

PAULA MUHR

FEMALES UNDER TENSION

Audio-visual installation/

Video (B-W) with sound, 17:24 min, projection in a loop and lambda prints, various sizes.

The work explores cultural strategies in the construction of femininity, sexuality and desire, as well as normality. It questions historical (pseudo)scientific and social practices reflected in historical films, photography and written material of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. These historical representations are at the roots of our present-day practices of mapping and controlling the body in terms of knowledge and regulatory mechanism. The work traces and thematises their influences on the contemporary gender discourses.

One of the source materials for the work is a historical document, the book entitled *“Abnormal Woman”* published in 1895 by *Arthur Macdonald*, a specialist for the U.S Bureau of Education. MacDonald held the belief that complex human characteristics and emotional states can be quantified and compared. He wanted to illustrate female border-line abnormality, by studying „abnormal women outside of institutions, in the society at large“. By his definition, an *“abnormal person... conforms less to the customs of the community than the average or normal person.”* In other words, normality was defined as the typical behaviour and everything which deflected from this norm was labeled as defiant and abnormal.

MacDonald defined love as obsession, an emotional delirium and „one of the most prolific causes of mental, physical, and emotional aberration“. Consequently, MacDonald decided that the most convenient method for studying female abnormality was by placing personal advertisements in several newspapers, first in the USA, and later in Europe. When women replied, MacDonald made arrangements to measure their bodies, their reflexes, reactions to pain, changes in pressure and temperature. In the end he published a book in which he made the letters of altogether 86 „cases“ public.

MacDonald’s original advertisement was slightly modified in order to make it more up-to-date:

“A man of high social standing (de l’education europeene) desires correspondence (acquittance not necessary) in German, French or English, with educated woman of high social and financial position. She must tell me all about herself, i.e. give detailed account of her personality, experiences, emotions, views on life and describe her expectations from a relationship.”

- More than hundred years after the initial experiment, women of different age, professional background, nationality and political orientation were invited to write a letter from their current contemporary perspective as an answer to the above quoted personal advertisement.

Additionally, one man was also invited to contribute a letter as a ghostwriter, imagining that he is writing as a woman. Altogether eleven letters were chosen from the received reactions, and the fragments from each of these letters were then composed into a single unified narrative about a woman's expectations from a relationship with a man. The text is read by a computer generated female voice.

The sound recording was montaged with deconstructed film material taken from the film „How a French Nobleman Got a Wife through the New York Herald „Personal“ Column“, which was produced by Edison Company in 1904. This is a typical example of the early chase films. In this case, a man who had advertised for a wife is pursued by eleven women through different locations. Individual women in the original film are present only as interchangeable specimen of their gender, yet together, through multiplication and accumulation, they represent an average woman. By erasing the cause of the chase, the pursued man and the moment of closure with which such films conventionally end, the chase is turned into a hysterical, illogical, neverending repetitive action. The pace of the film as well as the soundtrack are slowed down to a point when they acquire an almost hypnotic quality.

The projection is presented together with the associated photographic works based on the reinterpretation of historical medical and scientific images of women. The images are taken from publications such as *“Nouvelle iconographie de la Salpêtrière”*, *„Endurance and Suffering: Narratives of Disease in the 19th Century”*, *“Clinique de l'hôpital Saint-Louis, ou traité complet des maladies de la peau”*, as well as a number of contemporary secondary sources. The appropriated images are juxtaposed with various objects and animals, which directly refer to Dutch still life paintings and their symbolic meaning. The photographs and drawings, which originally served as an illustration, but also as unambiguous evidence of illness and abnormality are, thus, brought into question.

Paula Muhr, October 2010