



Arte, forza e



interviewed by MARIA CRISTINA PARRAVICINI and BRUNA MORI

Artista, performer, videomaker, Michelle Handelman ha esplorato nelle sue produzioni imma-

handelman



The Adventures of Lady M. Art. performance art. ©2003

caramelle



The Adventures of Lady M. Art. performance art. ©2003

gini opposte che specchiandosi rappresentano il "tutto": maschile/femminile attrazione/repulsione... Utilizzando materiali la cui iper-sensualità trabocca nel grottesco e crea un immaginario in cui le ossessioni si fanno variopinte determinando i caratteri di personaggi iperfantastici.

“The body is the point of impact”



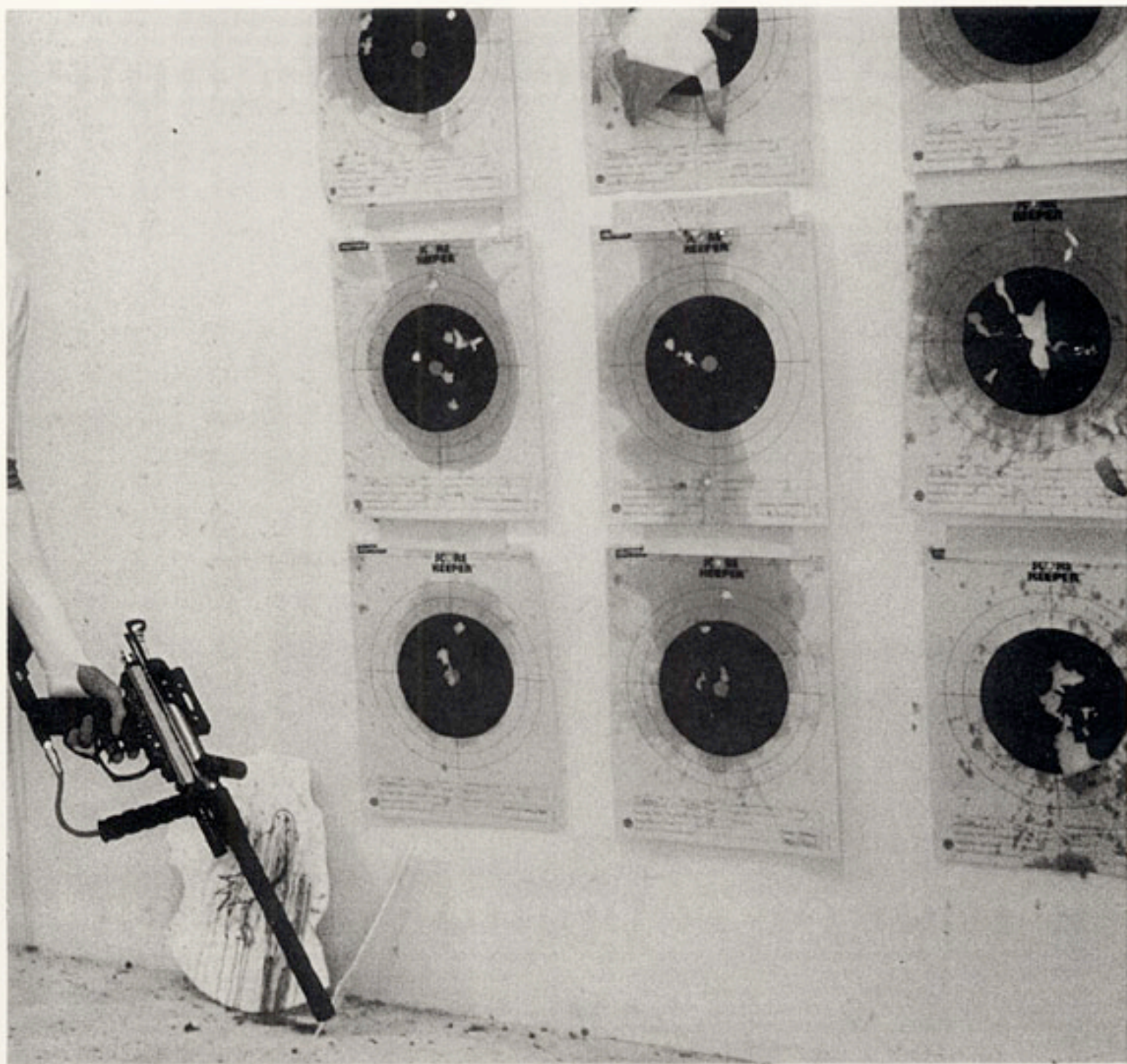
M. Parravicini and B. Mori: **What is the relationship of the body in your work?**

Michelle Handelmann: The body is the point of impact. I am working in the artistic tradition of feminist body artists like Hannah Wilke, Valie Export and Carolee Schneemann who use their bodies not just as makers of the work, but as agents of the work. It conveys the agency of desire, and desire is the core of all my work. The body can become a tool of rebellion as well. I'm interested in that space between subject and object where the fragment implies the who-

le; violence as a force of pure vigorous intensity that transforms matter from one state to another. The body, a living machine, contains a built-in mechanism for involuntary adaptability; proving the functionality of form, however imperfect the wiring of human intelligence.

What about fetishism? Do you see your relationship to objects and performance as fetishistic?

Of course. Because I'm obsessed with obsession. As I understand it, the word



fetish means to imbue an object with a magical feeling, almost maniacal in intention - an object of abnormal passion. Without sounding insane, I find certain objects talk to me. They tempt me, thrill me. They are built from a historical language that's almost pre-lingual. I feel I work with icons, and so by working with the iconic, one can bring up a host of meaning just by allowing their breadth of content to resonate. My left side of my brain tells me there is no spirit in these objects - but it also knows that my obsession with them is

very, very real. Like my giant needles, I love them, I caress them, lick them. I just really want to curl up and sleep with them. (laughs)

Your work is obviously strongly feminist, yet your use of color and material is very feminine. How do you see extreme femininity working within feminist discourse?

Subversion is the key. To take that which is thought passive and make it aggressive, make it confrontational. With this latest body of work I wanted to

make something... images... so pretty that it hurt just to look at them. To lose oneself in beauty is to lose one's self, and losing one's self is a dangerous proposition. If only for a moment of diving into the void. Without ego there is no such thing as the feminine. All of my work centers around the attraction/repulsion principle, so while the materials I work with are sensual, their hypersensuality borders on the grotesque. It's kind of like a joke I play on the viewers to lure them in with feminine wiles, then sucker punch them.

Who are your influences?

Poetry has always been my starting point, Pasolini, Baudelaire, Artaud. Other influences are the horror classics Frankenstein and Dracula; the films of Hitchcock, Argento, Kubrick; Sexy Sci-fi like "Barbarella" and "Flash Gordon";

"Sexual Techniques in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" at all?

Synthetic connection to the organic... very astute of you to make connections between my first film "Sexual Techniques in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" to the latest "Cannibal Garden" Series. Whether it be through speed, sound or digital animation I'm trying to combine mechanical, digital, synthesized versions of organic movements and reality-based representations. Ever so slightly though, so while the viewer may subconsciously perceive the anomaly, they may not consciously be able to name it. This allows them to choose their own entry point for meaning. Hermaphroditism as I see it is a metaphor for the whole. Consumption/ regurgitation, attraction/repulsion, male/female, mirrored images, these are all manifestations of the whole. I also expand the defi-

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John Frankenheimer's, "The Manchurian Candidate" which combined political cynicism with the fashionable ESP experimentation of the 60s, Irving Klaw, go-go dancers, Dada and Zen. I think most artists co-exist with cultural movements as a reactor/mediator. As Wickie Stamps told me when I was interviewing her for my documentary "BloodSisters", "You're here because you want to find out something. When you've found that out, you're gone, you'll go on to the next thing." My interests are so varied that I've yet to find a group so specifically defined that gives me fulfillment. I've always been wary of aligning myself too closely with any one movement because history will trap you there forever. And my biggest fear is loss of creative and intellectual freedom. Tell us about the "Cannibal Garden" series and it's relationship to the hermaphroditic? Could you comment on the motif of consumption/ingestion in terms of fetishized objects and hermaphroditism? When you take in and release, the polarity seems as androgynous/symbiotic as your flowers. Does this relate to your impetus for creating your first experimental film

of hermaphrodite to mean that which is sexually self-gratifying. And in my work this obsessional desire for physical gratification plays itself out in a closed hermaphroditic environment where I am both subject and object... to take in so much that you have no choice but to grow to accommodate it. To quote William Blake, "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough." Here's a good story: my boyfriend and I were making love one night and we found ourselves in such a position that the angle of his penis inside me created this illusion which felt like it was attached to me and I was fucking him! It was so bizarre! We both felt it. It was physical, psychological, this complete gender flip which had nothing to do with anything as obvious as role playing. I would like my work to have that effect. To flip the switch. To suspend belief in all that is readily known. I don't think I'm there yet, but I keep trying. I read that your work is personal and meant to push your own boundaries. There seems to be an immediate social context, in addition to the Visceral Feminism. With "The Torture Series", bondage is a metaphor for

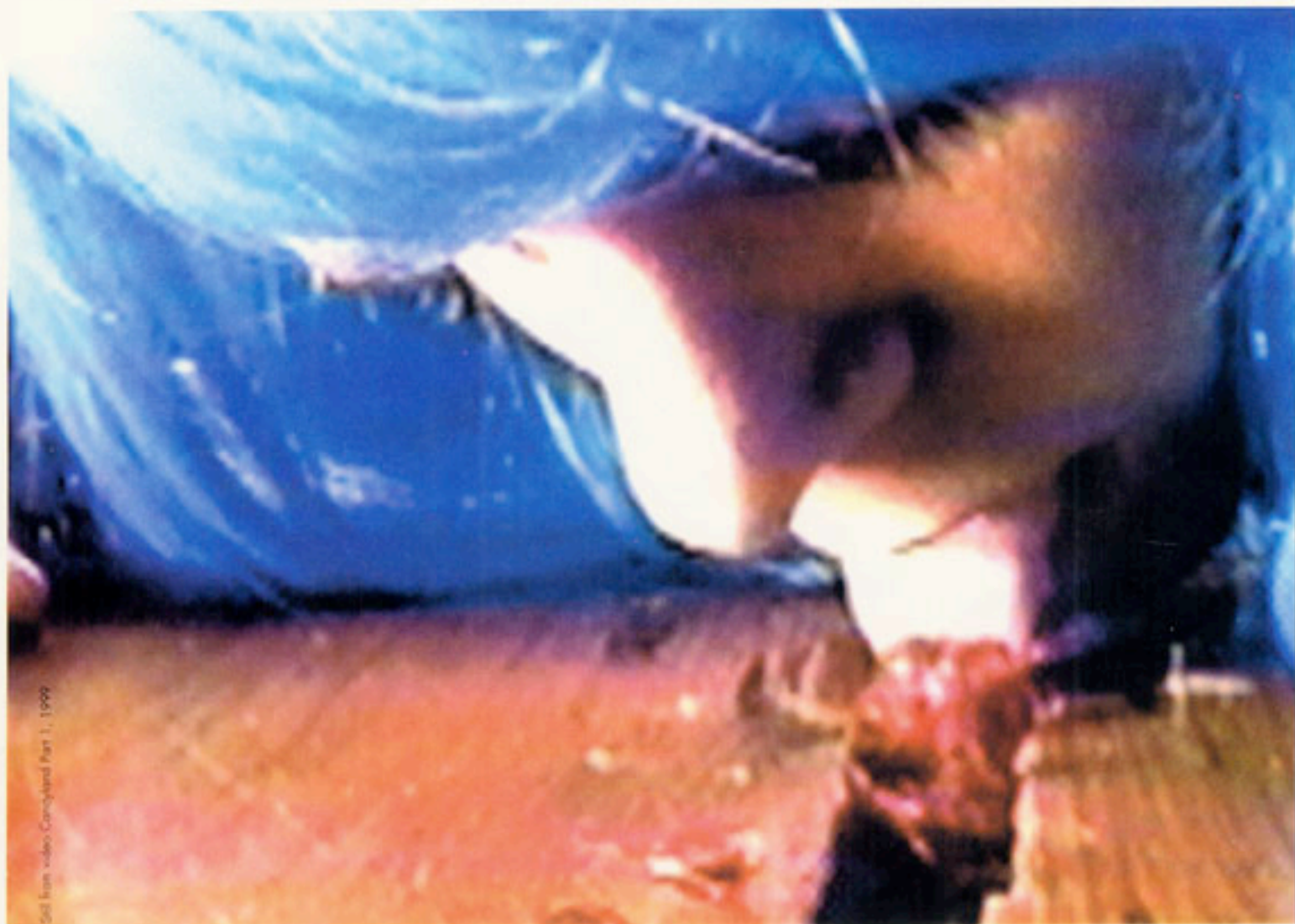
the objectification of women and in *"BloodSisters"*, you speak of intentionally giving S/M dykes a voice. Also, in *"I.C.U."*, you speak directly into the camera confronting the audience. Then again, other pieces are notably quiet, like the spewing of feathers, after choking on them. Do these actions grow from the same impulse?

I've always loved those moments where there's a break in the diegesis. (laughs) Diegesis... can you tell I teach film. You know those times when the character breaks the fourth wall. Like in Spike Lee's *"She's Got a Way"*, or Dorothy Arzner's *"Dance, Girl Dance"*. It's an attack on the medium... an attack on the rules of the medium. Everyone should challenge their medium because it forces the viewers to challenge themselves in how they process and absorb information. It's cinematic rebellion. These two approaches I use ...the loud and brash vs. the silent or quiet, to me are again, two side of the same coin. Silence can be as deafening as Chaos when it pushes you up against a wall inside yourself, forcing you to sink or swim... and neither give an easy nar-

it was all very organic with everything being in constant flux, dependent on the needs of a project and the message of a medium... as it still is. The painter Ed Ruscha once said, "I'm more interested in the end result than the process." And I would have to agree with that. I get an idea, an image and then try to find the most conclusive way to efficiently execute it. It doesn't matter to me that sometimes I'll hire others to do part of the work beyond my skill level. The medium is one ingredient to the content, imagery is another. Anything that's meant for final video output will definitely be simultaneously photographed, but something that's meant for photographic output may not necessarily be videotaped. It's all determined by final output.

How do you prepare for your uber-performances, after the conceptual work, do you improvise or rehearse?

I usually start with a mood, then work on sketches and the costumes. I'll videotape myself in action and watch it for clues on how to hold my body, what's working visually and what isn't, and just to generally see what's coming across.



rative which placates the viewer into passive mediocrity... I want viewers to be shaken in some way, above all, to question.

There is a lot of humor in your work. Do you use it as an ironic technique or do you wish to get your message across in a different way?

I love to laugh. It's the cure for all ills. And I love making people laugh. It is the great equalizer. I use humor to make fun of myself, to make fun of human frailty and just to remind everyone not to take themselves so seriously. It's more about the shadow side of glamour and the ability to laugh at one's self. The ironic element of my work comes from looking at myself, using myself as a sacrificial fool, holding a mirror up to the artist and her actions and illuminating the irony between the "historical significance and seriousness" of art and the goofy things one does to make it. I mean, when I catch an image of myself half-naked, crawling on all fours and drooling like a dog— that's funny!

Did your passion for film, photography, and performance develop simultaneously/organically or separately? And why do you choose to work in so many different medium?

First it was photography, which led to performance, which led to film. I'd say

There will be an outline, one or two walk-through rehearsals, but after that it's all live improvisation dictated by the moment. I love the fall into the abyss! And I tend to feed off of the audiences energy to determine the intensity of my actions. Of course for weeks before a show, all that runs through my mind, 24/7, is the performance. I walk through it over and over in my mind. Performance anxiety, paranoia... I usually am my own producer so it takes constant mindfulness just to make sure all the material requirements are in place.

Can you talk about other forthcoming projects?

I'm working on the *"The Adventures of Lucky M."* which is a series of Super Action Anti-Heroine performances. "AIM" the paintball gun picnic shoot-out at The Aldrich Museum was her first appearance. She's like a cartoon without a book, a deadly assassin who laughs at her own jokes... part hyperfantasy character, part bumbling human. Next she hits drag car racing with a live feed from her car to a website where people can interact with an obstacle course that feeds back to her screen. I call her Lucky M because when I see all the shit taking people down, all in all I must say, I feel pretty lucky... lucky to know how to make my own luck! :)