



REWIND | Artists' Video in the 70's & 80s

Notes on Doppelgänger by Dr Laura Leuzzi October 2012

Since 2005 the research project Rewind has been recovering the 70s and 80s British video art and has successfully brought back these experiences and the early video community to National and International attention. As the research assistant on *Rewind/Italia* - a research project following Rewind, I met many artists who had lost confidence in their early video works and in the medium in itself. The work of many early video artists has been marginalized for years and only recovered recently as the Seventies' video formats were soon abandoned, and had become obsolete, some videotapes were left in old cupboards, were forgotten or even got lost. Many videotapes are still to be re-discovered and the video work of women artists, in particular, has not yet been recovered completely.

This is maybe why a significant videotape such as *Doppelgänger* by Elaine Shemilt has only recently been recovered by Rewind: after more than thirty years of oblivion (it was showed only once and that was at the time of the exhibition concluding the residency, in which it was produced) it was never seen again until it was presented at the Rewind book launch at TATE Modern in London (25th Sept. 2012).

As soon as one approaches it, it is quite clear that, for its content and symbolical quality, its form and style, this videotape deserves a detailed analysis.

Starting from the title, the word *Doppelgänger* has its origin in the middle of 19th century from German (literally "double-goer") and means "an apparition or a double of a living person". It's so revealed the core of the video: the exploration of the identity, a key theme – it must be said - in many art works in those years and in many video art pieces of the same time as well. Identity as personality, as gender, as psychological entity, as body, as artist: this video appears like a seminal work in this sense.

The videotape begins with a close up of the face of the artist, her eyes face the camera directly, without hesitation, and later we see her approaching a mirror and take a sit in front of it, with her back to the camera, simply dressed in a denim overall and T-shirt.

From the reflection in the mirror we see her putting some make up on her face with very dry, precise gestures. During these actions different voices can be heard: they are records of some psychological analysis on schizophrenia, evoking again a double personality. And the use of multiple sound traces in itself creates an effect of multiple layers of the personality represented.

At some point, twice, this performance is interrupted by another image: it's showed the face of the artist, beautifully dressed, with her hair combed and her make up on. This frozen portrait begins slightly to move creating many doubles of her face.

Then the action goes back to what we could call the mirror set: and it's evident now how the make up that the artist has put on her skin has become too much. We can distinguish the borders of it on her forehead: her face has become a mask with an effect that it's similar to the theatre make up. At that point she drops the concealer and takes a dark drawing pen: and like on canvas, evoking the traditional image and position of the painter, and the use of mirror in self-portraits, she begins to draw on the mirror in front of her. From the eyebrow to the shadow of the nose, and later the lips and the oval of the face, the hair, the neck and shoulders, the artist shapes a sort of double of herself following the traces/borders of her real image reflected. Another mask in black and red (for the lips, that can be distinguished even in the b/w) is so created and it gets mingled to the reflected image of the artist.

So this situation evokes inevitably the myth of Narcissus: but the reflected image of the artist is twisted by its own hand, creating a phantasmatic double – the *doppelgänger* - that stands in front of her. Even the mirror in this case it's double: the material one on the scene and the electronic one given by the eye of the camera (as the artist looks into it at beginning of the video but also as the mirror evokes in some sense the monitor).

Furthermore this *doppelgänger* seems to be part of herself: she continues to work on its image moving her face and mimicking the gestures of when you put lipstick on with her lips, continuing to look at herself to the mirror like checking the result.

Again in the end of the performance other images of the body and the face of the artist with the overlapping of other body/face images which evoke these multifaceted personality, are showed.

And finally we get back to the mirror set and the artist has gone: the *doppelgänger* has taken her place.

It's clear from this brief analysis that *Doppelgänger* is not the mere record of a performance but it's a video art work in itself with its own autonomy which exploits the *medium* and its nature in a very distinguished way: video becomes a tool for introspection and expression/representation of the inner self, to build an intense image of the personal and public portrait. In fact, video as a time based medium allows the artist to show the genesis of that image, the process of its making and the gesture of the artist as part of it.

Furthermore, the continuous mix between the action of the drawing (mirror set) and the images of the artist (her face, naked body) creates a stratification of layers that open window in her inner life, in what relies under the image, under the surface.

It is also interesting to notice how this work is very close to some videotapes/films of female artist of the same period such as the Italian Federica Marangoni (*The box of life*, 1978), with which it shares the theme of the double, of the representation of the self/not self, and Sanja Ivekovic (*Make up-Make down*, 1978) from Zagreb, with it shares the use of the make up. The make up, not only refers to the social status of the woman, who is required by society to be beautiful, but it also evokes the possibility of self changing and self –shaping our own image.

In this sense we can discover a *fil rouge* that links some works by female artist and suggest the possibility to identify a peculiar use of video by woman artist.

As long as *Doppelgänger* has been only recently recovered, let's hope that more works by female artists will be soon recovered and re-evaluated in their importance.