

## **The Beauty of Slaughter** **Gabriela Golder's video COWS**

By Christoph Blase

A bull, or perhaps it is just a cow, is chasing a group of people who are escaping on a packed horse-drawn wagon. But the cow gives up its seemingly hysterical chase, and turns off. It doesn't stand a chance. This is the first and also the last scene in the Argentinean artist Gabriela Golder's video *Cows*. And it is the only time an animal is seen hunting a human being. Otherwise the whole work turns around killing animals, wrenching and ripping off great chunks of their flesh before they are actually dead. Once people have had their share, or more precisely, once they have managed to grab as much as they can just about stagger along under the weight of, they hurry to make themselves scarce.

The concept of "making themselves scarce" is vividly underlined in the video. It runs in slow motion for long passages of its good four minutes, impressively slowly. The people with their booty seem to choreograph their flights unconsciously, they pause, look backwards and sideways, constantly trying to find an open and safe path out of the fray, alone or in groups. The images, drawn from television stock, are processed, rearranged and repeated in such a way that for a time they also acquire an abstract beauty that contrasts starkly with what the video is recording.

In reality, time was racing by on that 25 March 2002, when a cattle transporter overturned on an Argentinean country road, burying its load intended for the abattoir alive underneath it. Within a few minutes, hundreds of people were on the spot, cutting and tearing the trapped creatures up as quickly as they could. A single policeman can be made out. He can do nothing, or perhaps does not want to do anything, other than stand and watch.

But the alienation in the video is so powerful that at first we have only a vague idea of what is really going on. Gabriela Golder cuts to black for a few seconds over and over again, as if she wanted to give viewers the chance to think briefly about what they have seen. Uncertainty prevails until the end. Only then do four lines of text appear, saying that people actually did slaughter the cows trapped under the lorry on the open road. And even this is worded so dryly: "About 400 people slaughtered the cows, which had spread on the asphalt some minutes before when the truck transporting them fell down," as though it was just a minor news item, nothing special, not a drama, not a tragedy, just a completely normal, even if somewhat bigger and more unusual, opportunity for plunder in a decaying South American country. Here, in contrast, the animal protection agencies would trigger a discussion about the safety of cattle transport. That is how different life is on the other side of the earth.

On a second viewing, knowing what is actually happening, the video develops like a funeral march at first. The images fade slowly in from black, and the music on the soundtrack sounds like mourners humming, the short black seconds on screen are the black of death. We are reminded of the sacrificial lamb, or of human sacrifice. At one point the music is reminiscent of crackling flames. In a still that interrupts the flow of movement several times, the red of the raw flesh between two people seems like the flames of a funeral pyre they are burning on. As if these people are being burned anyway, for the rest of the world. The trucking accident with steak intended for the reach was just a happy chance that prolonged life without hunger for a few days for once.

The techno-style music that comes in later sounds like shots ringing out and electric shocks. From here onwards the action deals not so much with death as the act of killing. People slaughter cows, but people also slaughter other people. There are some moments in Golder's work when it is not clear who the massacre is aimed at. It is possible to imagine that the army might arrive, or the abattoir owner's henchmen, and start shooting indiscriminately at the crowd.

Golder does not use the original sound. Perhaps the television stations didn't use it for the broadcast either, as the cows' death bellows must have been brutal. It would also have thrown the video of balance: a soundtrack like that would have been too dominant. We would have thought too much about the poor animals and not enough about the poor people. The video would have lost its subtle element.

We would not have been able to look at it at the same way as we do Eugène Delacroix's picture in the Louvre, which considerably resembles in places – in colour quality, composition, and content. The

boy's blue shirt, the red meat on his back, his white cap – just a few stripes, as in Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue*. In fact it is precisely this pictorial power that is specifically not to be overwhelmed by the content, and thus makes this video so effective. Of course the work also relates to the situation of people in Argentina and to globalisation policy. Without these it would have no basis at all. We would not understand *Cows* at all. But if that were all it was about, it would not be so good.