

## IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

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"Truffaut once famously said that cinema was pointing a camera at a beautiful woman. If this is the case then Monika Oechsler captured moments and microscopic scenarios as played out in Johari's Window relentlessly unpicks the nature of our understanding as to who that woman might be.

If we know anything about the illusion of cinema it is, what you see, is definitely not what you get. This adage is taken to new heights in the work of Monika Oechsler. In Johari's Window her most recent creation we have multi-screen work in which a group of seven women seated around a poker table in a cavernous, deserted casino play cards. There are no hints as to who these women are or where they come from. As we watch it becomes evident that, these are females playing at being themselves. We are observing actresses working to outwardly represent themselves to the mirror of the camera, and the image at least is that of women as women at play.

Like so much of Oechsler work you the spectator have to take an active role to see beyond the surface representation. In so doing he/she is rewarded with clues that reflect on the dynamics of the games we play. In Johari's Window as in her other work, like High Anxieties and High Achievers, what we see is the result of a process of group improvisation, where her performers are asked to deconstruct the fragile self and self presentation, in order that we the audience can reconstruct a sense of unity from the scattered fragments. Unlike conventional cinema, the reconstructive process is not about finding a linear narrative, but rather about unravelling the complexity involved in the very act of attributing meaning. In the case of Johari's Window the given clues are pointers towards the identity and motivation of the characters, which we are free to interpret as we see fit.

Crucial to how we read the game play in Johari's Window is it's installation. Four huge freestanding screens of wide screen format meet in the centre creating an X formation. On the four screens thus created, we see the images of seven women reacting to each play as the camera's rotating device moves the image around the screens capturing the progress of the game of poker. As spectators, our reading of these cinematic images, projected in a darkened space and larger than life, is continually fractured as we circumvent the work. As in life, the more we look the more we change our perception and understanding of what it is we think we see, in the act of looking. An ignored movement or a missed gaze the first time round seems to reveal more to us on repeated viewing.

Images of the seven actresses radiate out confronting and ignoring us at the same time, they are caught up with each other, in a circle of looks and reactions. Key to the work it self, is the even, steady and relentless rotating motion of the camera, which follows the rhythm of the game around the table, thus creating a heightened sense of the careful orchestration and choreography. The work was filmed with four cameras positioned at the centre of the table, and fixed to a specially constructed rotating device. What results is a cool and precise work that seduces and teases in equal measures, with the eye of the moving camera splicing the whole into bite sized glances. Nothing is ever fixed about what we are gazing at, one moment we think we know what is going on, and at another meaning seems out of reach. The camera confers an authoritative position on the women, yet inside the frame the atmosphere is one of uneasy confrontation amongst the female players. The revolving camera structures and dictates who we look at, we have no choice in the matter. Even when the circling camera fleetingly captures a lone male presence, the dealer is never fully shown, our focus remains solely on the women, and their interaction. Snatches of dialogue hint at a narrative, but the rhythm and pace of the camera compels us to travel round the piece, anxious not to miss a telling look or gesture.

Without being confusing Johari's Window points to the complex ways in which women identify with various roles they play in representation and in life. Equally so, the work implicates itself in our obsession with personal psychology, as we try to understand and learn about ourselves through the eyes of another, and our interpersonal interactions. The title Johari's Window is borrowed from a psycho-analytical model used in group therapy. The model divides the concept of self into four cells

based on, self knowledge, knowledge of self through feed back from the group, knowledge kept secret from others and hidden knowledge, i.e. sub-conscious knowledge of self. Like the participants in Fassbinder's truth game in his film Chinese Roulette, the women in Johari's Window engage with each other on the level of personal motivation, secrets and hidden desires. Thus they are like signs constantly signifying, but what? How precisely are we to read them, and what we see and hear? Is it all a game or is the game a foil for the bluff and counter bluff? Besides the gaze what else is at stake in our enjoyment of surveying these women being surveyed?

Cleverly, Oechsler's work signals cinematic narrative without giving in to it. We are challenged to fill in the blanks while we survey the seven women's faces and observe their actions. As we continue to look and listen dialogue emerges, sometimes hinting at a hidden conflict between the players. In one uncharacteristically "dynamic" section, one of the women gets indignant when she fails to notice that her time has run out for her to place her bet. This is an opportunity for other players to toss out down dead pan remarks about her lack of concentration or being in another world. A signal also in a sense to us, the viewers, that this a piece with both sound and vision, with more levels of meaning on offer to the careful viewer and listener. Gestures offer us another level of meaning. One of the players incessantly plays with a fan, another starts a slow clapping of hands, another still smiles a supercilious smile and yet another has a passive look on her face, but what if anything do any of these tell us about the women themselves, what is being consciously or unconsciously revealed?

Oechsler has picked the highly charged setting of a casino to play this out this scenario as a nod to the inspiration behind the piece, Fassbinder's Chinese Roulette. The domestic tension of Fassbinder's work is transferred to the casino, and instead of a constructed encounter out of hate, we have an encounter fixed on play and manipulation with no real clues as to the ultimate prize. Although play and role-play is significant feature of Oechsler's work, previous work has tended to be located in the world of pre-pubescent childhood and adolescence. In Johari's Window the play is less innocent, the women are mature and conscious about what is at stake, both in the roles they are playing and the game play itself, they are playing to win."

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