



Faculty of Art

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## Reviews: Mary Mary: Anna Gronau, YYZ, Toronto

Tuer, Dot

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# REVIEWS

MARY MARY  
Anna Gronau  
YYZ  
Toronto

A lot of Indian land was surrendered in treaties. From what I understand now, a lot of Indian people consider it not a surrender but a gift. The thing about colonies is that the whole idea of a colony presupposes a particular attitude towards land. It's an ownable commodity, not simply the support for human beings, for human life. Some people can take it away from other people, own it more and have more right to it than someone else. I guess what I keep thinking is that the "immigrant self" for you and me maybe is an image of our ambivalence. The place that we occupy is contradictory in so many ways.

Anna Gronau  
*In A Different Voice*, 1986

The examination of the self and its images of ambivalence are often conceptualized in Western society as an intensely personal odyssey. Psychoanalysis is the favoured paradigm of cross-examination. Through its discourse, the fiction of a unified consciousness is deconstructed and the "self" redefined through binary oppositions of identification and desire, of presence and absence, of a masculine ego and a feminine other. The cultural imperatives and ethnocentric assumptions that underlie these dichotomies, however, are more rarely interrogated. Gronau's tenuous call for the necessity of such an interrogation in the quotation above anticipates the motifs of "self" and "place" that are explored as sites of complexity and contradiction in her new film *Mary, Mary*. Mapping from the "talking cure" a context for the "I", the compulsion to repeat the self into existence is central to the construction of an intense subjectivity in Gronau's new film. It is also the object of critical scrutiny. For in *Mary, Mary*, the elusive process of sifting memories to locate the "self" strains against the containment of discourse; autobiography is engaged to reveal the paradox of historical dislocation.

A: I got a phone call. The footage was found. I looked at it but I was disappointed.

M: It was exactly as I remembered it.

A: It must have been a screen memory. You have to decide if this is a film



Anna Gronau; *Mary Mary*; 1989; 16mm, colour, sound; 55.5 min. Photo: courtesy the artist

or a dream.

M: (screams) 'If that there King was to wake,' added Tweedledum, 'you'd go out-bang!-just like a candle.' 'I shouldn't!' Alice exclaimed indignantly. 'Besides, if I'm only a sort of thing in his dream, what are you, I should like to know?' (screams) 'Ditto' said Tweedledum. 'Ditto, Ditto', cried Tweedledee.

This encounter between Anna, as the director of the film, and Mary, as the central character of her script, occurs early in the film at a scene shot at the Toronto Zoo. During the verbal exchange, the camera pans slowly between Anna and Mary, separated by an underground aquarium window whose eerie light bounces shadows off their faces. When Mary screams the "ditto"s of a Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the camera returns to the place from which Anna was speaking. She has vanished, leaving Mary standing alone, a large polar bear floats behind her, suspended in the water and entrapped behind the glass of the underwater tank. At this moment, Mary is transformed from a character to a cipher of the filmmaker's imagination; a mirror of her physical absence. She becomes the object of a subjective transference, a cinematic double occupying a site of absurd symmetry where remembrances of the past intertwine with images on the screen, where dreams of the living and the dead become the disjuncture between "place" and "self."

I dreamt I was at Bay House to make the film. It was very early morning and I was walking through the house with my camera.

I went down the stairs, and I was struck by the stillness and the serenity. Everything in the house seemed especially "in place," as though it was all there just for me.

As an object of transference, the place from which Mary speaks and dreams is an apartment in Toronto; a location of retreat where the isolated process of writing the film's script is recreated. As a cipher of the filmmaker's imagination, the place of which Mary speaks and dreams is an old house on a bay on Lake Ontario in Prince Edward County; a repository of childhood fantasy and family history. The Bay House, with its garden of "green grass buzzing and poplars twinkling" becomes the "screen memory" of the film; a recurring motif where the past and present will finally meet. In the first scene of the film, the camera traces a path towards the front door of the old house, looming on the horizon—a black and white mirage, ominous and silent, emptied of people and of context.

The second image of the Bay House is conjured like a ghost from the archival footage of which Mary and Anna have spoken. Two women, dressed in Victorian white dresses, emerge from the door and walk in the garden. The folds of their dresses swirling in the wind, their grainy, dreamy movements are caught in the memory that super-8 film evokes. These women clearly belong to this place; their bodies move with ease and confidence.

Never dabble in autobiography. Unless you want a perfect world that perfectly excludes you.

Mary's movements are less sure, less

certain. She falls out of the bed in her apartment. She rifles through books as if looking for something elusive, unwritten. Her answering machine relays messages, but she sees no-one. She does not possess the past, though the past has begun to possess her. Fragments of Victorian novels echo in her head, reverberate as voice-overs in the film. A series of statements, tracing her process of internal interrogation, appear as texts on top of the film's images: Four sets of thirteen propositions, they become a house of cards she is building; a reconstruction of the Bay House that haunts her dreams. As she deals, from a shuffled history, the last thirteen cards of her game of solitaire, Mary leaves the apartment and drives towards the Bay House. In this, the last, scene of the film, Mary retraces the camera's path at the beginning of the film, following the long and twisted road that leads to the front door of the "screen memory." Opening the door to the Bay House, she discovers inside that everything, just like in her dream, is "in place." Wandering from room to room, it is Mary who seems out of place, an intruder from the present confronting the sleepy phantoms of the past. And as the camera shifts its point of view from inside the house to the silent garden overlooking the lake, the screen is once again emptied of people and of context.

Easier to deflect responsibility-somewhere else.

Long ago.

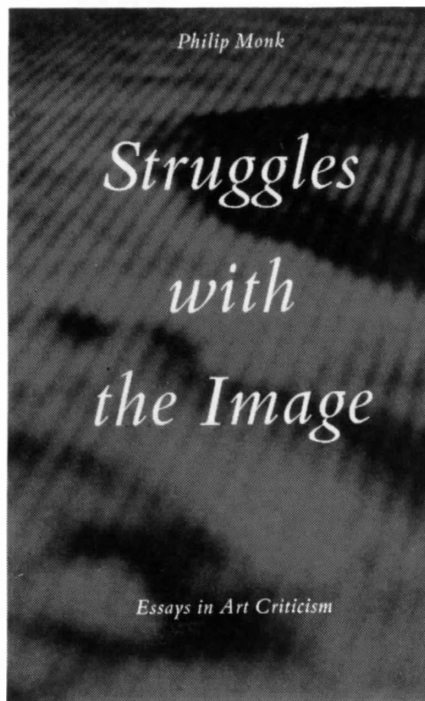
White lies.

White man's history lessons.

A perfect world that perfectly excludes you.

It is in this final glimpse of the Bay House and the secret garden of Mary's childhood fantasies, that the dealt cards reveal less of the "self" and "place" than the non-sense of a birthright, intertwining chance and destiny. In *Mary, Mary*, the obsessive search for a location of the "self" is not simply a psycho-analytical process of self-realization, but a more drastic symptom of cultural dislocation. The cards that Mary has been dealt tell not only her story, but the story of colonialization. The Bay House in which she seeks a history of personal memory is also a house of occupation: built on the lands that the Iroquois signed away in a treaty in 1797. And as the collective memories of native oppression collide with her recollections of her family ancestors; her birthright becomes a birth of dislocation. And as a location where her 'rights' are the rights of the oppressor, realization ruptures certainty. An amorphous relativity forms. The movement backwards through history is not to claim the privilege of a cultural heritage, but to implicate one's birthright into a casual brutality.

Dot Tuer



PHILIP MONK  
*Struggles with the Image*

YYZ Publications

Toronto

In the preface to *Struggles with the Image*, Monk suggests that his work as a curator, far from displacing the critical program put in place by writing, represents a practical 'demonstration' of the local history for which that writing has argued. Moreover, as the organization of these essays indicates, this move toward the practical, the demonstrable, would be consonant with a trajectory already at work in the writing itself (from general speculation to local representation). It would be interesting to ask how the terms of this history have altered in the passage from critic to curator, from private voice to public representative. The task I undertake here is however, a more circumscribed one. Restricting myself to the essays, I wish merely to suggest that their progress is in no simple sense a movement from general to particular, theory to practice. Far from representing the application of a politics elaborated in the early works, the appeal to the 'local' that characterizes Monk's later essays comes to buttress an entirely different theory or model of community. The final effect of this revision is, I would suggest, a suturing over of that gap, that moment of violence or difference, that the early writing represents as constitutive of any community project.

Monk's analysis of a violence endemic to the social relation is of course indebted to a reading of Hegel that has dominated

French thinking since the lectures of Alexander Kojève. What Kojève emphasized was the struggle for recognition that grounds the social relation, a struggle that is, for Hegel, resolved in the developmental history of *The Phenomenology*. (The normativizing tendencies of the Hegelian system would reduce 'violence' to a mere moment in a progress whose telos would be a transparency of subject to subject). One way of getting at the point of the French revision of Hegel is through the work of René Girard, a thinker who stands as the inspiration for the second of Monk's essays. For Girard, there can be no definitive overcoming of the violent indifferenciation that founds the community relation because such an *aufhebung* will always require recourse to a representation that is itself violent. The model for this violence would be the *pharmakos* or scapegoat figure who facilitates in her or his exclusion, the differenciation and exchange of identities necessary to the constitution of any community.

This violence of the image, precisely that violence entailed in the becoming image of the other, is given a specifically sexual inflection in the third of Monk's essays, "Breach of Promise". But this sexual inflection is perhaps less significant than the historical one that accompanies it: for what distinguishes the work in question here (Picasso's *Desmoiselles*), what marks its exemplary modernity, is the way it refuses any totalizing identification of self and other, image and viewer, the way, in other words, that it recognizes violence at the very origin of the social:

The passage of one image to the other, from *The Entombment* to *The Demoiselles*, is a narrative transformation: from the presence of promise to its absence. On my side, the narrative is the representation of fascination—putting its drives in motion. To represent the 'breach' between the two images—the breach and the space between—is to register the gap between me and them. Representation leaves an absence in its origin.

But, and herein lies the paradox to which Monk's work incessantly returns, to "represent this 'breach'" is already to have forgotten it; difference itself will not be identified. It is for this reason that there can be no simple passage from *The Entombment* to *Les Demoiselles*, only an endless vacillation between a death that is at once loss and exhalation and the compensations of narrative:

The breach of promise is a breaking of the symbolic: the breach strands me in the gap between these two images.

In his second chapter, Monk extends the terms of the analysis described above.