Possible" (exhibition catalogue), Genova, Italy: Foyer Teatro Carlo Felice, 1993.

Curated by Al Harris F. and Karen Emenhiser.

University at Buffalo Art Gallery/Research Center in Art + Culture Al Harris F. Director

716 645-6912 Wednesday-Saturday 10:30-8:00, Sunday 12-5 Free parking weekends and weekdays after 3pm