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# WHO IS THAT WOMAN BEHIND THE CURTAIN?

## An American Performance Artist in Eastern Germany

by Therese Grisham



I first met Ohio-born Janet Grau in Dresden in 1999. I was teaching film studies as a guest professor at the university there and she sat in on some of my courses. Perhaps because of her clear seriousness and engagement with the material, and perhaps because we are both Americans who share an interest in women's art, we began to see each other outside of class. We exchanged experimental films by women filmmakers—from Maya Deren to Ulrike Ottinger.

As I got to know Grau, I asked what led her to Dresden. After all, Dresden, a city of former East Germany, is still remote to most Americans. She told me she moved there to be with her Eastern German partner whom she had met in the United States while he was an exchange student.

During our talks, which usually took place at a cafe near the university where we had long lunches, Grau spoke about her own art and I watched some of the videos she had made. I found them fascinating for their fragmented, sometimes repetitive narrative sequences. I was equally impressed with her use of impro-

visation; her concern with women's experiences allowed the women appearing in her videos to shape their own material with little direction from Grau. Most surprising, though, is that Grau still considers herself a beginner as a video artist. First and foremost, she considers herself a performance artist.

Grau began her performance work in between her undergraduate work in ceramics, painting and photography at the Cleveland Institute of Art and graduate studies in fine art at Ohio State University in Columbus (she received her MFA in 1995). While she made a name for herself as a ceramicist, Grau felt constrained by two major elements: first, she, by definition of her medium, had to distill an object from her materials; second, those objects, compromised by the requirements of the medium, such as kiln size, were always in some way attractive and ended up as parts of buyers' collections. Grau's emerging vision of what she wanted her art to be finally forced her to give up ceramic sculpture, except to make functional objects for her own use.

Instead, Grau took off in a totally dif-

ferent direction: video, dance, and performance art. These diverse areas have served her well, since, as Grau says, performance art "can be seen as the ultimate multi-media, or 'inter-medial' art form. It is an experimental laboratory for artists to challenge the boundaries between disciplines, to examine contemporary viewpoints on such issues as the body, gender, or multiculturalism, to break the barriers separating art and life, private and public, custom and taboo."

In Grau's case, her constant preoccupation, even while making ceramic sculpture, was and is "a larger field centered on female experience, often about the feminine body." She explains that other elements are intimately connected to issues of the female body, as well: "Audience involvement (often as an extension of the concept), and a relationship to time that may not always be comfortable or entertaining to the audience but which is necessary to allow the process of perception to unfold and develop." Grau has by no means exhausted her exploration of these fields, and for this reason, more than any other,



she created and performed *miss perception* in Dresden.

Advised by many Dresdener friends and artists not to do a performance piece—as one artist said, “Dresdeners will not know what to make of it”—Grau was not deterred by hypothetical cultural differences. She went ahead with her new piece as part of the group show called “Licht” (Light). *Miss perception* was performed on the show’s opening night in December 1999. Amid the other works in “Licht,” all of which were sculptures, the performance took place in the dark, chilly underground halls of a 16th-century fortress called Kasematten near the Elbe River. *Miss perception* used light and shadow, space and time, projections in silhouette of Grau’s body, and photography—all instruments for visual perception and ultimately for apperception of the female object of desire.

Drawing from many, mostly mass-cultural sources (a pin-up girl and a Hollywood movie Hindu priestess, for example), Grau posed as various popular female archetypes (or stereotypical female objects of the Gaze). She wore a wig, padded bra and girdle, projecting these silhouettes from behind and onto a long white curtain covering the arched balcony windows above a large courtyard, the first site of the performance.

As the performance began, the room darkened and blue light was trained on the balcony. From behind the curtain, at irregular intervals, a flash of white light accompanied by the click and whir of a Polaroid camera made these silhouettes visible, distorted by the folds of the curtains and the placement of the light. The audience stood below, blocked from entrance to the courtyard proper by a railing. Red and white tape cordoned off a stainless steel table reminiscent of an

**Opposite:** Grau’s self-portrait Polaroid.

**Above:** Grau behind the curtain during the performance of *miss perception*.

autopsy slab or laboratory table. Two long clotheslines affixed to pulleys stretched diagonally down from the balcony to a point just above the table. Says Grau, “These lines effectively described and inscribed the space between the performer and the audience—the space where light would travel, bringing the image of the (desired) object into view.”

After each flash-image, Grau attached a Polaroid photograph to the clothesline with paper clips and sent it beyond the curtained space slowly down to the not-yet-public space, where it dropped unceremoniously onto the table. These photographs had been prepared before the performance, and while they were all Polaroids of parts of Grau’s own naked

body, many were shot in such extreme close-up that they could not be recognized as such, or were different versions of the same body parts, such as repeated images of Grau’s feet shot from various distances and angles. Many had the effect of impossible, even macabre skin tones. “In this way,” Grau explains, “the body (the female performer) was presented not as a comprehensible whole, but rather as a collection of fragments, of puzzling and/or disconcerting peculiarities.”

As the Polaroids made their way down to the audience—the sequence of events during this part of the performance continued until about 70 photographs reached the table below, an







**Above:** Audience members in Dresden sift through the Polaroids as part of Grau's performance art piece *miss perception*.

uncomfortably long time for some—small spotlights illuminated the clotheslines and the chain of images, heightening the audience's anticipation of the images to be received.

When all the photographs had finally reached their destination, a lamp above the table and a blue light beneath it focused attention on the second site of the performance. This second space remained unapproachable, the collection of seemingly disassembled images lying on the table removed from the audience. An assistant placed bottles of wine, goblets, and breadsticks on the table near the photographs, an arrangement resembling the Last Supper. The assistant cut the tape and left the area; it was an "official" invitation to enter the space.

Grau had speculated that, without instructions, some audience members

might experience this moment as the end of the performance, while others might recognize it as an unspoken invitation to approach the table and receive, perceive, as well as touch the "body" of images. As Grau says, this part of the work could be understood as "a continuation of the performance without the live performer, the viewers' exploration of the realm of possibility between passively watching and waiting and actively participating, becoming co-performers."

What was the audience's reaction to this new opening? Some left, perhaps assuming the performance was over; others stood waiting until someone else got up the courage to approach the table. Two young women, strangers to each other, finally collaborated to sort through and arrange the photographs. Others followed the example of a third woman who took a glass of wine from the table and retreated. In these and other ways, the viewers defined their roles in the performance. Slowly, more spectators gathered around the table, some eating or drinking as they watched others trying to discover the whole among the fragments.

Grau says, "In order for the (desired) object to be truly received and perceived, the various reflected and projected images need to be assembled and processed by the 'collective brain' of the audience. This can be an unpredictable and problematic process—discrepancies and irreconcilable details abound, such as the friction between the caricaturized/idealized female body represented by the shadow play and the sometimes disturbingly 'real' body seen in the Polaroids. Just as unpredictable was the response of the audience to the second part of the performance. The potential for misperception is as great as the potential for apperception, and both are simply part of the process of perception itself."

At the end of the performance, Grau appeared in a striped bathrobe, blonde wig, horn-rimmed glasses, and combat boots—another "opening"—this time to speak spontaneously with interested audience members. When I asked Grau if she noticed any differences between the audience's reception/perception of her performance in Dresden and her perfor-

mances in the United States, she said that she could make no real generalizations. Grau was "very pleased that people came to the table, looked at the photos, drank wine, communicated with each other, and tried to 'puzzle' a body together from all the fragments. They were people I didn't know. This surprised me—I had thought that my friends would know to start, would have less fear."

The only real difference, Grau says, was that even though her audience was an "art-going" audience, "it seemed as if it took much longer than it would have taken a comparable American audience to respond to the implicit suggestion to approach the table. To me, it seemed an eternity before the first people broke the silent barrier and followed their curiosity. To the Germans I know (who have spoken to me about it), it happened 'considerably fast.'"

*Miss perception* later generated much discussion among its public, resulting in an invitation to Grau to lecture on her performance at Dresden's university and an offer for her to teach a course in performance art theory. Grau has clearly become successful in territory far from home. Just as clearly, time—as an element of the perception of, and participation in, a piece such as *miss perception*—is not an absolute, but is also a matter of individual as well as cultural perspective.

Janet Grau, from behind her curtain—unlike the Wizard of Oz who was a side-show performer, a charlatan trying to disguise the instruments for perception in order to control his subjects from behind his curtain—exposed the apparatus and products of the perception of the female body for her audience's delectation. Dresden, while a long way from "home" for Grau and me, is also far from the false magic of Oz.

*Therese Grisham was a Fulbright professor and guest professor in American literature and film studies at the Technical University of Dresden from 1996-1999. She currently lives in Verona, Italy, and will be teaching film and literature at the University of Maryland in Vicenza. Grisham has published in C, Art Criticism, and Screen, among other journals.*