

Dorit Cypis

Anderson Gallery
Virginia Commonwealth University

School of the Arts
November 21 - January 16, 1990



from *X-Rayed, (altered)*, 1989

Dorit Cypis: *X-Rayed, (altered)*

The female body, wholly unclothed or demurely draped with form revealing garments, is a standard theme in Western art. Languid odesques, demure virgins, coy nymphs, women undressing, women at their baths, sleeping women in strategically disheveled bed clothes, all populate the great masterpieces of our museums with such frequency that we have become almost blind to the subliminal messages they transmit. What does it mean to be raised female in a culture in which the ideal of femininity as portrayed in art (and, by means of the trickle down effect, movies, advertising, television, and the other organs of popular culture) stresses availability, passivity, and desire to please? What does it mean to inhabit a body which is defined and judged

by those who look at it rather than those who possess it? Can one take the body back? What would it mean for a woman in our culture to repossess her body?

These are the kinds of questions that underlie Dorit Cypis' *X-Rayed, (altered)*. This installation is part of an ongoing series of investigations which originated in Cypis' own apparently contradictory experiences as a woman in a culture that views the female body as an object of male desire and as an artist whose traditional role has been to facilitate that process. Thus, in an earlier performance entitled *The Artist and Her Model*, Cypis attempted to undermine the traditional relationship between creative, self conscious artist and passive malleable model who traditionally serves as an empty slate for the (male) artist's and viewer's



from *Threshold in Musical Time*, 1989

fantasies. This performance which incorporated slides, music, and an actual nude model prompted the audience to examine its own reactions to the presence of a naked woman and asked the question: can a naked woman really be in possession of herself while being looked at?

With *X-Rayed*, which followed this work, Cypis attempted to answer that question. Using 8 slide projectors, she bathed viewers and exhibition space with images from art history, and textbooks and photographs taken by the artist of a little girl and of a nude woman. The latter was portrayed touching her body, not in order to display it to an unknown viewer, but to reconnect with her own physical being.

X-Rayed was originally installed at the Whitney Museum in New York in winter of 1988 and the work's subsequent history demonstrates just how troublesome the issues Cypis raises can be. Following the Whitney installation, Cypis received a letter from the lawyer of a woman who had posed nude for the photographs included in the piece. Despite the fact that the model had worked with Cypis in full knowledge of the nature and destination of the work, the letter demanded that Cypis desist from any further use of the images. In the ensuing legal battle, Cypis found herself placed in a peculiar position - in the process of creating an art work intended to examine and undermine the exploitative use of the female body in art, she found herself accused of just such exploitation.

Following this incident, Cypis began to re-examine her own role in her work and as part of her soul searching, she reshot the images in *X-Rayed*, this time employing herself as model. This is the version of the piece on display here.

In literally putting herself in the other woman's place, Cypis discovered that the social conditioning she was fighting was not easy to erase. Writing about the experience of placing herself in the role of the nude model, she noted, "As was evoked by the original images, where the subject seemed actively in possession of her body, in these new images I felt actively in possession of my own body. This knowledge, however, did not protect me from being overwhelmed by a deep sense of shame, guilt and repulsion on first viewing them. The double dilemma of suffering the shame, while simultaneously knowing that in so doing, I was colluding with these social forces which have socialized me into that feeling, personified the irony of my struggle. It was not the me in those images but the me projecting onto them as viewer, which was threatened."¹

In Cypis' work to be female is to exist in a world in which forces as diverse as child rearing practices, popular entertainment, "high" art and conventional gender roles all conspire to separate her from an awareness of and enjoyment of her body. In our culture, John Berger points out, "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at."²

The hopeful message of Cypis' work is that woman need not be a prisoner of her social conditioning. By refusing to acquiesce in our culture's ubiquitous sexual stereotypes and by assuming an active relationship with her own body, she suggests it is possible to discover a pleasure in the body which is neither exploitative nor depersonalizing.

As her experience with *X-Rayed* demonstrates, however, the search for self awareness has hidden costs. To confront a received identity and to attempt to fashion a new one in its place can be a painful operation. The subliminal messages of our culture, the feelings of shame and guilt that enjoyment of one's body engenders, the difficulty in accepting the fact that the body we inhabit is actually ours to use and enjoy, are myriad. Self acceptance, Cypis points out, is a project which is never really complete. Instead, it is in the

ongoing process through which we must constantly renegotiate our sense of self. In grappling with issues like those raised here, Cypis holds out that hope that we may come to a better realization of what it really means to be human.

Eleanor Heartney
November, 1989

NOTES

1. Dorit Cypis, notes to *X-Rayed, (altered)* performed at Intermedia Arts Gallery, Minneapolis, MN, April 8-22, 1989.
2. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (Penguin Books, London), 1985, P. 47.

X-Rayed, (altered) by Dorit Cypis

Components

Multiple slide projectors, slides, theater curtain, projector stands, plaster casts, props, and audiotape.

Conceived, photographed and directed by Dorit Cypis.

Photographs of the "Woman's Body" by Lyn Hambrick replicating original photographs by Dorit Cypis.

"The Woman," Dorit Cypis

"The Child," Anika Habermas-Scher

Sound Composition: James Harry

Taped Vocals: Dorit Cypis, Marilyn Habermas-Scher

Projection Dissolve Programming: Russell Manning Productions, Minneapolis

Revolving Tower Engineering: Thomas Briggs

Technical equipment and support for **X-Rayed, (altered)** was made available through Russell Manning Productions, Minneapolis and Boitnott Visual Communications Corporation, Richmond. Additional support provided by The Radisson Hotel, Richmond.



from **X-Rayed, (altered)**, 1989

BIOGRAPHY

Dorit Cypis

Born 1951, Tel-Aviv, Israel

Lives and works in Minneapolis, Minnesota and New York City, New York

Education

- 1968-70 Sir George Williams University, Montreal, Canada
 1971-74 Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
 1975-77 California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California

Installation Exhibitions

- 1989 "X-Rayed, (altered)," Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
 "X-Rayed, (altered)," Intermedia Arts Gallery, Minneapolis, Minnesota
 "The Naked Nude," Installation and Performance, International Center of Photography, New York, New York
 1988 "X-Rayed," Installation and Performance, "New American Filmmakers," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York
 1987 "Incantation," Maryland Art Place, Baltimore, Maryland
 "Heavenly Embrace," Baskerville Watson Gallery, New York, New York
 1986 "Body Talk: The Panorama Story," (projection during opening) The Real Big Picture Exhibition, Queens Museum, New York
 "Incantation," Faulkirk Victorian Cultural Center, San Raphael, California, as part of NEA Interarts "Ex(centric) Lady Travellers" project
 "The Architecture of Paradise: Home for Wayward Girls," McKnight Fellowship Exhibition, MCAD, Minneapolis, Minnesota
 "Love After Death," Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, Belgium, Exposition D'Adieu de Karel Geirlandt: Au Cœur du Maelstrom
 1985 "Vanity: Just a Split Second Away," Talking Back to the Media Exhibition, Amsterdam, Holland
 1984 Media Sources Exhibition, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, Minneapolis, Minnesota
 "Together We are a Part: A Tropical Blend," Post Olympics Exhibition, L.A.C.E., Los Angeles, California
 1983 "Still to be Seen," Artist Space, New York, New York
 "Still Cinema: Talking Pictures," developed through Corps De Garde, Holland; performed at Apollohuis, Eindhoven
 "Still Framed: A Treatment," (a book) Franklin Furnace, New York
 "The Pleasure is Back," Sushi, San Diego, California
 Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California; Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
 1982 "The Quest of the Impresario: A Re-emergence," Vehicule, Montreal, Canada
 "The Quest of the Impresario: Courage," L.A.C.E., Los Angeles, California
 1981 "The Quest of the Impresario: A Reconstruction," White Columns, New York, New York
 1979 "Fly by Night," Foundation for Art Resources, Los Angeles, California
 1978 "Through This Opening the Ni...," Thomas Lewallen Gallery, Los Angeles, California; Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York
 1977 "...of a film," Morgan Thomas Gallery, Los Angeles, California
 Los Angeles International Film Festival (FILMEX).
 "The Paradise of Shared Solitudes," Los Angeles Studio, Los Angeles, California

Performance Presentations

- 1989 "The Naked Nude," International Center of Photography, New York, New York
 "Threshold in Musical Time," Brattle Theatre, Photographic Resource Center, Boston, Massachusetts
 1988 "X-Rayed," a one time performance by Leeny Sack within month long installation, Whitney Museum of Art, New York, New York
 "Threshold in Musical Time," Space AD 2000, Tokyo, Japan
 1987 "Lively Arts: Video and Performance," (video documentation) Fresno Arts Center and Museum, Fresno, California
 "A Phantasmagoria," (with Leeny Sack) Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Anna Leonowens Gallery, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada
 1986 "The Artist and Her Model," (and video) DeZaak, Groningen, Holland
 "Love After Death: A Renaissance," theatre of mutability, produced by UC Video, Minneapolis, Minnesota
 1983 "Still Cinema: Talking Pictures," developed through Corps De Garde, Holland; Grand Theatre, Groningen, Holland
 1982 "The Quest of the Impresario: A Re-emergence," A Space, Toronto, Canada
 "The Quest of the Impresario: 3/4 Time," Pilot Theatre, Los Angeles, California
 1981 "The House of Commons," Grapestake Gallery, San Francisco, California
 1980 "Living Buildings Act," G.S.A. Federal Building, Los Angeles, California

Exhibitions (Photographic Objects)

- 1989 "The Photography of Invention - American Pictures of the 80's," National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
 "Sequence (Con)sequence," Avery Center for the Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
 "What Does She Want?" Carlton College and First Bank, Carlton College, Northfield, Minnesota
 "Self Evidence," Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles, California
 1988 "Utopia: Post Utopia," Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts
 "Life Like," Lorence Monk Gallery, New York, New York
 "Kiss," Anna Marie DeKruiff Gallery, Antwerp, Belgium
 "Representation: Conception/Perception," Art Gallery, California State University, Fullerton, California
 1987 Photographic installation, with John Schlesinger, Thomas Barry Gallery, Minneapolis, Minnesota
 "Cal. Arts: Skeptical Beliefs," Renaissance Society, Chicago, Illinois; Newport Harbor Museum, Newport Harbor, California
 1986 "The Real Big Picture Exhibition," Queens Museum, Queens, New York
 "Signs of the Real," White Columns, New York, New York
 "Spiritual America," Center for Experimental Photographic Art, Buffalo, New York
 "Three Photographers: The Body," The New Museum, New York, New York
 1985 "A World A Part," Beaux Lezard, Paris, France
 "Psyche and Eros," Seduction and the Working Photograph, White Columns, New York, New York
 "Ex(centric) Lady Travellers," photo exhibition, Film in the Cities, St. Paul, Minnesota
 1984 Photography Invitational, Daedalus Gallery, Minneapolis, Minnesota
 1983 "Film as Installation," Clocktower, New York, New York