



EL ARTE DE ALETTE SIMMONS-JIMENEZ Y LA META DEL SER

Por Alfredo Triff

LA PRIMERA VEZ QUE VI EL ARTE DE ALETTE SIMMONS-JIMÉNEZ FUE HACE DOS AÑOS EN EL DESIGN DISTRICT DE MIAMI. EN UN PEQUEÑO CUARTO OSCURO ME LLAMÓ LA ATENCIÓN LA IMAGEN EN VIDEO DE UNA MUJER NADANDO DENTRO DE UNA PISCINA DE GOMA DE NIÑOS

THE ART OF ALETTE SIMMONS-JIMENEZ AND THE PURPOSE OF BEING by Alfredo Triff *

The first time I saw the art of Alette Simmons-Jiménez was two years ago at the Miami Design District. In a small, dark room my attention was drawn to the video image of a woman swimming inside a child's inflatable pool.

Pool Comings And Goings shows a female silhouette that swims to and fro, floats and twists. She gracefully stretches with the soft sound of water and the gentle melody of a guitar, her woman's body voluptuous and fishlike, enjoying crystal clear, aqueous easy contact on the skin. At the end of the video we are looking at (in close up) the face of the young woman, or rather, her eyes. Up until then I had not realized that she is doomed to continue swimming, refracted in time, forever.

Swimming is embracing, being included in and surrendering to another body. That is why the fetus is happy floating in its maternal pool-womb. But the enjoyment may deceive us. Simmons-Jiménez' swimmer shares things in common with the Greek myth of Sisyphus – whom the gods condemned to the everlasting pushing of a rock up to the top of a mountain, where the rock would fall down again because of its own weight. Sisyphus executes a futile and eternal exercise; the young swimmer does not seem to know she is doomed, and if she does, she seems to have accepted her destiny.

Other prominent pieces in the history of video art come to mind that in some ways are related to *Pool Comings And Goings*. In *Sip My Ocean*, Swiss video-artist Pipilotti Rist also shows us a woman underwater, swimming towards us. Twenty years prior to Simmons-Jiménez and Rist, Hannah Wilke had already filmed herself behind another translucent medium, Duchamp's *Large Glass*, in this case exploring issues of identity and gender.

On the other hand, in *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, artist Martha Rosler shows us a different confinement of the modern woman that is very similar to Sisyphus's futile task: domesticity. Calmly and with fine violence, Rosler takes us through an alphabet of kitchen utensils and appliances, symbols of the division of domestic labor. Cecelia Condit has taken the *Barbie* and *Ken* couple as stereotypes of passivity and harshness. Could this be the same Barbie that swims inside Simmons-Jiménez's swimming-pool?

Merely 40 years in existence, video is a relatively new art form that has served as a tool for negotiating the usual problems with greater novelty. Video was born at the crossroads of hybrid trends: Minimalism, film, *performance* and conceptual art.

With its ability to instantly record the lonely action of the artist, the Sony Portapak camera was the vehicle of choice. Unlike film, video has a less predictable visual essence. Unlike television, social manipulator *par excellence*, this new

form captured image in a more precarious and empirical manner. Video is a bet on time transformed by the idealized subjectivity of the contemporary individual.

For several years Alette Simmons-Jiménez has been exploring video and installation art. There are obvious or implicit forms that repeat themselves: the labyrinth, the whirlpool, energy and the double or superimposed image; all this assembled within a dynamic scenario of constant flow and reflux. I would like to analyze some of them.

The labyrinth

The word labyrinth comes from the Greek *lá brys*, meaning the double-edged sword representing the two horns of the sacred bull. In addition, *labrys* was a sacred symbol, worshipped in the island of Knossos. From there comes the hypothesis that “labyrinth” means “palace of the labrys.” According to paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin, there is a link between the labyrinth, the abyss and in particular, the whirlpool.

The winding nature of the labyrinth envelops and entangles us in the same way that water embraces and surrounds us. However, in an installation in 2001 entitled *Fiddle Dee-Dee* at Miami-Dade College, Simmons-Jiménez built a labyrinth out of fabric. In the video accompanying the exhibit a camera follows us along between green soft walls that have been doodled over. A voice says: “Fiddle Dee Dee” an overdub of Vivien Leigh, in *Gone with The Wind* (Fiddle Dee Dee is a children’s song). Simmons-Jiménez’s camera keeps going along these walls to the tune of a birdsong and Afro-Caribbean music. Somebody intends to find his or her way inside this seductive trap. Video-game shots are heard – What is going on?

We approach the house/trap belonging to Fiddle, the little white mouse. On the wall, a sign warns us: “Wrong way”. An overdubbed voice states: “People go both ways” – to the tune of chords typical of Chinese music. At last we arrive at Fiddle and his buddies’ white garden fountain.

Fiddle is a tiny and long-tailed mammal, recalcitrant, agile, ominous, sleepwalking and voracious. The perfect subject at scientific laboratories, the guinea pig. We human beings are not that far from him; modern science creates surprising parallelisms. For example, it is known that mice learn very quickly to find their food by scouring the labyrinth.

Man is the only animal who stumbles twice on the same stone, the saying goes. So we should learn a little from Fiddle. It appears as if our civilization were intent on repeating the same mistakes of the past, which is the same as staying lost inside the labyrinth, finding no way out of the confusion. In Simmons-Jiménez’s narrative, Fiddle makes us wonder how to get out. He invites us to find a reason *why*.

A story goes that in the New Hebrides island of Melekula there was a labyrinth drawn on the sand. It was believed that the spirit of the dead had to follow the pathway in order to find the soul of their female guardian. If a soul approached, the guardian had to erase a part of the path, forcing the spirit to remake it in order to be able to be born again in a new life.

In the fable, the labyrinth is also a map, the indication for the pilgrim who yearns to arrive at his destination. All roads are full of obstacles and lost ways, but as long as we persevere, we shall forge our own destiny. The poet Antonio Machado tells us, “Traveler, there is no road; you make your path as you walk.”

Mise-en-abyme

A Couple of Days in the Life of Julie Ozama was the first video by Simmons-Jiménez, a more narrative piece than *Pools Comings And Goings*. In it the artist expresses a feminine subjectivity that is both hermetic and contemplative. One breathes an internal time of hide-tide. The primitive music evokes and radiates a peculiar relationship between the images that follow one after the other, and one inside of the other, in an esthetic game of *mise-en-abyme*.

The camera slides smoothly from the blank television, over the night table, to the window. From there to the painting on the wall and on to the coming and going of the waves. From the sea we pass to the crest of a wave against the reefs. The water becomes foamy. The TV comes back and next to it, the tick-tock of the alarm clock.

A young woman waits leaning on the windowsill. We notice her small room against the diagonal landscape. Outside are the city and the mystery of the night. The camera pans to the stars above and goes down along the sparkle of

cars to the street. We come back to the blank TV screen, which Julie –intently-- watches. There's a glimpse of the sensuous young woman's face, then a shot of her eye and her shining eyelashes.

Outside it rains torrentially, as in any Caribbean island. It stops. Drops fall slowly in a puddle that turns liquid-blue inside the sink in Julie's room, as she lies partially covered on her bed. From the window we observe the sky as the clouds pass by. It gets dark and the stars fill the firmament. Suddenly we can see Julie, her face bathed in an opalescent light. We return to that empty bed where our protagonist rests half-naked. The TV screen remains blank while the camera slowly pulls back, exiting through the same door it came through.

A Couple of Days in the Life of Julie Ozama makes me think about the video *Will-o'-the-Wisp* by Dara Birnbaum, in which we also see a woman, who's thinking solely of what is beyond her window. She may be pondering a romantic loss, a betrayal. Birnbaum, just like Simmons-Jiménez, tells us about the eloquence of memory and the surrounding reality.

Both works recount an air of lassitude, where the heroine is present and the male is absent. In Simmons-Jiménez's work, the absent man may be suggested by the primitive background music. While Birnbaum creates devices inspired by the Japanese art of the late nineteenth century, Simmons-Jiménez takes us to a wonderfully magical city, drawn perhaps from the pen of a García Márquez.

The clock and the television are inherent elements of the contemporary world. For Julie there is no simulation because she has already been deceived. As hard as it may be, days follow nights amid a loneliness that she herself has chosen. At least she has the sea, incapable of betraying her, mediating between continent and continent.

Simmons-Jiménez explores continuously evolving perspectives. Her images become layered with visual illusions -- penetrating one inside of the other. "The female way of looking has the ability of going inside and outside." Hélène Cixous would say. But in the case of *Julie Ozama* that look points towards an absence. It points to the boldness of facing the intimate loneliness of the past, as well as its memory and the possibility of a present that's always the same.

Energy/whirlpool

In the video *The Calling*, Simmons-Jiménez shows two images on opposing walls. On one we can see a white, sea bird with a black crest that caws, perched on a pylon near the dunes. Its call comes and goes with the eco of the afternoon breeze, and shortly after receives a response from others of its kind. In the other, we can see a subway "Down" escalator flanked by narrow walls. Suddenly, an invasion of people rushes down to the lower floor, running through the hallway.

Simmons-Jiménez juxtaposes the frenzied pace of the urban rush hour with the serene balance of the bird in its natural habitat. Two different energies: Man and nature, the pulse-frenzied and peaceful, the artificial and the genuine.

I don't think that the artist condemns the modern simply for being modern. Simmons-Jiménez's work is not moralistic. The image shows two sides of the same coin. We are part of nature but we resemble those birds that are capable of destroying a corn crop in a matter of seconds. We are the only animals capable of annihilating the planet.

The energy in *Revolution/Evolution* is different. This video has elements of retro, futurism and advertising. A series of scenes arranged around a time frame that reminds us of the A-B-A or "rondo" structure in classical music.

We open with a fragment of a movie from the 1930's, showing the choreographed movements of a dance troupe, seen from above. The dance routine imitates a flower that opens and closes its petals and turns into the fixed shape of a turning bicycle wheel (A glimpse of Duchamp?). This is followed, next, by the arms of a clock and a boy break-dancing on the floor then next by the motor of a blender *on-and-off* and a ballerina spinning in pirouettes.

These images converge on a drain in a sink that swallows water in a curvy whirl, which becomes the inside of a toilet bowl. Cut: A typhoon, a grasshopper moving its wings, a coin twirling on itself, and the rotating surface of Jupiter. We finish with Ginger Rogers, insanely tapping in a frenzied 20-spin ending. So, everything is connected, everything is a cog of a gear, each different yet interdependent. To turn, to circulate, in a way is to change, indicative of moving --or transforming.

In the history of philosophy of the late nineteenth century (and more exactly Kant's subjectivism) it was concluded that time and space (in themselves) did not exist, but rather they were ways of organizing experience. In other words, the clock does not measure an objective time, but rather the coordination between the rotation of the earth as it moves around the sun. In the twentieth century we learned that matter is energy and vice-versa. Now everything is energy, nothing lacks it.

Pool-Flush, a video shown in 2003 at the Daniel Azoulay Gallery, may be seen as a blend of *Pool Comings and Goings* and *Revolution/Evolution*. In this piece Simmons-Jiménez focuses on the energy of a whirlpool: a constant whirlpool mutating from green to blue.

Abruptly minimalist, the piece suggests: 1- the strength required to turn something on itself indefinitely, 2- water as the most excellent diluent, 3- the toilet bowl a place of excretion, 4- Lastly, the idea of sameness and difference, which since Parmenides and Heraclites have been a source of controversy. Can the same remain always the same? Argentine Julio Cortázar, who in his *Historias de Cronopios y Famas* examines the hypothetical route of a ball of hair beyond the drainpipe would say, "No."

Many of Simmons-Jiménez's installations point towards a dynamic similar to her prior videos. In *Mother And Crux* a semi-elliptical woven basket is suspended by a cable and rests on a pedestal near the ground. In front of the piece the artist has drawn, with oil stick on black paper, a duplicate version of the image, as if it were the reflection in a mirror.

This installation is the equivalent of a shape turning on itself. Said rotation becomes a solid body that contains an empty cavity. The transformation by way of centripetal force (unlike in *Pool Flush*) becomes something capable of containing and protecting, a kind of revolving womb.

Image/double

The recurrence of the juxtaposed figure (be it a drawing, video or part of an installation) is another important constant in the work of Simmons-Jiménez. *Puppet Cloud* (at Artformz gallery) shows a huge three-dimensional structure, made with pieces of square pipes overlaid in the form of a maze, suspended in the air by white cords hanging from the ceiling.

On a contiguous wall that has been painted black there is a projection of the same structure drawn with white cords; a different presentation of the same thing. The repetition has the intention of increasing our understanding of the applied figure. Plato has interesting things to say about the relationship between persuasion and geometry, to illustrate that the human psyche is able to project beyond itself. Assuming that others perceive what we perceive is an important mechanism in order to comprehend the behavior of our peers.

Another interpretation of the double image is present in *Ahh...*, a video with a fast sequence. Simmons-Jiménez watches directly into the camera and thus watches herself. There's an explosion. "In the beginning, the phone rings." Who can live nowadays without a mobile phone? The artist looks at the lens but in an empty, mechanical way. Her face seems to be tattooed by an Aztec aboriginal ideogram (or graffiti a-la-Keith Haring). The facial design is drawn and undrawn in a pulse of seconds by the heavy music beat.

Not long ago I read the following in a Mexican blog: "To see inside oneself is to see through time". The quote comes in handy in supporting the idea behind *Ahh...*, that flows under the beat of a synthesized bass in that 1980s, Peter Gabriel-style aesthetic. Mircea Eliade, in his classical text on shamanism, suggests that the shaman makes up the symbols in an effort to connect everything with the cosmos. With *Ahh...*, Simmons-Jiménez achieves the same.

Although in *A Couple of Days in the Life of Julie Ozama*, time seems to stop, waiting for the protagonist, in *Ahh...*, time is compressed at the speed of our current lifestyle. German author Volker Braun has said: "Man is 'up to the minute' because he is obsessed with time." The Native-American critic Leslie Marmon Silko has said, "We live not in the now, but in a substance wherein we imagine at every instant our own end."

After 9/11 this becomes truer. A possible reading of *Ahh...* is the precarious balance between the compulsion of having more and the purpose of life itself. The great paradox lies in that in having more, we feel we have less.

Not every woman is an artist, but every artist is a woman. Simmons-Jiménez uses the body as the essential element in her video art, linking performance and gender in a natural and determined manner. Where there are human beings, there is sex, race, age and complexion. Almost always our reactions are the result of our ideological presumptions.

But the identity of the human being goes beyond gender and sex (which nowadays can be changed with surgery and the use of hormones). Even the body that harbors us grows old and loses its agility and beauty.

There must be something else, another answer, another lifestyle. The work speaks through metaphors and images that are universal. Alette Simmons-Jiménez invites us to explore issues of humanity in a contemporary, straight-to-the-point, visual language. The whirlpool of the self, searching for its purpose: the goings and comings, the loss, and the uncertainty of achieving lasting, inner peace.

*Alfredo Triff is a resident of Miami where he teaches philosophy and writes criticism for the Miami New Times and other publications. He likes cats, African art and tobacco.