Katherine Adams

Of Worlds and Women: 'No Master Territories'

At the entrance of *No Master Territories: Feminist Worldmaking and the Moving Image*, recently on view at Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt, one comes face-to-face with Mona Hatoum's 1983 *So Much I Want to Say* intoning quietly: "…so much I want to say, so much I want to say…". The voice of Hatoum's female subject pulses quietly throughout the surrounding space, fitfully seeking new addressees. Its audio is clearly an overlay onto the 5-minute work's lingering scene—in the image, two large hands (coded as masculine), are gagging the mouth of the sound's protagonist. That is, Hatoum's audio is not a 'live recording' but appears to be rather an interior voice. Hatoum's work is the only openly audible installation in the ocean of video works that comprise *No Master Territories*—all other films require individual headsets to be heard. Passing into the rest of the exhibition hall, *So Much I Want to Say* is at one's back, but its sound continues sinuously around the waves of film installations. Hatoum's disembodied, breathless refrain seems to play the part of a curatorial chorus staging one's foray into this vast array of films, urging us on. Yet as its moving image becomes mere sound, one can easily forget that *So Much I Want to Say* is in fact a work about being silenced.

No Master Territories: Feminist Worldmaking and the Moving Image focuses on feminist film works from the 1970s to 1990s that merge straightforward, often documentary realism with the aesthetics of experimental artists' films. The works span myriad geographical locations and themes. In emphasizing worldmaking as its founding concept, *No Master Territories* proposes film techniques such as avant-garde montage and subjectivist close-ups—which in fact unravel, rather than unify, filmic 'worlds'—as strategies for the feminist re-assembly of existing social conditions. So many of these films would seem—like Hatoum's work—to oppose the kind of speculative, utopian 'worlding' connoted by worldmaking's aspiration to ontological reconstitution. The exhibition's works use cinematographic fissures and cuts to draw attention to dissonances between minoritarian political voices and majoritarian cultures; in this light, the exhibition's reliance on 'worldmaking' appears more provocative than may have been intended.

As a cultural process, 'worldmaking' is generally conceived of as the construction of a unified, ontologically and conceptually cohesive artistic situation. In recent years, it is an increasingly common invocation within contemporary art, often describing the use of strategies for imagining normally suppressed strains of cultural life as autonomous or socio-politically potent. In its more philosophical sense—stemming from the earlier, influential theorization of the term by the philosopher Nelson Goodman—'worldmaking' implies the refraction of artistic creation through structures of formal consistency. Also often discussed in the computer programming or gaming context, worldmaking offers a completist, if pluralist, approach to aesthetics.

Despite the triumphant pretext of a sovereign-less realm attuned specially to womxn, existential ambiguity reigns in *No Master Territories*'s featured works. Peggy Ahwesh's *She Puppet* (2001)

entangles a Lara Croft character in the dead-end gameplay scenarios of an eponymous video game. In *She Puppet* we find Croft—activated by Ahwesh—abjectly butting into stone walls, submerged at length under water, or being relentlessly pecked at by birds. Han Ok-Hee's *Untitled 77-A* (1977) plays with vanguard techniques for cutting and splicing film: the work self-reflexively records Ok-Hee's own cinematographic gestures in her studio and urban environment, but it also parodically figures these edits as violent cuts into a larger social body. We see Ok-Hee take control over long ribbons of film strips, meditating on potential compositions in a darkroom—then, parallel scenes show scissors jabbed into a white wall, from behind which red paint gushes out like blood.

Works closer in character to documentary film are no less adventurous in visualizing how feminist fractures can be forced upon otherwise patriarchal cinematic backdrops. Sara Gómez's *Mi apore (My Contribution)* (1972) details the vagaries of carving new family structures within traditional societies. In exploring the social 'cuts' required for articulating feminist positions, the film also exposes rifts within the women's movement in Cuba at the time. Other works toy with opportunistic self-objectification in a manner that takes up the very tropes of oppression—Robin Laurie and Margot Nash's *We Aim to Please* (1976)**.** As with Ok-Hee's work, many works focus more on jarring ruptures or creative exploitations of paternalist expectations than on the kind of emancipatory, self-contained imaginary one might anticipate finding within a masterless, uncontrolled 'world.' *Processo per stupro (A Trial for Rape)* (1979), filmed by a collective in Italy (Anna Carini, Rony Daopulo, Paola De Martiis Maria Grazia Belmonti, Annabella Miscuglio, and Lorendana Rotondo) recorded the legal assault that unfolded against a female plaintiff trying to bring three young men to trial for rape. An elegant, sparkling speech by the girl's lawyer devolves into a series of counteraccusations by the defendants' attorneys, completely inverting the terms of the case so that the girl must defend her morality, lifestyle, and dangerous feminist 'ideology'.

It's difficult to say that any of these works are not fully caught up in a territory chock full of masters. Moreover, *No Master Territories*'s work seems rattled by political voids—full of hopes for a freer existence but without the conditions or social unity to realize it. The exhibition is sobered by a poignant realism about barriers and constraints that at times barely escapes defeatism. If a radical opening toward 'worldliness' does not come through the films considered as distinct works, one might instead look to the exhibition installation itself to provide such continuity. Notably, the exhibition's works are by and large not works originally made to be shown as 'video-installations'—many of them are full films, often half an hour or longer in runtime. They seem to ask for a different mode of attention than the sort of looking that exhibition-time normally induces, and which here renders the films out of joint with their self-defined conditions of narrative coherence. *No Master Territories* creates a viewing situation in which one is constantly catching the moving image at an off-moment within its looping digital format. This is not an environment conducive to clear ends or beginnings—but the installation's

disorienting effect is perhaps in keeping with the exhibition's spatial and deterritorialized concept.

In these not-quite-worlds, one dynamic that is curatorially absent is any attention the margin or the periphery as its own form of non-territory. Though the title of the exhibition takes its name from a section of filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha's *When the Moon Waxes Red*, the uniform installation plan seems to downplay the power differentials Minh-Ha herself had attended to. "Without a certain displacement, again, the margins can easily recomfort the center…[1]" Similarly, the project takes a semantic way out of the very problem of 'woman' as a category, stating in the exhibition booklet that the project intends women to be understood in "its maximally inclusive sense," despite its normalizing character. While the acknowledgement itself may be valuable, this is just one of the many ways in which *No Master Territories*'s feminist realm is precisely *still mastered*, still tied to the hegemonic and gendered world of Woman as separated from man.

The artists in *No Master Territories* take the world apart, but are in no rush to put it back together. Despite the exhibition's nod toward world-constituting processes, many of the project's films operate within a paradigm of insurmountable, almost abject frustration. The exhibition apparently strives to create forms of unnavigability through its loose format, but the works themselves already provide their own versions of disorientation. Though it cuts against the grain of the stated intentions of this exhibition, it may be a good thing that *No Master Territories* fails to escort us through to any femme-anarchic atmosphere that could leap over the frictions and rifts of political resistance. We are living at a time when the world-form—sutured together through the child, family, or household—is precisely the mode of assembly so often weaponized against women. It is, moreover, weaponized not only by men against women, but by women against women, and as a barricade gatekeeping the terms of gender itself.

In exiting *No Master Territories*, one must come back once more to Mona Hatoum's *So Much I Want to Say*. Inclined to check the work one last time, its full character is now restored to view. As Hatoum herself has recounted, this is precisely a work about marginality, of an attempt to speak through one channel while being blocked through another[2]. Yet it seems important that we not yield too quickly to the promise of this woman's voice, which the curators liberated from oppression by causing us to turn our backs to her speaker's plight as we navigate the exhibition. The lilting sound that had become an immaterial siren or oracle for us viewers is re-embodied, returning to view as a *voice*, as we leave and must again face a gagged mouth—a woman under duress. Hatoum and so many other filmmakers featured here have much to teach us about how equality of opportunity fails to constitute gender equality more broadly. They ask us to move

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[1] Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (London, 1991: Routledge), p. 17

[2] Elizabeth Mancester, "Mona Hatoum, So Much I Want to Say," *Tate Modern*, accessed online at: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hatoum-so-much-i-want-to-say-t07536

beyond mere delight in the freedom to speak, and start cutting into worlds that must still be destroyed.