

LIP



1930



## DON'T BELIEVE I'M AN AMAZON

Ulrike Rosenbach talking with Elizabeth Gower, Margaret Rose and Janine Burke Transcribed by Margaret Rose

J.B.: *Ulrike, in 1972 you began making video. Was that a direct outcome of your involvement with the women's movement or did the two things, the form of your work and its content, develop quite separately?*

U.R.: I don't think that it necessarily had anything to do with the women's movement. I had already become conscious of my situation as a woman in 1969 when I was working on sculpture, making objects. At that time my main concern was to find out what women had done in culture so I read a lot. The feminist literature was fine but I could find very little about women and what they had done in the bourgeois arts so I became interested in crafts and found costumes women had made. One of my early projects done in 1969 was related to hoods (Hauben). It's called "Hauben für eine verheiratete Frau" ("Hoods for a married woman").

I sewed all these different hoods women had made for themselves, different shapes, even male and female shapes. I also researched costume and medieval and Renaissance hairdressing and hoods.

Lucy Lippard has written about this. She took photographs I had taken of myself in these different hoods in my kitchen, cooking and eating, and she showed these in one of the first women's shows in America.

E.G.: *So the objects that you made at this time were incorporated in performance, the performance of eating and cooking?*

U.R.: Yes, but I didn't want them to remain objects

any longer. I wanted them to relate much more to my body. The photographs were supposed to indicate that but I wasn't really content with them because males were taking the pictures and it became like modelling. That's why I was so happy with the use of video-tape as then I could manage to do the photographing myself, and I could move where the photograph only showed one gesture.

M.R.: *It struck me that when Lucy Lippard speaks of the repetitious character of your use of video she overlooks the dialectic of "oppositions", of movement and repetition, progress and recurrence created by your use of video. This comments on some of the oppositions or "contradictions" involved in the roles played by women. One example I am thinking of is that of the opposition madonna and amazon, passivity and activity, which is brought out in your performance "Don't believe I'm an Amazon". (Biennale des Jeunes, Paris, 1975).*

*Was the video also preferable because it enables you to develop a theme or tell a story? You mentioned previously that you were able to find more about women in literature than in art. Is video then better able to cope with the sort of information you've found in literature?*

U.R.: That's right. Also in Germany there has always been more interest taken in literature than in the visual arts.

J.B.: *So you were getting your information not from other women artists or from a sense of contemporary women's culture but from looking back into history through research?*

- U.R.: That's how it was. I did have contact with other women artists like Valie Export in Vienna. That was very important to me as it took me out of a certain isolation, the isolation of my own ideas.
- J.B.: *Another aspect of your work that is interesting is that of a woman artist using technology in the way that you have. Women, traditionally have been supposed to be unable to deal with machines or equipment while you have incorporated technology into your own work in a very positive way. Also because the conceptual basis is so strong through feminism that you never let the technology overwhelm the ideas and images, you use the technology without letting it use you.*
- U.R.: Well, that's mainly a danger for men because they relate to technology and are in danger of being taken over by it. We can use it another way because we approach it from another point of view. But I think it is important as we have to conquer (überwinden) this barrier put around us which tells us not to get involved in technology. We should be studying its effects on our society.
- M.R.: *In the 1890's women also had to conquer prejudice in being allowed to join such things as the metal classes in advanced art schools.*
- U.R.: Yes, the first wave of the women's movement was into that.
- E.G.: *It was interesting last night at the Ewing Gallery when you had shown yourself as an amazon shooting arrows into the madonna that someone asked if you had to practice much. Apparently the sight of a woman using a bow and arrow was hard for some to accept.*
- U.R.: Well, it's sort of out of fashion to shoot a bow and arrow but when I went to a club to learn there were lots of women doing it. Though they did tell me that I was too slight and didn't have the strength to manage the big bow. They took it from the athletic point of view which was quite interesting — and frustrating.
- J.B.: *Can you tell us about that piece, "Don't believe I'm an Amazon", the images you used and why you decided to use them?*
- U.R.: I was working on the idea of female roles and images and the two I picked out were the madonna (which I had previously worked on) and the amazon so the passive and active extremes in the role attributed to women were represented.
- I felt that in my education and life I had been encouraged to follow in the role of making oneself beautiful, of following the type of the Virgin, her jeunesse and beauty. But I wanted to be more aggressive than this — an amazon.
- People don't take the fighting woman seriously. That is why I tried to confront those two images, and tried to shoot one away with the other.
- J.B.: *I found one of the images in that work both disturbing and very beautiful. When you shoot the arrow into the "target" of the Madonna head, the arrows register on the video screen as piercing your own face as well. The expression on your face was overlaid by that of the Virgin.*
- It was almost a masochistic image.*
- U.R.: Because I feel that I have been educated in the madonna role, I do say when editing the tape that I am shooting into myself at the same time as I shoot into the face of the madonna because I want to change that passive part of me into something stronger and more active. I want to become more individual and not just remain a projection of a fictional image.
- M.R.: *Is this also why the live performance is an important aspect of your work? That is, it prevents you being reduced to another artistic image.*
- U.R.: That's true. The video-tape is something quite different.
- M.R.: *I thought that the simultaneous use of slides in the showing of your videos was an effective way of recalling the original performance as of the work.*
- U.R.: It's difficult, however, as the video must also exist on its own as a reproduction of the performance.
- M.R.: *On another tape you take Botticelli's Birth of Venus and show yourself merging with it, sometimes blocking it out, while in the amazon tape you set out to destroy those images. Is this another side of the story about the relationship of woman to her traditional archetypes or prototypes you've described in "Don't believe I'm an Amazon"? You show that we have to try to understand these images through identifying with them before separating from them.*
- U.R.: I've had many discussions on this and some negative reactions from feminists (for example, to my "Madonna of the Flowers"), saying we don't need this shit anymore. They wanted to start anew without these old images, but I wanted to explore and understand them first. I don't want to be just destructive, but to be positive, too.
- "Reflections on the Birth of Venus" where I use the Botticelli painting was done in 1976/77 on the West Coast of America where I was teaching and had begun working with the problem of beauty; the cosmetic image of women.
- E.G.: *With the video-tape you showed several slides relating to the use of images today (Venus bras and other advertising images). Are these also shown at the actual performance?*
- U.R.: I had a one-woman show that was very big and I could show everything connected with the performance and the video, so I included the slides too. But for me, performance is like a "kernstück", the central piece of the work.
- E.G.: *It's just that I found that the slides you showed of the distortion of the Venus image, of how it has been reduced to a sex image today, as a very important part of the work.*
- U.R.: I was very aggressive about this because I liked the stories about Venus and believed her to be a great goddess image. I objected to the cynical reduction of her in modern advertising to a sex object. Very often people laugh at this piece and at the Sydney Biennale I saw several men laughing. And it is just because they cannot understand it, it's not part of their consciousness. And that's very sad. That's why I want to



Ulrike Rosenbach. Don't believe I'm an Amazon. Biennale des Jeunes, Paris, 1975  
 Ulrike Rosenbach stands bow and arrow in hand aiming at the Madonna image. To her left is the video monitor.

restore some of the importance to that image.

E.G.: *How do men relate to your work? Do you get much response?*

U.R.: It depends. You see, I'm doing three different things at once, performance, video and feminist art which is altogether quite new. So there are a lot of men who relate to the video-tapes and to the performance in terms of their quality. But I think if there was more competition in the field of video and performance in Europe I wouldn't get all the publicity that I'm getting right now because they really don't like the other aspect of my work; they try to forget about it. But I have to point it out and that's why I stick to the label "feminist art". I don't like it very much but I regard it as a necessary political statement.

I first used it on my work in the Biennale des Jeunes in Paris because I saw that people wanted to forget about the context of my work; they only wanted to relate to the technical innovations and I hated the idea that I wouldn't be taken seriously.

J.B.: *They wanted to see avant-garde art without knowing anything about its politics.*

U.R.: Yes, and they can manipulate anything unless you make your political statement really clear which isn't always easy in art work.

M.R.: *Is this also a difficulty of using non-representational language for political statement in art or finding a new language for women's art?*

U.R.: It is hard to find a new language because men have absorbed everything even that made by women. They have absorbed our aesthetics and the contexts and they have put it all out as their own, as male. This is what I find so important in the work of Lucy Lippard that she tried to settle on a specific aesthetic, the notion of feminine sensibility.

J.B.: *The research that you've done on female images is fairly specific, isn't it? For example, you have done a lot of research on goddesses like Venus. I wonder if you could talk about the images you chose for the performance you did at the National Gallery of Victoria, about the relationship you tried to set up between yourself and the images?*

U.R.: I chose seventy or so photographs of women from different cultures and I set them up in a row to reflect a development from women in the so-called "primitive" cultures to the sophisticated woman of modern culture. This development is shown not by their work but by their costumes and dress which signify their position in society. The medals around the neck of the Arabian woman signifies the price paid for her in marriage.

And when I was tying myself in the video cable as I recorded the women with the camera, rolling from one end of the row of photos to the other I was showing myself being "tied to" the image of contemporary woman and released on the other side where the primitive woman is. That's important because I feel we haven't really increased our freedom very much.

M.R.: *Another thing that came across was that you were also belying John Berger's statement in "Ways of Seeing" that women have primarily been objects to be seen by also playing the role of the "see-er", with the camera, while relating to the passive photographs of women before you in a contrastingly active way. So there is a dialectic of action and passivity, seeing and being seen.*

U.R.: Yes, I liked that idea very much but there is still the crucial aspect of the performance, that you are using yourself all the time to make performance, to produce art from yourself. And



Ulrike Rosenbach. Don't believe I'm an Amazon, Biennale des Jeunes, Paris, 1975.

this a kind of development beyond the reflection of our consciousness which shows us how we ourselves have to construct our positions in society. It makes me very sad that we still have this problem and it also makes it difficult to develop a new point of view.

M.R.: *In many ways the video does set up new points of view. In painting it is perhaps less easy to show yourself "seeing" as it is to show woman as an object of others' sight. And to say that women are only there to be seen is to perpetrate a myth about women which reduces them to this role. But when we see you with the camera recording these women which is to see these images turned on their heads as you roll over then we destroy or counter that myth.*

U.R.: Yes, and that is what I call feminist art. It is a critique of art, making yourself critically conscious of your role is also a part of a feminist stand-point. I still call my art by this name.

J.B.: *You also run classes with women in Cologne. How does this relate to your position as a feminist artist?*

U.R.: I began the classes two and a half years ago when I came back from America because I worked with a lovely group of women in Los Angeles and I came back to my German isolation. I announced the commencement of classes and called it the School of Feminist Creativity (Schule der kreativen Feminismus). People were very upset by this.

I thought at first that artists would show up but they didn't. Women came who, in some cases, weren't even feminists (well, the feminists were into art then, that came later in Germany). They were women who just wanted to escape from their family situations, to do something creative themselves. I got about eighteen and took fifteen for the first class. I divided the programme into three sections and did a semest-

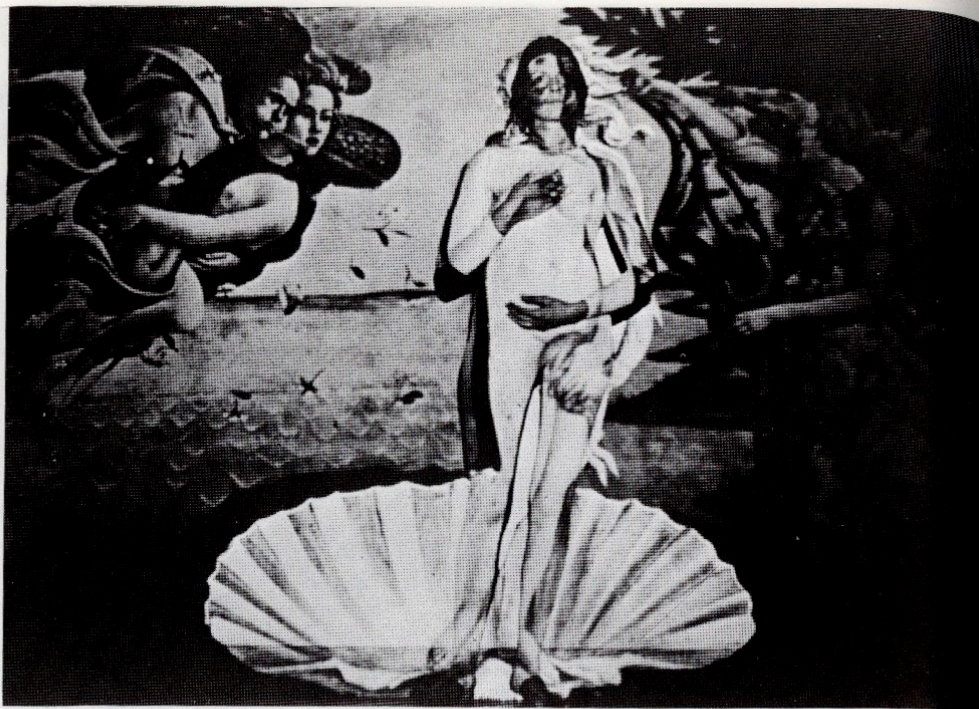
er of about four months on theory of feminism and creative practice. I showed slides on the culture of women, on female art work and then they would have to do some practical work that was based on what they had learnt about themselves through consciousness raising and through feminist theory. They really only have time for one piece of practical work per semester as they have different professions or are housewives.

I know I could run a whole school but I don't really want to do that right now as I know it would take all the energy I have, and it would also have to be financed.

Now together with the Feminist Book Store in Cologne we have founded a cultural centre. The bookstore is in the same building as a cafe and restaurant and downstairs in the basement I keep my classes going. I organize gallery showings, too, so that people will be aware of the activities of women.

I did a performance piece with several of my women students at the Palazzo Strozzi in Florence in 1977. It was difficult because they weren't used to doing things professionally and they were used to hiding away. For all these psychological reasons we had to work very hard.

We put together a piece on the culture of Florence and the female role in it. I chose several images of women from paintings in the Uffizi. My favourite one at that time was Caravaggio's Medusa which is painted on a shield, so I made five shields, one for each woman. There was a Medusa image on the front and a silvery moon on the back. Then I chose five Venus images out of those paintings I didn't like, the sex object ones by Tintoretto, Titian and so on. We made a large, circular carpet of salt on the floor, at least a ton! And we drew a pentagram that gave us the form and the symbolism of the concept.



Ulrike Rosenbach, *Reflections on the Birth of Venus*, Amsterdam, 1976. Performance.

The year before Rune Miels and I did a pentagram project and she discovered that the number five is the number of Venus and in the Asiatic tradition the human body is symbolized by the pentagram and that is why we used the number five in Florence.

On the crossings of the pentagram we placed bowls of hot coals and in front of them were positioned the images of the Venuses. On the walls we showed slides of a series of Botticelli's paintings about a woman being hunted — it is actually from a story from Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The Boccaccio story was read aloud to provide a back-drop for the piece and also to measure its length.

We worked out a kind of choreography using again the number five choosing gestures of passivity and activity. The first position was lying on the floor and covering your head with the shield of the Medusa, and then we went through three more stages — defending the belly, using the shield as a halo, symbolizing spiritual power — building up to a very aggressive, battle-like position.

As we did this I burnt the Venus images in the bowls of coal.

The ideas behind the performance were related to Florence. The Piazza della Signoria, traditionally the centre of the city, was where they burnt witches during the Inquisition and it is close to the Palazzo Strozzi. The people there who viewed the performance understood its meaning.

M.R.: *Have you now turned away from working with archetypes of women?*

U.R.: I think I shouldn't do it too much. It's too dangerous.

I get lost in it, there are so many things to do that I could get lost in it and I would like to

do some work with our own concerns, with more contemporary images.

J.B.: *It's interesting to look at the women who have done body art. Carolee Schneeman's early pieces like "Meat Joy" (1964, New York) was done at a time when Alan Kaprow was organizing the first happenings. Her work and recent ones like "Up to and including her limits" (1976) are a great celebration of sexuality.*

U.R.: Hannah Wilke is using her body in a negative way because it is only sensational or spectacular.

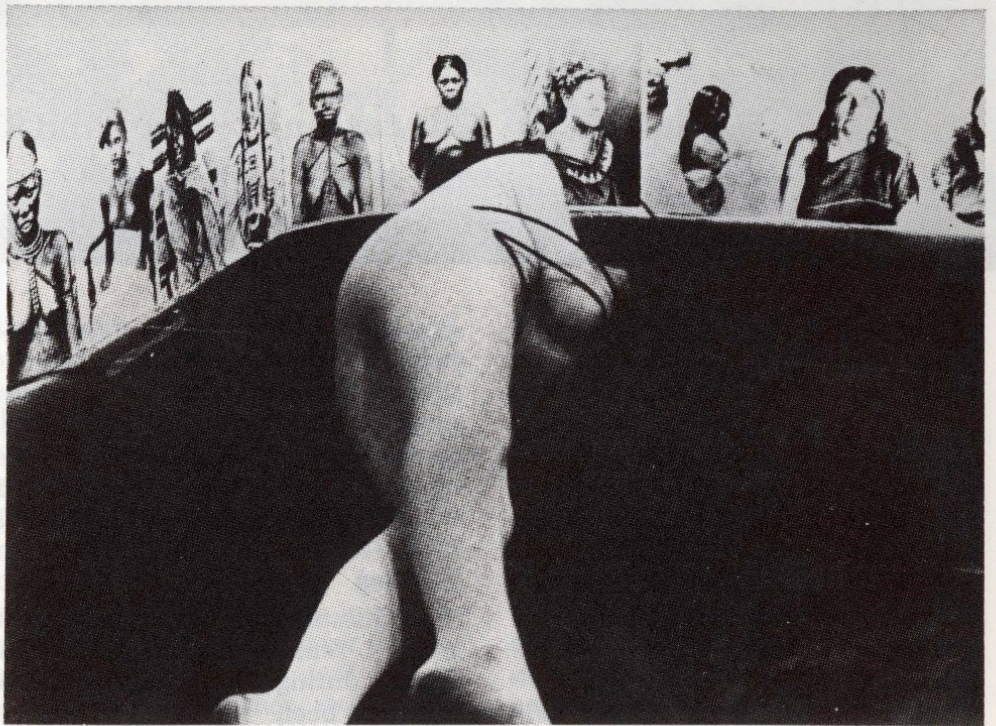
I try to hide my body away. I wear a neutral white leotard during the performance. The only other alternatives of hiding in a costume or going on nude which can be like doing a strip-tease; it's difficult for women to perform without getting lost in their costume.

I have, for example, worked in museums where I was told afterwards that the men in the audience were looking at me as a kind of sex-object. It's so perverse! I try to concentrate attention not on my body but on my ideas.

M.R.: *It struck me that one of the things that you do with video is literally to project your idea of yourself, and your idea of woman, but it's also you that you're projecting so that when you speak of your students not having reached that stage yet we're perhaps really speaking about a state of mind as much as about their professional status. That is, they haven't got to the stage of projecting themselves as independent women. To project themselves in their art, or to use a camera as a mode of projection, they must first be able to project an idea of themselves as independent people.*

U.R.: Yes, it's very hard. Men don't have this problem. But as a woman you're always type-cast, put in some role.

What you wear in a performance is a per-



Ulrike Rosenbach. *Women's Culture*, Performance done at Sidney Biennale, April, 1979 and at National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

sonal thing. For example, Marina Abramovic does it quite differently to me. Valie Export also does nude work; they all performed nude, the first performance artists.

J.B.: *On the subject of body art, it is apparent that while some men in the 1960's were using their bodies to inflict pain, relatively few women have involved themselves in that. Gina Pane being one of the few who has actually caused herself pain.*

U.R.: Yes, Gina Pane also did "menstruation pieces". It must have been ten or twelve years ago now. She exhibited twelve sanitary pads with menstrual blood on them, in frames in the gallery.

E.G.: *I've always wondered why women artists haven't dealt with periods in their work. In a way, it seems so obvious.*

U.R.: Perhaps it's still too deeply buried. I'm interested in this but my work is more conceptually based. I don't want to perform with blood running down my leg. Some American women like Suzanne Lacey have done work on women as victims.

J.B.: *And there are artists like Ana Mendieta who has done rape pieces where she covers herself with a bloodied sheet to be "discovered" in the gallery or in the landscape. She has used her body to make a horrifying statement about the way women are used as victims.*

U.R.: I can't perform that way. I suppose I find that kind of pain too disgusting.

J.B.: *Well, that's interesting because when I was watching your performance at the National Gallery, I wondered how you felt, rolling up and down for thirty minutes, how painful it was for the body?*

U.R.: Yes, of course, my body feels pain but that's not the main point or part of the performance.

What I would really like to talk about now is the relationship between women artists exhibiting in the art world and the development of feminist culture — these two things haven't always related positively to each other.

What we have to do to win power is to make a statement which says the art world is shit and that our culture has developed in our own consciousness, in the consciousness of every woman doing creative work, and that it doesn't have to be shown in a fucking gallery or museum. I may have some personal power but the point is that it's very hard for women in our society to be recognized as creative *and* as individuals who could have some political responsibility in the whole society. This has to be brought about by a common movement and this is what interests me.

J.B.: *There is the whole problem of women being accepted as artists but have you found another problem here because of the kind of work you do — performance and video — that it hasn't been taken as seriously as painting or sculpture? Or isn't that an issue in Germany?*

U.R.: I haven't found it to be because I think that women painters also have a hard time being taken seriously, it's hard for women to get out of the category of the "average" and be respected.

E.G.: *It could be in a sense, easier for the woman performance artist, as performance is still relatively new. It hasn't been typecast yet.*

U.R.: Yes, that's true. Video has been good for me because there is really nothing to compare it with. As for the content of my work, well, it is important to discover a different aesthetic. There are so many women painting the same kind of stuff as the men, and this must change. For me it is a feminist issue.

