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INFLUENCE



KEREN CYTTER 50 PERCENT ANXIETY

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«IT'S GETTING TOO STRESSFUL TO MAKE SO MANY SHORT FILMS. WHEN I WAS YOUNG AND STARTING OUT IT GAVE ME A CERTAIN BUZZ. NOW I'M STARTING TO FEEL LIKE IT'S JUST ABOUT SOLVING PROBLEMS»

I'D NEVER HEARD of Anna Wing until I caught sight of her striking, droopy-eyed presence in Keren Cytter's video installation *Avalanche* at the Pilar Corrias Gallery in London – well, I had never seen 'EastEnders,' the long-running British soap opera, so how would I know the woman who played what Wikipedia tells me was 'the archetypal East End matriarch' in the early years of the series?

Cytter had never heard of the 95-year-old actress either. She just turned up serendipitously as a customer when the Israeli artist was filming at an Italian eatery in Fitzrovia, not far from the gallery, and given Cytter's informal, spontaneous working methods, there had to be a way to fit her in. It makes sense, too, because Cytter's oeuvre amounts to a sort of ongoing, sliced-and-diced avant-garde soap opera, substituting Berlin Mitte for the imaginary London Borough of Walford in 'EastEnders' as the main locus where a shifting cast of recurrent faces – grungily dressed, nomadic young Dostoevsky-quoting bohos rather than working-class Londoners – act out their desires, infidelities, friendships, and fantasies in a manner at once melodramatic and deadpan.

Avalanche epitomizes Cytter's fractured aesthetic: the four parts are spread between two different venues, the Corrias Gallery and the nearby David Roberts Art Foundation – in each case, one upstairs, one downstairs, with the sound bleeding through. Shot in Berlin, London, and (just a little bit) in Japan, the four videos – the artist prefers to call them movies – use the same cast of characters (or rather, amateur actors whose roles are deliberately never allowed to coalesce into clearly defined characters). If having to take a single work in across different places seems awkward, that's probably the point. The work is imbued with a sense of displacement; reality and imagination intermingle, so that multiple scenes seem to be taking place in a single room while the setting for any given conversation can shift by a thousand kilometers at the drop of a hat. Somehow it's telling that while the female lead, played by Rosalind Masson, is constantly berated by her ex-lover for being a 'Francophile,' she never tries to go there; these people live in their heads more than in a given city. Here, as in all of Cytter's work, observational realism – so this is how a cheap flat is furnished in Berlin – mixes it up with formalism; artifice and its opposite become indistinguishable. One of the four films is presented as a product review of a Canon digital video camera – though the unexpected guest star turns out instead to be the portable snow machine that's constantly spraying the actors with white powder.

Meeting up with Cytter to discuss the new installation, I can't help suggesting that we sit at L'Angoletto, the Italian joint where Anna Wing had popped up. There are no unexpected star turns this time around. And maybe because the show has just been installed and she didn't get much sleep the night before and she still had the opening to face that evening, Cytter seems – in her understated, funny, self-deprecating way – unusually self-critical. In fact, she seems a bit pissed off with everything – not only her video work, but also the performances she makes with Dance International Europe Now, the dance theater ensemble she formed in Berlin a few years ago, although she does still seem pleased at being able to say she can call herself a choreographer despite claiming not to know how to dance. The DIEN website mentions a range of inspirations: 'Yvonne Rainer, Pina Bausch, Samuel Beckett, Disney on Ice, Sascha Waltz, Batsheva dance group, Michael Jackson,' among others. There are dancers in the troupe, but Cytter

Right: video stills from Keren Cytter's



explains that what they do is more like experimental cross-genre performance art than pure dance – ‘but I thought it would be much cooler to say it’s a dance company.’

I ask if she herself ever performs with the group. The idea seems to horrify her. ‘Never!’ she says. She explains that this is one of the problems with both the performance and the video works – that she thought that by having other people perform her words, she would be spared having to do it herself. But instead, she’s found, in order to get her cast to do what she has in mind, ‘try to entertain them – I perform for them.’

Cytter tells me that she is ready for a big change in her work, starting in 2012. ‘It’s too bad the world is supposed to end then,’ she reflects. What’s the nature of the change she has in mind? ‘I want to make longer movies,’ she explains. ‘It’s getting too stressful to make so many short films. When I was young and starting out it gave me a certain buzz. Now I’m starting to feel like it’s just about solving problems.’ Whatever the form her works might take if she does come through on her promise, or threat, to start making fewer, longer works, you can bet they won’t be ordinary narrative features. For one thing, she’s not interested in writing conventionally consistent personae: ‘It’s hard to be interested in characters,’ she says. ‘I try. But I can’t get so interested in making stories with characters that have character.’

So what would her new films be like? ‘I only know I don’t want to do the same things I did before. And each time I make another one of these short films, I see that I am doing the same kind of thing. I want to think differently. I don’t want the movies to look like they’re mine. I’m not even sure if I would like my movies if they weren’t mine.’

But the artist is always her own toughest critic. She may wonder if she really likes her work but everyone else certainly seems to, as certified by critical acclaim, awards like the Baloise Art Prize at Art Basel in 2006 and the first annual Absolut Art Award in 2009, and recent exhibitions in venues like the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, and Le Plateau in Paris. But then Cytter is not the kind of artist to accord others’ appreciation too much weight. She’s more interested in her own doubts, which become the material of her work. In fact, after we’d finished our lunch – Caesar salad with chicken for me; a cold antipasto plate for her – and started walking our separate ways through London, I couldn’t help thinking back to an odd remark she’d made when trying to explain her state of dissatisfaction. ‘I feel I’m using only 50 to 60 percent of my anxiety,’ she’d told me. I can see what she means. If she can make such good work using only part of her anxiety, why let half of it go to waste? ■

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