

IMAGINE THAT EVERY WOMAN IS A COUNTRY

by Johanna Householder

Art does not reproduce the visible; rather it makes it visible... Formerly we used to represent things visible on earth, things we either liked to look at or would have liked to see. Today we reveal the reality that is behind visible things, thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the universe and that there are many more other latent realities...

Paul Klee (1879 – 1940)

Creative Credo, 1920 Imagine that every woman is a country.

Her borders are fluid. She is an island after all, surrounded by water. Her landscape evokes a potent nostalgia in its inhabitants. The country of Melati Suryodarmo is a small but strategic island whose economy is based in a fusion of physical resources and complex analytical processes. In the larger world this island has both active and passive relations with those beyond her borders, but she protects her autonomy, for in it there is strength. Activity and passivity are political positions – though this country has no army. Dancing is preferred to marching. Gambling is legal. The island is populated by a tribe of one.

On certain days, the high priestess of this island stands on a mound of butter in a little black dress and red stiletto heels. Her long black hair flips across her face as she begins to dance. The butter slides and shifts beneath her feet, replicating the earthquakes and disruption that impact the surface landscape. She slips and falls, the music continues, its drumming insistent. The butter slides again like a relationship gone awry. She gets up, she dances, she falls, she gets up, she dances.

On other days the priestess sits alone in her temple, cradling a raw cows liver. Her dress is red. Her hair extends for eleven meters out of the door of the temple. The hair of seduction, fragrant and smooth blurs before our eyes into a path or a carpet, coarse and fibrous. It might ensnare our ankles, slither up and overwhelm us. The liver is the centre of the body. To feed on one's liver is to turn inwards, to obsess. And yet she cradles it tenderly. Malevolence and beauty in dynamic balance hold in her presence and her performance. There is no narrative. Though ancient mythologies are invoked, there is no single prince, no princess, no trip to the underworld - and yet somehow we feel we know something profound about this scene, it seems familiar, but just outside the grasp of words. Catharsis takes place within the body of the beholder, not in the mouth.

Melati Suryodarmo speaks of her work as " ... a point where I can be, and switch the material body with this immaterial body." The switch that Suryodarmo both identifies and embodies with such clarity, is the beginning and end of performance art: the artist has a body, and she is a body. This exact overlay, too often invisible, elided by our daily lives, our habits of viewing, is a space to be opened. Through performance the predominately visual space of art is opened to the other senses – not only for the artist – but for her audience. The kinesthetic and proprioceptive senses that we often suppress in the presence of art, are called upon to make sense of what we see/feel. Suryodarmo appeals directly to our nervous systems – bypassing habitual thought to speak directly body to body. "Talking about politics, society or psychology makes no sense to me if the nerves are not able to digest and understand the information."

Suryodarmo's work is an insistent investigation of art and the mind. She proposes that what we call "spirituality" is also a neglected aspect of experience, especially in the visual arts world, and especially during this time when human beings are preoccupied with political and economic disasters.

She articulates through performance the need to be able to "touch the layers of emptiness." In *Ale Lino*, the transformation from being a human being with gender, into a no-gender identity is central. Her intention is to reveal the work of an inner transformation rather than to confront the sexual terms which normally frame the female body. The aesthetic arrangement of objects used in this performance support an image which comes from a transformation process in her individual state of mind. Amidst myriad projected images she stands on a plinth with a spear pointed

towards her heart. "In this performance, I want to create the silence between the rush." Through the transparent energy of performance, Suryodarmo shares her concerns with her audience. "This is a layer of mind, which I consider as a bridge between a human being and its god, spiritual guides, nature, the supra natural power one."

She uses time and duration as concrete elements to effect her transformations. The apprehension of an image slowly evolving as something from a distance gradually comes into view and into consciousness. The ship draws closer to the island.

Did I say there is humour in her work? Cow's liver, horses, 11 metres of hair, piles of clothing or butter, butter!, broken telephone communications. These are absurd elements and she doesn't shy away from their hilarity. This is part of the pleasure of her work, it is sensual to the border of hedonism and then it crosses that border.

As the ruler of her small island Suryodarmo chooses not to be authoritarian, but instead to open up a space, so that the public has "the freedom to reflect." This reflection encompasses the social relationships we establish in the world, and how our cultural frames and cross-cultural positions are connected with private space. It is an intimate conversation that ranges into psychology, mythology and the spiritual but it is grounded, solid, anchored in the physical. It is an island and a world.

– Johanna Householder, January 30, 2006

[quotes from an interview by Tanya Mars with Melati Suryodarmo, Toronto, November 1, 2004.]

Johanna Householder

Johanna Householder has been making performances and artwork in Canada since the late 70s. She became notorious as a member of the influential, satirical feminist performance ensemble, The Clichettes, with Louise Garfield and Janice Hladki, who performed throughout the 1980s.

She began teaching performance at the Ontario College of Art and Design in 1988, and was chair of the New Media/Integrated Media Program, from 1990 to 1996.

*A founder of the biennial 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art, she has brought many international artists to the festival. She is keenly interested in current social art practices, and the effect that performance has had in contemporary art and new media. Her recent works include collaborations with her daughter Carmen exploring the transmission of affect, and a series of works that depart from a 1981 performance text by Clive Robertson, In a Drunken Stupor. Her collected video work, Approximations, produced in collaboration with b.h. Yael has been screened internationally.*

With Tanya Mars, Householder co-edited Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance by Canadian women, YYZ Books, Toronto, 2004. Her work is also represented in Prêt à Porter / Take Out: Performance Recipes for Public Space, edited by Christine Redfern, La Centrale, Montréal, 2004.