

**Giovanna Zapperi (essay from the exhibition catalogue)**  
**Excess and Devotion: Rituals of Masculinity in the Films of Pauline Curnier Jardin**

In the spring of 2020, Italy was under one of Europe's strictest lockdowns as the country was struck particularly badly by the Covid-19 pandemic. During this period, Pauline Curnier Jardin was living in Rome as a fellow of the Académie de France at the Villa Medici, where she had arrived to conduct research for her forthcoming video, provisionally entitled *Sebastiano Blu*. Needless to say, the stay-at-home order and the subsequent limitations on professional activities and personal interactions put a stop to the artist's investigations, just as she was preparing to film the processions that were going to take place during Holy Week in April 2020. Like other aspects of everyday life, the sphere of religion was strongly affected by the pandemic: the spectacular image of a solitary Pope Francis on a rainy day in Rome's St. Peter's Square epitomizes the lockdown's consequences for Catholic rituals. The lockdown had a huge impact on the collective ceremonies that contribute in such an important way to cementing the sense of belonging to a community.

Curnier Jardin's most recent endeavours combine a number of themes found in the artist's previous projects: her interest in rituals and processions, the carnivalesque, the conflation of magic and religion, the camp, the queer, and the grotesque body, and, more generally, what Ana Teixeira Pinto defines as the artist's ongoing "inquiry into what qualifies as deviance – artistically, as well as politically".<sup>1</sup> The gendered body undeniably plays a crucial role in Curnier Jardin's practice, be it by means of video, installation, or performance. In her recent works focusing on religious rituals in southern European societies, the artist considers these celebrations as important moments of collective corporeal expression. The body therefore emerges as a contradictory site in which gender performativity and identification often exceed the normative frame provided by religion.

Her most recent projects, *Sebastiano Blu* and the installation *Fat to Ashes*, experiment with a visual language that combines ethnography and experimental cinema, while at the same time conveying the intimacy of a home movie through the use of a Super 8 camera. However, the artist's distinctive fusion of heterogeneous filmic and aesthetic codes can hardly be subsumed under the rubric of "experimental ethnography", coined by film scholar Catherine Russell to describe the interplay between ethnographic and avant-garde film in the age of video.<sup>2</sup> Rather, Curnier Jardin's emphasis on the body and, more specifically, on performance in tandem with her interest in queer/feminist underground cinema, generates a visual vocabulary that transcends both ethnographic and experimental film practices. In her films, reality is dismantled in a non-linear succession of dreamlike sceneries in a way that recalls Ulrike Ottinger's cinema and her ability to embody the fantasy of a place one "has never seen, but has certainly imagined".<sup>3</sup> Drawing on Ottinger's suggestion of a "ticket of no return"<sup>4</sup> from heterosexist cinematic time and space, Curnier Jardin's videos open up the possibility of a kind of non-binary visual pleasure, in which the staging of hyperbolic (and often eroticized) gender performances is negotiated by a queer/feminist gaze. Indeed, in her work she often combines the documentary and the fictional; it sometimes starts as a performance before turning into a filmic material that can become part of an installation, a sculpture, or a live event.

While researching some of the rituals and processions disseminated throughout the Italian Peninsula in early 2020, Curnier Jardin, suddenly unable to travel, became interested in collecting found footage documenting religious rites celebrated via private screens (smartphone, computer, TV) and their intimacy. Her video *Le lente passioni* (Slow Passions) (2020) weaves together a number of scenes, mostly captured online, displaying images and songs related to the Catholic celebration of Easter. Since religious rituals are mediated via the screen in this time of a pandemic, the edited footage provides a moving account of the passions expressed through personal forms of devotion. Individual and collective modes of worship are conveyed via the video's emphasis on sound and, more specifically, on the songs and prayers that accompany these acts of piety. In particular, *Le lente passioni* highlights music, rhythm, and the voice as a direct reference to Curnier Jardin's interest in

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<sup>1</sup> Ana Teixeira Pinto, "The World Inside Out: Pauline Curnier Jardin according to Ana Teixeira Pinto", *Fondation d'Entreprise Pernod Ricard*, September 2018, <https://www.fondation-pernod-ricard.com/en/textwork/pauline-curnier-jardin-ana-teixeira-pinto>.

<sup>2</sup> Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> See Elisabeth Lebovici, "'Never seen, but fully imagined': Delphine Seyrig's Part(s) in Ulrike Ottinger's Cinema" in *Defiant Muses: Delphine Seyrig and Feminist Video Collectives in France, 1970s–1980s*, ed. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez and Giovanna Zapperi, exhibition catalogue (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofia, 2019), pp. 162–81.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

the work of Giovanna Marini, a prominent Italian ethnomusicologist and singer who has been instrumental in recovering traditional songs and music since the 1960s.<sup>5</sup>

Whereas Marini has been mostly interested in the intersecting traditions of southern Italian folklore and leftist protest songs, the significance of sound in Curnier Jardin's work points to the bodily dimension of religious rituals. This might seem somehow paradoxical as the "slow passions" collected by the artist can only express themselves via the screen's disembodied interposition. However, the emphasis on sound, and especially on the voice, refers to the somatic and sensorial components of religious rituals. As Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero has pointed out, the voice is first and foremost sound, affect, and relation. Because it is constitutively connected to the field of emotions, the voice conveys bodily presence and intimacy, before turning into language with its claim to fix meaning.<sup>6</sup> *Explosion Ma Baby* (2016) significantly starts with the voice, a male voice calling upon the crowd gathered for the procession in honour of Saint Sebastian. This short video follows the exclusively male procession that takes place in a southern Italian town, which involves dedicating newborns (both male and female) to the patron saint and foreshadows the artist's ongoing project *Sebastiano Blu*. The babies are lifted naked, sometimes adorned with banknotes, towards the saint's statue, which is carried around the town by a select group of young men. Interestingly, Saint Sebastian is an icon of gay culture, with his arrow-pierced body becoming a sign of homoerotic desire, which is obviously condemned in Catholic societies. Curnier Jardin films this phallogocentric ceremony celebrating male fertility with her Super 8 camera in a way that produces a sort of phantasmagoria of the male body, as the camera's physical proximity echoes the erotic dimension of the whole ritual in which male bodies come close to each other. The video's title refers to the fireworks and the event's festive atmosphere, therefore blurring the line separating liturgy and the carnival, thus introducing its overtly sexual subject matter. The camera's insistence on the colourful explosions of the fireworks, in tandem with the contrast between ancient and new elements (the church's baroque façade and the shiny inflated balloons), also contributes to producing a narrative in which ritual and magic collide.

The entwinement of rituals and the body as a way of expressing emotions is crucial in Curnier Jardin's understanding of collective acts of devotion in which pre-modern practices and superstitions have been historically incorporated into Catholic rituals. Drawing on the work of Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino, the artist envisions the significance of archaic forms of devotion in contemporary European societies. Writing in the context of Italy's post-war "economic miracle", de Martino stressed that the persistence of magic in southern Italy's Catholicism was not just the wreckage of a lost society: rather, magic has become an integral part of contemporary religiosity, one that is able to constantly renew itself.<sup>7</sup> More importantly, according to the Italian anthropologist, rites connected to possession, exorcism, and bewitchment point to the open temporality of such folkloric-religious relics: poised halfway between the past and the present, simultaneously ancient and new, they are located outside of a history conceived in terms of the continuity connecting past, present, and future.

*Sebastiano Blu*, Curnier Jardin's ongoing film project, tells a story in which superstition and Catholicism are closely entwined. The film is set in the same town where the patron saint, Sebastian, is worshiped in relation to male fertility. This project, which expands on a previous performance and a short video,<sup>8</sup> centres on a young man called Giorgetto, who is haunted by the persistence of a latent matriarchal structure within a patriarchal society. Obsessed with his virility and sexuality, the video's protagonist is tormented by his anxiety about women, whose bodies are viewed as both desirable and monstrous in their ability to give birth. While dealing with male fertility and fatherhood, the video delves into the entwinement of gender, religion, and ritual. Both *Explosion Ma Baby* and *Sebastiano Blu*'s speculation on reproduction and masculinity recall Curnier Jardin's *Qu'un sang impur* (2019), a previous film and installation loosely based on Jean Genet's film *Un chant d'amour* (1950). In a tale of

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<sup>5</sup> The bulk of the material assembled in *Le lente passioni* was collected by the Riti e suoni di una settimana santa fuori dall'ordinario research group, coordinated by Antonella Talamonti. Talamonti is a scholar working closely with Giovanna Marini who has created an online archive featuring a variety of rites and sounds related to Holy Week. The material was made available to the artist, who herself participated in Marini's seminars during her time in Rome. A part of the footage used in the video was collected via social media.

<sup>6</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Ernesto de Martino, *Magic: A Theory from the South*, trans. Dorothy Louise Zinn (Chicago, IL: HAU Books, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> *Sebastiano Blu* (performance, 2018, based on the screenplay written and narrated by Pauline Curnier Jardin) and *Sebastiano Blu* (teaser, 2018).

voyeurism and transgression, Genet's rare experimentation with cinema depicts the erotic fantasies of two young male inmates and their prison guard. However, in Curnier Jardin's remake, the eroticized inmates have become post-menopausal women eventually enjoying their erotic power, free at last from reproductive labour and the attendant political economy of sex that was famously described by feminist anthropologist Gayle S. Rubin as "the traffic in women".<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, in patriarchal societies both old women and gay men are excluded from reproduction, and this is perhaps the reason why, in these different projects, sexuality and fertility convey an imaginary reversal between life and death. In *Qu'un sang impur*, the post-menopausal women actually menstruate but, instead of bearing life, they inflict death on the young men they encounter in their everyday lives. These older women, whose destructive power is exerted on men young enough to be their sons, embody what one could imagine to be Giorgetto's worse nightmare: the fantasy of a maternal body that is both destructive and caring, eroticized and abject. Indeed, as we learn from the film's script, Giorgetto's obsession with his own infertility transmutes into a fantasy of self-destruction, in which he identifies with Saint Sebastian's martyred and eroticized body.

Even though Curnier Jardin's films are evidently set in specific locations, such as southern Italy, these appear as rather unreal, as if seen in a reverie. The visual language's dream-like quality mirrors the artist's aim of envisioning the encounter between worlds and temporalities. In reactivating ancient myths about women's reproductive power, *Sebastiano Blu* lingers upon the dilemmas in which female bodies have been historically trapped. In both traditional and modern cultures, one could argue, women and their bodies are always seen as already transgressive, both dangerous and in danger; they embody the perils of the erotic spectacle, as well as the potential for a radical alternative to the patriarchal organization of life.<sup>10</sup> This is perhaps the fundamental ambivalence within which Pauline Curnier Jardin sets her visionary exploration of sexual difference, one in which ancient and modern rituals of masculinity are constitutively entangled with the imagined embodiment of the female Other. The syncretic temporality that constitutes the backdrop of the artist's engagement with rituals, gender, and devotion therefore allows for unseen and untold cultural structures to become apparent: not so much as a reality against which we continue to struggle, but as a phantasmagoria in which gender is endlessly unsettled in everyday rituals.

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<sup>9</sup> Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex" in *Deviations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> See Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1994).