

Playing Along with Anna

by Joshua Decter, copyright 2002

In and out, back and forth, on and off, off and on. At the start, the video screen is dark, a moment later, a very subtle clicking sound may be discerned, and the tip of an erect penis is illuminated the moment that it touches-on a light switch. Subsequently, the penis retracts out of the pictorial frame, and then, it returns to switch the light off, and the screen goes dark. The cycle begins again, looped into a 15-minute piece. Initially, I couldn't believe my eyes, or rather, I wasn't entirely certain what I had just witnessed. This was swiftly followed by a moment of recognition: it was not a finger turning the light switch on and off, but rather a man's dick, an irrepressible boner. Was I somehow repressing identification or recognition? Perhaps, a *mis*-recognition, an unconscious response to this uncanny scene?

"On/off" (1999) happens to be the title of this humorously sexual, oddly disturbing video by Anna Jermolaewa. The hard penis literally and symbolically triggers an illumination of the pictorial space (the interior scene) which it has just 'penetrated,' and so Jermolaewa appears to be playing a game of both corporeal and psychological substitution: a penis substituted for a finger, the penis *becoming* the finger. Here, there is a gender-specific sexualization (re-coding) of 'neutral' space, an eroticization of the mundane, yet presented in such a casual, matter-of-fact way as if to provocatively suggest that this could be the normal order of things, if fantasy were allowed to more actively 'penetrate' our everyday experience.

Ironically, for me, this particular work by Jermolaewa triggered a reminiscence of Nikolai Gogol's tale, "The Nose." Perhaps this is an inappropriate analogy, yet I cannot help but project some latent connection. Although Jermolaewa left her native Russia for Vienna in 1989 when she was 19 years of age, I discern something of a (postmodern) Russian philosophical prankster in her works. A sensibility drawn to revealing the darkness of the human condition through absurd gestures of symbolic psychological displacement and semiotic reinvention. A penis behaves like a finger, and a nose is mistaken for a person. Perhaps, somewhere in the back of my mind, I am imagining that Jermolaewa might be a distant inheritor of Gogol's absurdist sensibility, and it is interesting to note that the narrative of "The Nose" unfolds within St. Petersburg. There has been much literary analysis proposing the nose in Gogol's story is the sublimated substitute of a phallus, perhaps not surprisingly. So, somehow, whether appropriately or not, I indirectly connected this with Jermolaewa's deployment of the penis-as-finger.

And, in Jermolaewa's charming, yet edgily sexy video loop, "Blumenbeet" (2001), we are witness to another psychological-sexual substitution: the male body becomes a symbolic 'flower bed.' A number of differently-colored watering utensils sprinkle nourishment onto the genital zones of one man (or various men?), resulting in the *sprouting* of erect penises. Literally and symbolically, the springing-up of phalluses, as if by some miraculous intervention. At once quaint, hilarious and threateningly sexual, "Blumenbeet" delivers an allegorical reflection on masculinity, fertility, and sex, and if I'm not mistaken, it is a woman's hand (perhaps the artist's?) dispensing the watery sustenance. We know what's going on here, we are in on the game, we know that it is a set-up, and Jermolaewa is seeking to fool no one. Yet there is a certain magic here, a wonderful

suspension of disbelief that can only be associated with a type of absurdity. Absurdity as a form of social allegory, humor deployed in order to get under the skin of our habitual lives, our common assumptions, and to draw out another kind of truth—or, perhaps, a recognition that there is no one truth. Except, perhaps, the ‘truth’ that emerges when a man’s penis is watered: it grows!

Female eroticism and/or sexuality is skillfully re-navigated in “Kurvenreich” (“Curvy”), a 3-minute video loop from 2002. Here, in a sequence of tightly and beautifully edited sequence of fragments, a little toy red sports car is seen navigating the curves of a woman’s body (the artist’s, perchance?), racing across a corporeal landscape which is as objectified as it is sensuous. The only sound element is the friction of the toy car’s wheels as it moves across the skin’s surface. It is almost as if the car becomes a mapping device of this woman’s body, whose face is never revealed; like a pencil drawing in space, the car articulates the line of the corpus, as if to suggest a sculptural entity. With her trademark light touch, Jermolaewa humorously interrogates a commonplace cultural trope: the sexualization of the automobile (i.e., men ‘riding’ curvaceously sexy sport-cars), or, in the case of car racing, a high-velocity extension of male power (the *mobile* phallus). In this elegantly constructed video, the red toy sports car might also be construed as the symbolic substitute of the man’s body. And, as the toy car also represents the world of children and play, the introduction of this sign of ‘innocence’ triggers the possibility of other disturbing connotations.

To extract the absurd from the apparently mundane qualities of life is actually a means of illuminating the absurdity of life’s banalities. The construction of absurdity as an aesthetic-philosophical condition allows us to see, more clearly, just how ridiculous our human condition is, and more significantly, helps us to persist through our day-to-day circumstances. Jermolaewa deftly extracts the absurd from objects, and manipulates situations that appear, on the surface, to suggest a certain normalcy, yet immediately become estranged from their normative condition. In a sense, Jermolaewa entreats us to recognize just how normal the absurd really is, and, of course, vice-versa. For example, in “Mutterschaft” (1999) (“Motherhood”), a 33-second loop, we are presented with a scene that seems at once ‘everyday’ and idiosyncratic: puppies feed enthusiastically on the teats of their mother, while simultaneously the mother dog is given food (extra scraps?) by a man sitting at a table. This appears to be a fragment of a context that indicates, perhaps, some type of domestic scene; we don’t see the man’s face, or the broader context, yet we do overhear him ‘talking’ to the mother-dog. As viewers, we tend to oscillate between identification and estrangement, identifying both the charming and the unnerving qualities of this scene of motherhood. The uncovering of the comic or sinister from the surface of the normative also finds unique expression in Jermolaewa’s “Das Hendltriptychon,” (“Chicken Triptych”), from 1998. Each monitor presents a 3 to 4 minute loop of views of 3 different chicken-cooking rotisseries, shot from what appears to be the perspective of different city streets (we, as viewers, as voyeurs, watch the cooking chickens, as if peering into the shop windows). These are the kinds of chicken rotisseries that we could find in ethnic restaurants and shops throughout many different cities in the world. Through the endless repetitions of the loop structure, Jermolaewa amplifies both the ‘everydayness’ of these culinary scenes as well as the intrinsic – and contradictory interplay between – humor and violence that we might associate with the endless machinations of chickens roasting over fire.

In the two-channel video piece, “Shooting” (2001), Jermolaewa ‘destroys’ the apparatus, the apparatus of video, and penetrates the observer’s field of vision in a rather violent

manner. We are offered an allegory of the construction and destruction of representation in the age of 'democratized' media culture, wherein anyone with a video camera can become a putative moviemaker. The two video monitors face each other, replicating the original scene of the video *shoot*. In one monitor, a woman, who appears to have black hair (or is it a wig?), wearing large protective eyewear, holds an automatic pistol. It appears that she is aiming, pointing, the gun directly at us, the viewers. It is a face-off between the imminent violence of a gunshot and the imminent 'reception' by the viewer of this action. As a possible target, I am about to be shot, figuratively speaking. I am arrested, physically and metaphorically, by having a gun pointed at me. The woman is standing, holding the automatic pistol, in what appears to be an underground space- perhaps a shooting range, perhaps a more pernicious context. On the other video monitor, the image of a video camera mounted on a tripod, in front of a brick wall. We assume this camera occupies the same space as the shooter. Perhaps, the video camera is the actual target, and I, as viewer, have become the imaginary intermediary in this depicted scene? On the other monitor, the woman takes a breath (is this Anna, the artist herself?), aims the pistol at me/us/video camera, and fires off one shot. Target practice? After a few moments, there is a subtle disturbance in the quality of the video; it appears to be deteriorating in quality. She aims again, appears ready to shoot, and then briefly stops, pulls back, takes a longer, deeper, breath, and then shoots off a second shot. And then, abruptly, there is only static: the materiality of the tape has been undermined. Simultaneously, on the companion video monitor, we observe what might be described as the 'victim' of the shooting, the objective evidence: it is the video camera, helpless, almost pathetic, which has been partially destroyed, or 'executed.' Perhaps, in some indirect way, this is an ironic revision of Chris Burden's famous 1971 "Shoot," although I believe there is something else going on here. Jermolaewa desires to implicate us, as viewers, suggesting that we are all complicit in this endlessly repeated act of actual/symbolic destruction and reconstruction of the video apparatus- a gesture which reveals the underlying 'fictive' status of video's claims of veracity, objectivity, truth-telling.

Jermolaewa cunningly seduces us into playing her games, creating a dynamic in which we are at once innocent 'victims,' casual onlookers, unwilling accomplices, and culpable participants. Who is in control under these circumstances? Who is being manipulated? Her works are articulated with a deft economy of means: just the right tempo, a velocity that corresponds with the accelerated delivery systems of our contemporary media culture, and the employment of looping as an instrument of repetition (and information-compression) that triggers contemplation and critical reflection. Playful, a bit shocking, certain of Jermolaewa's videos sexualize commonplace situations so as to challenge our life-rituals; she re-codes 'everyday' objects and situations for the purpose of subverting our assumptions about how seemingly innocuous things in the world can generate unforeseen complex and multiple meanings. The estrangement of the real, the reality of our estrangement from the real, and the dark humor of it all.

Joshua Decker is a New York-based curator, writer and art historian. He recently organized the exhibition "Tele[visions]" at the Kunsthal Vienna.