

On the Threshold

Notes on the female element and women in the work of Gabriela Golder

*It's a privilege to see
So much confusion*
Marianne Moore

In Gabriela Golder's career, the choice of video as a means of expression took place from the very beginning, when she studied film in the early 90's. Very early on she discovered that her quest connected more readily with austere and solitary forms of production, with the plastic nature of images and with the construction of a poetic language than with the collective, compartmentalized work of the film industry. She then resorted to differing tools and support according to the project and ultimately it was her own voice, not the language of the means employed, that prevailed. A voice aware of its literary, especially poetic, influences from modern cinema and contemporary art.

Gabriela Golder's work is also to a great extent populated by women. Little girls trying to keep their balance, reading about love; women smashing plates against the floor, subtly furious or dispassionate; they assert themselves in their spaces as if the body, beyond language and through the intensity of its own physical presence would open an almost always tense, or at least intense, bond with its surroundings and with the others.

The woman's body as a receptacle of an increasingly overflowing chaos is, in Gabriela Golder's work, a purely contemporary subject. An observed entity who observes intensely in return, like in *Resistencia* ("Resistance", video installation, 2000), making a super-human effort not to blink, to keep her eyes wide open, to stare and stare at the time which she inhabits until she breaks into tears. In this dialectic, many times playfully swinging between looking, forcing to look and being looked at, Gabriela confronts the others as a way to travel into her own inner space.

Since 1992, in her early work with video and short fictional films, the female body appears as a subject which is restless because of itself, open to doubt, exposed to the difficulty of existence. That is why many times these women are created on the limit

of what is visible. Buried underwater in a bath surrounded by flowers (*Irreversible*, video installation, 2005), drowned by a scream or the very silence (*Silencio — Silence — video installation*, 2003; *Intemperie — Out in the Open —*, video installation, 2006), the woman appears and vanishes, as if by showing herself (in many cases it is her own body starring in the scene), the artist would simultaneously chase them away. There is within them an element at stake which belongs to the order of absence, of secret, of a threat to sense. A “lack of knowledge” insistently inhabits the work of Gabriela Golder and its enunciation, the quest and the doubt as central stylistic features, emerge in her pieces through persistent questions, repetitions, enumerations and silences. In them, image is not a given element which we assimilate to interpret or consider in a literal way, but rather it brings question marks, revives suspicions and imposes losses, loneliness and anguish.

Between men and women, between social classes, between the individual and the system, tension seems to have no possible solution outside of poetic answers. Two clear, albeit not unpolluted spaces emerge in her pieces: the intimate, luminous and in turn dull space of her personal story and the collective space. To obtain a classification, which will surely lack absolute fairness, we can group her pieces according to those criteria and relate them back to the artist’s figure, which crosses all of them transversely.

Metaphor and Action

With the exception of a few pieces¹, where the artist resorts to conceptual, plastic work with real images from television to make us think about social oppression, resistance, survival and the way we look at certain unfortunate, socially violent events, in every Gabriela Golder piece, the female figure somehow emerges to take hold of our attention. Even in pieces where she seems to be absent or blended into a collective set, as is the case with *Reocupación* (“Reoccupation”, video installation, 2008), *Rescate* (“Rescue”, net.art and video installation, 2009) or *Arroró — Argentine lullaby —* (video installation and net.art, 2009), the female element surfaces through the artist’s own insinuation in the piece or the process of the piece.

¹ I am referring to *Vacas* (“Cows”, single-channel video, 2002), *Bestias* (“Beasts”, single-channel video, 2004), *La lógica de la supervivencia* (“The Logic of Survival”, single-channel video, 2008) and *Multitud* (“Multitude”, video installation, 2008).

Both *Reocupación* and *Arroró* stem from the desire to and the practice of listening to the other, of committing physically and intellectually to what they have to say or sing. They are part of an effort which has involved many meetings and interviews, inviting those attending to look at themselves and listen to themselves. The original idea, as in a documentary process, is transformed based on what the other proposes. “*All we have to do is tighten our skin like a drum for great politics to begin*”, wrote Gilles Deleuze. In this act which precedes the piece, the act of facing the other, of rescuing with the other a forgotten gesture or a song which is part of childhood, lies her entire political dimension and one of the key points to consider about her work: to always place her view in relation to that of others, to confront, converse, learn, find that which is hers in the others and build her own identity not only out of her own traits and obsessions but also through a deep sense of belonging to a particular group, or even through the proof of difference.

In *Rescate* (net.art and video installation, 2009), the idea is to recover the memory of certain words from books censored by the Argentine military dictatorship. The words are not only saved in their typographic form, but spoken one by one by the artist. It is not superfluous to mention that she reads them without a pause.

There is no montage.

Gabriela reads the hundreds of words comprising the piece, chooses them, rescues them, and in the modulation of her voice we reunite with her figure and perceive her physical exhaustion.

From the individual sphere to the collective, Gabriela Golder has said on many occasions that her journey is circular. In *Heroica* (“Heroic”, single-channel video, 1999), *Doméstico* and *Concierto diurno* (“Domestic” and “Daytime Concert”, 2007 and 2006, two versions of the same work in single-channel and video installation formats), for example, the concept proposed is radical and even literal. A group of women perform a sort of dance while hanging the laundry; other women smash plates against the floor without exchanging a single word, appealing to the memory of the gesture and all of its symbolical potential. If in those two pieces Gabriela Golder focuses on gender and violence issues, inquiring and questioning certain social models, it will be in *Díaspóra* (“Diaspora”, video installation, 2005) that the artist crosses the individual and the collective once again, placing herself at the center of the performance. The artist licks the floor across a room in an endless path, and in that symbolic gesture not devoid of sexual connotations, the woman marks out her territory like an animal and exhibits

free from shame the idea of female submission and the miseries of immigration (the piece was first exhibited in the building which housed the Immigrant Hotel in the early 20th century at the Buenos Aires harbor).

Her presence in the pieces, however, is far from vindicating or programmatic. Even though her background makes her familiar with the close relationship between the raising of gender issues and power hierarchies, and the origins of video creation and the performing practices of the 60's and 70's, we dare to think that her stance is rather closer to the assertion of individual identity, the uncertain construction of the self identity and its connection to the world, pain and the experience of others. As if the sorrow in oneself and one's own experiences could not be complete without being in turn confronted by those of others, taking their place and establishing an open bond to produce a new way of thinking and a new sense.

The Space of Desire

In *Pasajes* ("Passages", single-channel video, 2010) static, disturbing shots of an abandoned hotel in ruins follow one another while a literary, silent dialogue of a couple shown in the form of subtitles tell us unfinished stories, or rather notes of what perhaps once was.

It is possibly in this latest piece that Gabriela Golder takes to an extreme her need to exhibit desire tied to abandonment. Desire and desolation joined by the emptiness within both of them, since there is no experience, to the artist, which does not originate from the force of desire.

In inhospitable spaces, words are more important than what is said. The story dissolves under the weight of the sounds of the text which sustain the absent bodies. The ghostly dialogue envelops a void, remaining at the edge of what is not there, which undoubtedly constitutes the very core of desire, a black hole filled with words which direct us to the imagery.

Pasajes is a piece loaded with absence. In addition to the visible distance of the bodies, the words expose the absence and lead to an abyss. Something lies beneath, something which is overflowing and impossible to control. The cadence of the deserted, repetitive image makes us forget the text as a story. At other times, the situation can be reversed. We no longer look, we only try, weakly, to keep our balance between the lines of a hesitant dialogue, as we remain sustained by a certain tension, an original

discomfort. Georges Didi-Huberman says that the bond between images and words is ever dialectic, restless, open, unresolved. That is how this piece presents itself, and we can positively relate it to the environments of Marguerite Duras, the dialogues, the hotels, the silence rocked by the chaotic beat of desire. We do not ask ourselves who is engaged in dialogue, but rather we join in the dialogue with them, with the spaces, the light and the dark. “*The word is not a weapon, it is a place*”, wrote Duras, and Gabriela Golder seeks to build that place through the combination of multiple voices, leaving doors closed, doors half-open, windows that filter the light. Here it is not the female body that is present but rather the female element as an underlying force which escapes the text, mines the sense and endows the images with sensuality and sexuality.

Returning to the idea of producing an encounter with the other, which is a strong element in Gabriela Golder’s latest work, three recent pieces apart from *Pasajes* find in the literary language a nation, a memory and a bridge towards that which is unspeakable in love and pain.

In *Despojos* (“Remains”, video installation and performance, 2009) a group of people were invited by the artist to occupy different rooms in an empty hotel (in Sao Paulo, Brazil, during an international art residence), and read texts of their own choice about love, separation, and passions. The voices overlap and build a new text in multiple languages loaded with nuances, confronting these presences with the ghostly absences suggested by the space.

Loucos de amor (“Mad with Love”, single-channel video, 2009) shows two little Brazilian girls reading out loud fragments from a Sam Sheppard text: an adaptation of the theater play *Locos de amor*. With a kind of understanding different from that which an adult might be capable of, the girls comment on the text spontaneously, interrupt one another, get tired, contaminate the literary work with their own voices, transform it and give it a new identity.

Finally in *Dolor* (“Pain”, video installation, 2010) Gabriela invited a group of women, many of which were immigrants, to define pain by choosing a text and reading it in a part of her own house, during the artist’s prolonged stay in Montreal, Canada. So each woman chose a part of the house and the artist recorded them reading and listened to their stories of pain, which little by little began to inhabit her house and blend into her own hurt, becoming simply one massive pain.

This idea of the splitting of the self mediated by the literary language is already present in *Es todo* (“That’s all”, experimental full-length film in video, 1997). But in her recent work, the idea has been refined. There are no actors; it is the other that chooses the text; and it is the artist’s own home that is inhabited and becomes almost a place of exile, of externalization. Gabriela Golder takes a step back in order to listen and recreates her pain with images that belong to others, words in foreign languages, and new kinds of music. Thanks to the words, as dull as they may seem, something rises, stands upright on the threshold of enunciation. This, the pain which in appearance is as atrocious as it is inaccessible and non-transferable, finds a poetic form that enables its visibility (as it occurs with the display of the gesture in *Reocupación*, or by naming silenced words in *Rescate*).

Behind these mechanisms lies a very precise notion of art, a belief in the transforming power of a piece, which is capable of acting swiftly on oneself and the others. And there is also an extraordinary force of desire. Loving desire, desire of the image, desire to make desire “speak” so as to revolutionize every form of expression and demonstration. It is from this destabilizing, voluntarily imprecise and threatening area where questions surface and certainties escape, that the female element takes hold of Gabriela Golder’s work.