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Curatorial Programs



HOME SWEET HOME

BETTY BEE, GIULIA CAIRA, CECILIA LUNDQVIST, MARKO MÄETAMM,
RONALD MORÁN, ULTRA VIOLET, AND KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO

Curated by Ombretta Agró Andruff
February 8 – April 12, 2009

Opening reception: Sunday, February 8, 2:00–5:00 p.m.

“It is estimated that between 3.3 million and 10 million children in the U.S. witness physical violence between their parents each year. This type of violence ranges from overhearing some form of violent behavior from their bedrooms, to seeing severe acts of violence such as beatings or assaults with guns and knives. In many cases, these youth observe repeated acts of violence perpetrated by multiple partners throughout their childhood.”

— Maura O’Keefe, Ph.D., and Shirley Lebovics, MSW

Violence and life are inseparable, engaged in an incessant war with one another. Violence is erratic, can be material or immaterial; it lies at the heart of human destinies, of broken subjectivities that are wounded, suffocated.

Artistic practices in which violence is expressed relate equally to performance as they do to the photographic, videographic or cinematographic image. Through a cathartic process, violence is contemplated, dissected, its origins and consequences weighed; in sum, violence is exposed. The artist becomes simultaneously perpetrator and victim, detached voyeur and sympathetic witness. He/she exhibits suffering and treats violence symbolically, allowing for its working-through.

The artworks in *Home Sweet Home* confront the notion that familial relationships and domesticity provide a safe haven from violence. The artists, using a wide variety of media and languages—video, animation, drawing, photography, performance and installation—explore the sick-

ening universe of violence against children and women and the wall of silence that often isolates its victims. These works depict violence in both its psychological and physical dimension; violence against oneself, violence inherent in any power-struggle type of relationship, and violence charged with eroticism.

Crossing the family threshold, boundaries of shame and taboo, we enter a world of unspoken secrets, heroic endurance and helpless resignation. What happens behind closed doors, whether happy, sad, or disgusting, is private and generally sacrosanct. *Home Sweet Home* opens those doors, breaks the barrier of privacy, and reveals publicly what is happening there.

Coming from broadly different backgrounds, nationalities and ages (ranging from 36 to 73), the international artists featured in the show address the theme of domestic violence in a variety of ways and from widely different perspectives. Some of them, such as the Swede, **Cecilia Lundqvist**, have dedicated their entire artistic production to such a subject matter; others may have touched upon this topic in just a few, or even one single work. Some use more direct, however ironic, imagery, such as the Estonian **Marko Mäetamm**; others rely on subtle and evocative metaphors to convey a feeling of fear and threat, as in Salvadorian **Ronald Morán**’s installation and Italian **Giulia Cairra**’s video and photographs.

Others again bluntly denounce endured violence through real-life stories told by real victims, as in the case of the photographs from the CECUT Project by Polish **Krzysztof Wodiczko** and the video by Italian **Betty Bee**.

Neapolitan-born **Betty Bee** draws inspiration for a large portion of her body of work from memories of an unhappy childhood; the cruelty and neglect of her father combined with sexual abuse by her brother. This situation forced her to leave home for the streets of Naples as a teenager, ending up living in company of

the “femminielli,” local transvestites, who took her in and looked after her. Betty constantly mixes fantasies and desires with images of innocence, sexuality and voyeurism; her artistic resource is herself and her tragic/comic narrative is told using both traditional and non-traditional media such as paintings, photographs, installations, videoworks and performances. These last two forms of



Betty Bee *Lionetti Luigi Classe 1920*, 1997



Giulia Cairra *Se stasera sono qui*, 2004



Cecilia Lundqvist *Told You So*, 2008

expression become the medium of her extreme thoughts and actions. The video, *Lionetti Luigi classe 1920*, from 1997, is a surreptitious view of her father as he takes a bath in her home. A victim of his physical and verbal abuse during her childhood and teenage years, Betty hid a camera in her bathroom after her father, whom she had not seen in years, asked her permission to not only visit, but also to bathe at her place. Exposing him frail, naked and totally defenseless as her way of getting her “revenge” becomes a liberating act of expiation. Through his humiliation, the monster in her memory becomes exorcised.

The video, *Se stasera sono qui* (If tonight I am here), is a work from 2004 by another Italian artist, **Giulia Caira**, born in Cosenza, and currently living and working in Turin. Along with the video, she also created a new series of photographs specifically for this exhibition entitled *Relazioni Intime* (Intimate relationships).

Caira’s body of work is rooted in ‘70s feminist culture when female artists used, and abused, their bodies, in public performances. However, while the atmosphere conveyed by her moving and still images can reach quite intense and dramatic effects, she never reverts to the literal representation of self-inflicted violence we find in artists such as Gina Pane, Marina Abramovic or Cathrine Opie. Caira is always the subject of her photographs, but more than self-portraits, these works become visual representations of the various identities and roles she assumes and interprets. The universe in which she performs always refers to the domestic and household context. The objects she uses as props belong to a “reassuring” feminine word such as nylon stockings, lipsticks, cleaning rags, and plastic groceries bags. In her series “*Love me tender*” and “*Così impari*” (So you will learn the lesson) these same objects become the tools used to inflict

violence, a violence that is never shown directly, but is always implied.

Caira’s video was born as an exploration of the nature of the relationship of a couple in which the violence becomes an integral part of their love affair and daily routine. In this dynamic, victim and perpetrator dissolve into each other, both accomplices of a tragedy made of cuddles and beatings. The theme song, written by Luigi Tenco, a popular Italian singer from the ‘60s who committed suicide, plays a major role in the work and underlies the contradiction of the unhealthy bond connecting the protagonists.

A similar strategy of “implying” the act or threat of violence, while never portraying it overtly, is employed by Salvadorian artist **Ronald Morán** in his striking installation *Habitación Infantil* from 2005. An apparently inoffensive and familiar environment is created by

reproducing the domestic setting of a child’s bedroom. Through the game of appearances, the concept of aggressiveness is created by covering walls and objects in white batting in order to convey to the spectator an eerie feeling of extreme smoothness, comfort and cleanliness. The objects found in the environment—war-toys, fake guns, a play station, a belt casually hanging from a chair—while commonplace, convey a sinister hint of the physical and psychological violence inherent in childhood today.

In his body of work (installations, such as the one here showcased, large scale paintings, photographs and video), Ronald Morán uses fragments from his reality to make a statement. He talks about violence and how it has become part of the daily life of El Salvador: a violence that has reached all levels and places of his country, from domestic environments to public spaces, from childhood to adulthood, all the while demonstrating a perpetual lack of safety. This is what Morán conveys in his work. Disguising a dangerous object under a soft white mantle of cotton is akin to people hiding their fear and dirty secrets behind a mask of civility and false normality. This same false normality and apparent well-being that hides the dark reality of domestic abuse, is the subject matter of the work of **Cecilia Lundqvist**. The four video animations screened in the exhibition are from 2001 and 2008 and focus on domestic violence, both psychological and physical, without ever showing its most gruesome aspects. *Told You So* shows a psychological power-struggle between two people during a short dialogue that initially seems rather absurd but harmless. In the black & white *Oh, I’m So Happy*, we meet a middle-aged woman who is living in total isolation, and who made a “kingdom” of her kitchen. The woman performs a monologue in which she tries her best to convince us, and herself, about how happy and content she is with her present situation. However, the

failure of her attempt is evident from the very beginning. *Emblem*, one of the two earlier works, consists of one scenario that contains several short clips. Colorful animations illustrate the rather basic and monotonous actions between the two main characters and a few objects around them. A woman dressed in a bathing suit and white socks performs simple gymnastic movements, observed by a man dressed in a suit. The woman has several bruises, more or less visible on her body. The images are accompanied by a soundtrack consisting of a dialogue between the two of them. The monotonous repetitions, recurrent both in the visual as well as in the sound elements, allude to the claustrophobic feeling of being trapped in a treadmill. Violent acts within the safe walls of home are alluded to, but never openly shown.

The last work, *C*, is an animation that consists of five different, simple scenarios whose main characters are two young girls who show us that what initially appears as innocent and sweet, can easily disguise a dark, evil core.

Drawings are the starting point for all of Lundqvist's animation work. As the artist herself explains: "My fascination in animation as a way of artistic expression revolves mainly around the fact that film is a form of time. This means that during a certain time I am allowed to tell the things I would like to say, using both pictures and sound. For me, animation is the ultimate way of expression. [...] For the animator absolutely nothing happens by chance, he/she has total control all the way. My films are personal, but in a distant way, perhaps because they are animations and not live film".

Estonian **Marko Mäetamm's** animation, *FAMILY*, is a gruesome yet funny video where an axe-wielding man keeps running around the flat after his wife and two children. They try to hide behind the sofa or a bed or the shower curtain, or under the blanket, but the axe-man always finds them and while he seems to kill them over and over again, they always come back in better shape than before. Mäetamm's sculpture, *Sandbox*, consists of a table covered with sand and children's beach toys with an opening in the middle. Hovering on top of the table there is a wooden crane holding in her beak a yellow rope noose, an obvious allusion to a

child-size gallows. In *Sandbox* we experience an interplay between what we know a sandbox for children is built for, and what its current function is. Normal and innocent is thus juxtaposed with dysfunctional and deadly. In most of the artist's works, fear and humor are woven together and become the two most recurrent motifs. Mäetamm's use of humor and irony functions as a psychological defense mechanism, allowing him to deal with uncomfortable subjects, while keeping them at a tolerable emotional distance.

Polish born, and U.S.-based, **Krzysztof Wodiczko's** works, a series of 11 prints from the *Tijuana Projections*, stand on the quite opposite end of the spectrum. While Mäetamm uses humor to distance himself from the

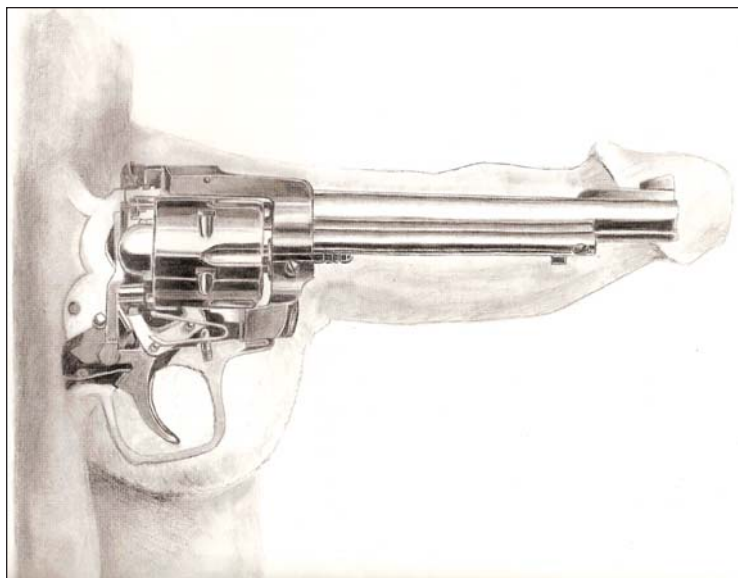


Marko Mäetamm *Sandbox*, 2006



Krzysztof Wodiczko *Tijuana Projection*, 2001/2004

violent stories he tells, Wodiczko fully embraces the accounts told by the protagonists of the *CECUT project* initiated in 2001. Female “maquiladora” (factory workers) in Tijuana were invited to wear a camera and microphone and speak about the conditions in which they live. The women’s testimonies focused on a variety of issues, including work-related abuse, sexual abuse, family disintegration, alcoholism, and domestic violence.



Ultra Violet *Pistol Phallus*, 2007

Wodiczko’s signature art generally involves the large-scale, short-term projection of an image onto the facade of a public monument or building. By reclaiming these sites, however ephemerally, as sites of public discourse about power, violence, alienation, and human rights, Wodiczko challenges traditional conceptions about the function of public space and the meaning of historical memory. For the Tijuana project Wodiczko projected the testimonies in a public plaza on the facade of the Omnimax Theater at the Centro Cultural Theater of Tijuana.

“Art in general seems to be a very useful artifice - says the artist - Film, theater, painting, literature, media art—all of this is a very good conduit for transmitting the things which people would rather not hear or see. This is a possibility for transmitting something uncanny, something that ought to be hidden but comes to light. It takes aesthetic form as an artifice; it’s partially real and partially fictitious. So, those faces, they are partially people and partially façades, partially testimonies and partially spectacles. It’s much easier to accept them for what they’re trying to say this way than, for example, listening to someone speak directly.”

Last, but not least, are the drawings from the series *Pistol/Phallus* by French-born and New York-based Ultra Violet. Pupil, studio assistant, and muse of

Salvador Dali in the fifties, and then central member of Andy Warhol’s Factory in the sixties, Ultra Violet has emerged today as a prominent artist who has exhibited throughout the world. The drawings *Pistol/Phallus* series represent a gun and a phallus becoming one. In the words of the artist herself: “Both phallus and pistol shoot. Weapons of war and weapons of rape have a missile paradigm: to conquer, to impress or to oppress”.

Her drawings are a meditation on the painful subject of rape and sexual conquest. They explore profound questions that often appear in all-cap text along with images in her work: “DOES SEXUAL VIOLENCE COMMITTED BY MALES CONFIRM MASCULINITY OR IMPOTENCY?” and “DOES VIAGRA COME AT A RAPACIOUS TIME WHEN WOMEN ASSERT THEIR LIBERATION AND MEN RE-EVALUATE THEIR ANCESTRAL DOMINION?”; “ORIGINAL SIN HAS ALWAYS CHALLENGED GENDER EQUALITY. IS A NEW ERA DAWNING WHERE “WE SHALL BEAT OUR SWORDS INTO PLOWSHARES” AND MALE AND FEMALE SHALL BE TOGETHER IN EXALTATION?”

Home Sweet Home has been a particularly challenging show and, as a true labor of love, it took a few years to come to life. It is about raising awareness and it is about empowering artists to spread that awareness through their works. As Krzysztof Wodiczko aptly puts it: “Art in general seems to be a very useful artifice [...] for transmitting the things which people would rather not hear or see.” It is my hope that *Home Sweet Home* will help break the silence that allows domestic violence to continue in our communities. □

— Ombretta Agrò Andruff
New York, NY
January 2009

BIOGRAPHY

Ombretta Agrò Andruff is a New York-based freelance curator and art critic. She was born in Italy in 1971. Since moving to the U.S. in 1998, she has curated solo and group shows here and in Europe, collaborating with museums, art festivals, commercial galleries and art fairs including Artists Space, Queens Museum of Art, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, The Armory Show, The Art Basel Miami Fair, DUMBO Art Under the Bridge Festival, the Esso Gallery, Alberto Peola Gallery, and the 2006 Winter Olympic Games. Since 2005, she has been a consultant to the Italian Cultural Institute in New York City and the Italian Ministry of Cultural Affairs. In 2007 she started collaborating with the Religare Arts Initiative, a New Delhi-based art organization, as their International Art Advisor. For more information: www.ombrettaagro.com.

CHECKLIST

BETTY BEE

LIONETTI LUIGI CLASSE 1920, 1997
Video
21 minutes 46 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

VOLEVO TANTO SCRIVERE, 1998
Glitter and enamel on canvas
22 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist

GIULIA CAIRA

SE STASERA SONO QUI, 2004
DVD
4 minutes 2 seconds
Music performed by:
Voice: Johnson Righeira
Trumpet, electronic: Giorgio Li Calzi
*Original score by Luigi Tenco, *Se stasera sono qui*, 1967, Ricordi ed.
Courtesy of the artist

RELAZIONI INTIME #1, 2009
Digital print, duratrans, plexiglass,
Edition 3
20 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist

RELAZIONI INTIME #2, 2009
Digital print, duratrans, plexiglass,
Edition 3
20 x 30 inches
Courtesy of the artist

RONALD MORÁN

HABITACIÓN INFANTIL, 2005
Mixed media
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of PanAmerican Art
Projects, Dallas

CECILIA LUNDQVIST

OH! I'M SO HAPPY, 2008
Digital video
3 minutes 7 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

TOLD YOU SO, 2008
Digital video
2 minutes 5 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

EMBLEM, 2001
Digital video
2 minutes 27 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

C, 2001
Digital video
2 minutes 37 seconds
Courtesy of the artist

I FEEL PROTECTED INSIDE, 2008
Graphite on acid free paper
12.3 x 12.6 inches
Courtesy of the artist

*YOU KNOW WHAT'S COMING
NEXT*, 2008
Graphite on acid free paper
12.3 x 12.6 inches
Courtesy of the artist

MARKO MÄETAMM

FAMILY, 2007
Animation
4 minutes 9 seconds
Director and producer: Marko
Mäetamm
Courtesy of Galerie Nosbaum &
Reding, Luxembourg

SANDBOX, 2006
Plywood, sand, toys
60 x 60 x 90 inches
Courtesy of the artist

KRZYSZTOF WODICZKO

TIJUANA PROJECTION, 2001/2004
Suite of digital prints on
watercolor paper
32 x 41 inches
Courtesy of the artist and Galerie
Lelong, NY

ULTRA VIOLET

PISTOL/PHALLUS #1 AND #2, 2007
Pencil on paper monoprint,
Edition 7
22 x 8 inches
Courtesy of Stefan Stux Gallery, NY

PISTOL/PHALLUS #3 AND #4, 2007
Pencil on paper monoprint,
Edition 7
22 x 28 inches
Courtesy of Stefan Stux Gallery, NY

Cover: Ronald Morán, *Habitación Infantil*, 2005

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