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THE (IM)POSSIBLE

By

Bethany Taylor

BFA, University of Southern California, 1991

**A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate
School of the University of Colorado in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Fine Arts

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University of Colorado at Boulder



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**This Thesis for the Master of Fine Arts Degree by
Bethany Taylor
has been approved for the Department of Fine Arts
by**



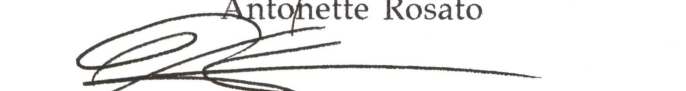
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Linda Herritt



Antonette Rosato



Alex Sweetman

Date _____

Complexities. She lived in a world of possibilities and impossibilities. Uneasiness. She balanced herself tentatively, everything swiftly, constantly changing, shifting balances, shifting with her and then back, *against* her. Certain of nothing, She was finding it increasingly difficult to comprehend what she was thinking and experiencing. Listening. She could tell that it was all questionable, that she too was questionable. She was not heroic, one who dares to defy. Those of them who were heroic could be lifted out their historical context, but she was not so exceptional. She could only desire that she would always search out, and recognize her own subjectivity, which wouldn't be so easy to locate in any fixed manner, nor would it be so easy to deny.

Upon scratching my own surface, I found a person struggling to fit in, to feel located in some way. I never quite found a space that I didn't violate some of the rules. I felt like I was constantly juggling roles and expectations, and I began to accept that these struggles might not ever resolve themselves. Conclusions were always a bit frustrating to me. They never quite "captured" the situation I was trying to observe or express. They never quite dealt with the contradictions and conflicts. Resolutions. They rarely dealt with my own desires, but almost always with someone else's...

" You can't write about yourself and then say The End. Alas, the soul's history is endless. The longest version cannot escape being a fragment. Very curious little fragment it is, too, in which the I becomes the You ..." ¹

Wholes/holes

She was always suspicious of wholes, or that which claimed to have all of the answers or to "know" from a completely "objective" point of view. Every proposition had it's "holes" and was necessarily incomplete. She had come to understand, however, that there was often a "lack of authority" to something that did not wish to "privilege" one theory over another, or to place its appropriateness beyond question.

What exactly are you talking about? Invaded my ear. I often, contradictorily, desire unity or total comprehension in my work. At the same time I am reminded of the complexities involved in communicating, and the gaps and silences I 'd have to live with in order to achieve this apparent unity. Questions in terms of my audience and message I have understood as important, (especially if I would like the viewer/reader to respond, and conversation to continue.) However, I'd like to see this understanding of communication as less about "truth" seeking, than as a genuine hope that there is someone "out there" with whom conversation is possible. I would like to make my meanings intelligible, but only

¹ Chelva Kanaganayakam, *Structures of Negation: The writings of Zulfikar Ghose*, University of Toronto Press 1993, p.177.

insofar as it is independent of notions of "undistorted communication" or my own "communicative competence." ² Control. "Professionalism", if it means securing "objective" and definite positions does not always interest me.

These she feared often rested heavily on "truth claims" or visions of the "whole" without being aware of inherent biases and emissions necessary for these appearances. She was aware of her own biases and noticed when she fell into the very traps she distrusted. She studied different models, but each, although helpful to her in some ways, were problematic in other ways. One theory showed her how gender relations are central to her construction, but obscured her female sexuality. Another urged her to "write and read like a woman", in order to illuminate some of what is suppressed within the dominant view. In these strategies, however "man" still retained his place as sole author and character in the stories devised to oppose "master narratives ". She wondered... how one could speak for "woman" when no such person exists, (except within a specific set of gender relations, to the idea of "man", and unto many different "women".) *How can a "woman" speak as a "woman" outside of what she has learned that arbitrarily means?* So, again, despite her desire for "a defining theme of the whole", it was also very problematic. If she gave into this "fixity" of beliefs in her need for authority, coherence, or understanding, she

² Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, p. 223

would be assuming more knowledge than she actually possessed. Her discourse would become a closed system, and she, a prisoner to the oppositions she had intended to deconstruct. In addition she would be assuming that all others shared similar backgrounds, and experiences, which was just not the case.

Always seen in relation to a culture that is also changing...I often contradict myself. My actions and words are sometimes dissimilar. Ambivalence. My feelings about sexuality, autonomy, relatedness, or my own potential to understand these are almost always in conflict. My thoughts, are often, not so easy to communicate. I think the anxiety caused by these ambivalences are revealed to me most when I feel the need to deny them and begin to desire premature closure, or one sort of "correct" perspective. These moments indicate to me the embeddedness of my thought in the very social processes and psychological structures I would hope to critique. I believe we can and should justify our choices, but as to what forms these might take is still unclear to me. I can only account for my strategies and my preoccupations so far, not for my "permanent position"

Did she have access to a position within rules of classical perspective? Did she really want to freeze moments of "truth" in the space of a painting? Was she more interested in her thought in motion or in the single thought itself? Was there a space she could speak and think in motion without interruption and without articulating in the end, a point. Be it a vanishing point or a frozen

truth, was she interested in that or did she even have access to it?
...or, was she interested in one point among several or many?

"Confronted with complex and changing relations, we try to reduce these to simple, unified and undifferentiated wholes. We try to search for the right answer or the "motor" of the history of male domination. The complexity of our questions and the variety of approaches to them are taken as signs of weakness or failure to meet the strictures of pre-existing theories, rather than as symptoms of the permeability and pervasiveness of gender relations and the need for new sorts of theorizing."³

Despite attempts to create and enforce governing ideologies, I don't feel most of us really live that way. We piece together our stories and realities, from whatever we encounter. This cannot be solved by introducing a "master" framework in which to understand our experience, but by developing open ended partial descriptions of experience. Art must be more than a site of opinion for me, but a place where audiences can experience complex feelings, questions, doubt, hope, and maybe even laughter.

her language, her difference....

"Speak just the same. Because your language doesn't follow just one thread, one course, or one pattern, we are in luck. You speak from everywhere at the same time. You touch me whole at the

³ Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments*, p. 179

same time. In all the senses. Why only one song, one discourse, one text at a time? To seduce, satisfy, fill one of my 'holes'? I do not have any with you. We are not voids, lacks, which wait for sustenance, fulfillment, or plenitude from an other. That our lips make us woman does not mean that consuming, consummating, or being filled is what matters to us...

...They neither taught us or allowed us to say our multiplicity. That would have been improper speech. Of course we were allowed-we had to?-display one truth as we sensed but muffled, stifled another. Truth's other side-it's complement? it's remainder?- stayed hidden. Secret. Inside and outside, we were not supposed to be the same. that does not suit their desires. Veiling and unveiling, isn't that what concerns them, interests them? Always repeating the same operation- each time, on each woman...." ⁴

Is there a feminine language? Is the authority of logic necessary for speaking to have force? Is the logic that represents a supposedly neutral and objective truth, really the expression of parochial power? Is there in all language, even as it pretends to be most rational, a hidden expression of desire?

Model after model she studied them all. In all of their contradictions and all of their biases only to realize that she was trying to understand herself within a "world view" that may not be her own. She listened to her "fathers" as they explained to her the predicament she was in. One said language attempts to construct a

⁴ Luce Irigaray, *When our Lips Speak Together*, 1977

symbolic university where dependence on other's (mothers) gives way to the "Law of the Father". In order to escape a fusional dependence on *his* mother the subject must see *himself* as separate from her. The "feeling", "needing", *me*, must give way to the demanding linguistic I, in order for the subject to enter a rational language structured around a phallic presence. Women, he says are less willing to give up this intersubjectivity to become an "I" that objectifies and symbolically controls objects of desire. Because of this, she cannot begin to express the "truth" of her own situation and is condemned to struggle in a world of alien values.

This is not very encouraging to women who want to think, write and speak for themselves, about themselves. It does set up a problematic challenge though.

Another "father" argued that concepts rely on their opposite concepts for meaning. (For example, *man/woman* or *good/evil*) So that for each of the concepts "arbitrarily" assigned to "man", their opposite concepts would then be assigned to "woman". In addition one side of the opposition is "valued" over the other term which is often more descriptive.

So then I become everything he is not, and I can never be like him. I think I am more like him, however, than let's say a frog.

He searched out "blindspots" where words used in different situations contradicted each other, words that meant both sides of an opposition, thus revealing a text's instability. He also talked

about "traces" of opposites infecting the other, contradicting any assumption of purity or unity.

It was like Maria's eggs. As wasteful as it seemed, she was instructed to separate the yolk from the white of the egg, a task she found nearly impossible. It was an exercise in purity . I hardly understood the purpose, but I knew it was an ongoing struggle I knew, trying to separate , myself or position from my "opposite", only to find I was left with a mix. (a yolk that was floating with egg white, separate, but difficult to separate completely) Maybe a combination was necessary.

"Power is consolidated by keeping separate different areas of knowledge and by denying the politically permeated nature of all activities."⁵

"I think of the attempt at control exercised by those who possess both power and the categorical eye and who attempt to split everything impure, breaking it down into pure elements (as in egg white and egg yolk) for the purposes of control. Control over creativity. And I think that something in the middle of either/or, something impure, something or someone mestizo, as both separated, curdled, and resisting in its curdled state. Mestizaje defies control through simultaneously asserting the impure, curdled multiple state and rejecting fragmentation into pure parts. In this

⁵ Malini Joher Schueller, *Toward a Politics of Difference: Linguistic otherness in The Armies of the Night, The Politics of Voice*, 1992.

play of assertion and rejection, the mestiza is unclassifiable, unmanageable. She has no pure parts to be "had", controlled."⁶

"Thinking of resistance, resistance to a world of purity, of domination, of control over our possibilities." ⁷

Language. Its desire is to maintain hierarchical relations. Does that mean that women, through language, cannot open up possibilities of expressing "their" desire, or exposing simple observations that remain hidden beneath the layers of "rational" language? I struggle with the (im)possibilities of speaking of "feminine" desire while enmeshed in the very communicative structures that allow me not to. And how do I speak of "woman" being and experiencing without closing observations into "truths"?

" Her language does not contain, it carries, it does not hold back it makes possible. When id is ambiguously uttered the wonder of being several-she does not defend herself against these unknown women who she is surprised at becoming, but derives pleasure from this gift of alterability." ⁸

I absorb everything, and my work becomes, in part, everything I encounter. The pages of glamour magazines, with her on every other page, hair blowing in the wind, clothes about to blow right off her body. She, hovered over toilets selling cleaning products. Or,

⁶ Maria Lugones, Purity , Impurity and Separation, Signs, Winter 1994,p. 160

⁷ Ibid., pp. 459-60.

⁸ Helene Cixous, The Laugh of Medusa,1983

she, invisible, the one who cannot fit the representation desired so that she cannot appear anywhere at all. She, the countless images of inanimate "objects" put to text that infers that they are somehow female. Exchange. Consumption. 1992 ...Documenta article, the artist is a "he" and the art work a "she". " ...she couldn't be a he, for me" , he says. I guess most artworks welcome the gaze as does a "she". I think of the myths that surround her body and of the violence continually imposed on her body, to render her helpless. Every picture of her, every thought about her, every word to express her "condition" , I am all of these women every day.

"She is definitely other in herself. That is undoubtedly why she is called capricious-not to mention her language in which *she* goes off in all directions and in which *he* is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Contradictory words seem a little crazy to the logic of reason and in audible to him who listens with ready made grids, a code prepared in advance. In her statements-at least when she dares speak out-woman retouches herself constantly...

One must listen to her differently in order to hear an *other meaning which is constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilized.* For when she says something, it is already no longer identical to what she means. Moreover, her statements are never identical to anything. Their distinguishing feature is one of contiguity. They touch *upon* . And when they

wander too far from this nearness she stops and begins again from zero her body sex organ."⁹

I do not mind anymore if my language seems incomplete or seems to disperse. I do not mind always having to begin again, without first exhausting and completing a story or following a theme. I do not mind anymore if it seems better to concentrate on beginning and mostly middle processes rather than a working toward a predetermined endpoint. I feel most at home to always be in the middle of something, and when I get too close to "the end" I notice I start over again. This is a part of my process I need to learn to value. I read once that if postmodern stances had really taken a "feminine" perspective, the infamous "deaths" they speak of may have instead been an ongoing series of struggles. I believe that. Ongoing struggles and partial experiences. These are what I know best. If there is an end I value, it lies in the reader/viewer, and the beginning, I guess, from what else? - the word. I, then must be located somewhere in the middle, which is not necessarily the center.

her body, her work, her voice.

Oppositions again. She is body instead of mind. If "artist" is male, (and he is continually spoken of as a he) then she must be his work of art? I think of a Laurie Anderson song where she says her brain is very bossy. It wants "her", (who is just referred to as a

⁹ Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which is Not One*, 1981

body or baby doll) to take him out to a ball game and then to a movie because he likes to sit in the dark. I think its a funny notion that if minds are male "we" are all walking around with little male brains in our bodies, the main control site for all of our body's actions, locations, desires, etc.... what an arbitrary idea assigned to "men" and "women". If this was accurate, though, this would explain alot.

Sometimes she feels all that she does can only be structured through "male" perspectives. Sometimes she does not fight that idea or try to prove it inaccurate, but instead searches for a way through it that she can speak. If she corresponds to "all of the things he creates and controls" then she must first be just that, and then also be the other too. She must be subject and object, artist and artwork. Her body and mind are not separate and she must be both. Being a subject is hard for her, however because in order to be a subject she must see herself as the origin of perception. She would exist but in a fixed manner. Therefore, she felt it was important for her to juggle different subjectivities. Even so, in the end it was always very obvious from her work that she was a female artist. Some even told her that the fact that she could not give up this subjectivity, was her biggest "problem".

How many times do women artists I know have to contend with questions of their work being too gender specific, or not objective enough. Hasn't art often been about a supposedly objective artist making work in some way, shape or form about a specific gender.

(namely about "women") How strange that when a "female" artist makes work about "women" or any of the arbitrary concepts that have been pinned on them , That somehow it is different. It is too gender specific?

She noticed that this was partially due to ideas of authorship, which had always been his authorship, his tastes, his preoccupations, his ideals and morals, not her's. The more her work could evaporate "her" authorship, she knew the more palatable it would be. If it appeared to be like his work it would be more accepted, unlike the work of women that stray too far from "acceptable canon's."

I think I try to walk the line between that which shows signs of my uniqueness and presence in the work, and an erasure of myself and hand in the work altogether. Complete erasure of my identity I feel would be counterproductive. I do not think that my work is not personal. The work is very autobiographical, but I often mask it a little. I've seen women's work make others very uncomfortable if the viewer feels it is too subjective. But it is. It all comes from me, my experiences, I am the author, ... but am I also the artwork? I think my authorship lies more in the process. Most of the time the origin is located elsewhere . The work is about me at times, but I don't think I am always necessarily the subject. I take the ideas, text, images, combinations of oppositions, etc. through a process and it is through this I try to articulate an experience.

She began to learn very quickly what it was that she did that was acceptable, and that which "overstepped boundaries." She was also made very aware when her authorship was too strong. She was beginning to see the power that lied in the personal, but it was also very difficult, she thought, for a woman to be autobiographical without some of the personal attacks she can encounter from this honesty. In addition, she felt that "unitary" languages and positions often worked toward consolidation. She was afraid that instead of subverting absolutes with personal disclosure, she would be setting up a new set of absolutes, ones that may not have intended to be, but that would be misunderstood, and frozen as "truth". In addition she did not feel that she had access to unified self or fixed social or political position. Instead she hoped that she could only begin to discover the "truth" of her situation by trying to immerse her self in investigations, among these would be personal, interpretive and a experiential investigations.

My authorial voice does not rely on a unified and autonomous voice. I like to think that there are always traces of different voices I borrow from in the formation of my own ideas. I often speak through the guise of different authorial voices, but I use it in a way that I do not give up myself to them. I try to be aware of writing as a continual process of interpretation and the semantic openness of any articulation. Experiences that are not my own, I sometimes make my own, and those that are my own I often give to another "she". Sometimes I feel like disclosing more of myself and at other times I skirt around myself, but still try to speak of my

experience. Sometimes I feel like structuring my work in a more traditional format in order to speak, and other times, I can't find structures that will even begin to express what I'd like to. I feel that for myself I cannot determine "one way as best" and I will instead try to find, and explore other alternatives in my art making process. I used to hate the fact that this means at times I will appear more or less "all over the place", which in terms of an artist has been labeled "bad".

Maybe this "all over the place" is what she is.

I hope that I will not limit myself, not to explore different structures and processes. This time around I did not "disguise" the gallery space or the work. I acknowledge "his" space and "his form". All except video has a history of excluding women artists. In a way, video has become a space that I can speak without interruption. In the other pieces I was conscious of biases inherent in painting as well as in language, but I tried to see this as a structure I could think and speak through.

To speak at all is an affirmation that she exists. Maybe she hasn't found an alternative space, or maybe there isn't one. Maybe she can only exist within, in relation to, or against, "his" symbolic universe. She doesn't want to conclude on that, but rather that she doesn't know, but will keep her investigations in motion.

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts
Bethany Taylor
has submitted this written thesis as a supplement to the creative
thesis
and 10 slides
which are in the permanent possession of the
University of Colorado and recorded with the
Department of Fine Arts

Approved by


Chuck Foresman


Linda Herritt


Antonette Rosato


Alex Sweetman


Chair, Department of Fine Arts

Number of Slides and Medium

1. Ink-jet Prints on canvas w/ theater barricades and polyester stuffed carpet 6ft.X 11ft. Rolling it out for Them
A Site of Speech and Taste
2. Detail Rolling it Out For Them a Site of Speech and Taste
3. Cactus Print, Ink-jet Prints on wood 9ft.X 14ft. Hairballs and Hurricanes
4. Detail Hairballs and Hurricanes
5. Ink-jet Prints on canvas, Plastic Wrapping 4 in. X 48in. I OBJECT(s)
6. Detail I OBJECT(s)
7. Oil on Canvas + Ink-jet Prints 3ft.X 3ft. A-E-I Owe You
8. Liquid Light on canvas and Brown Prints on kitchen towels 14ft. X 18ft. A Still Life of Measuring up
9. Oil on canvas in body bag 4 1/2 ft.X 3 1/2ft. He Loves Me He Loves Me Not
10. Detail He Loves Me He Loves Me Not

