

Subjects in Pictures An exhibition curated by Philip Monk YYZ, Toronto,
September 24 - October 13, 1984

(review by Ian Carr-Harris)

I'm not sure I should characterize what I'm doing here as a review. Or rather, let me characterize it as precisely a review: a review of Philip Monk talking to us about his construction of this exhibition.

Subjects in Pictures is not to be understood as simply six artists showing works of art. And because it is not, never was intended as such, the subject of this exhibition is a thesis which Philip Monk presented last year at the Rivoli, and published later in the May issue of Vanguard Magazine.¹ This places the artists included in the exhibition as representatives; if we have trouble with that, let us consider more carefully the very subject of Philip's thesis: the construction of subjecthood in subject-matter. The work of these artists will be seen (has been seen) in other contexts, and while here they act as representatives, that will become only a part of a complex history of 'being seen' for each of them; or as Philip Monk would say, of their relationship to 'the look'. That Philip is himself a male subjecting these women artists to his look is only a dramatization of the complexity inevitable in that history. And as we shall see, that complexity is already anticipated not in Philip's thesis, but in his writing.

Subjects in Pictures, then, begins at the Rivoli and was first published in May as an attack by Philip Monk on expressionism. Not expressionism in its crude stylistic resurgence, so much, but on the notion of expressionism, and Philip attached this notion to a particular social circumstance in which men - that is, males - found themselves. His attack could therefore be seen as an attack on male art in Toronto, or at least certain male artists in Toronto. Let me quote from that article: Philip has just characterized Marc de Guerre's painting as "nihilistic expressionism". He then continues:

Subjectivity as a term is not something we necessarily should give value to. What is truly subjective, however, is social; it is not a matter of personality, presence or expression. Subjectivity is a process enacted in the contradictions between the public and private. It is not a withdrawal from or opposition to the public, objective, rational, technical, whatever. Subjectivity is not a freely assumed condition - the personal appropriation or absorption into the

unity of a consciousness as compensation for frustration elsewhere. It seems historically that when men can no longer act in the world, they recuperate that mastery subjectively. The conditions and sites of subjectivity are in active, contradictory process - constructed in totality, not consumed as content. One can be complicit in that construction through consumption of that content or act within the constraints of that construction through recognition of its making. Representation seems to me to be a more objective condition and avoids subjectivity, or at least it displays one's place within it. Expression does not. The work by women to be discussed has a more intimate knowledge of and care for the conditions of representation. To have the conditions of representation inscribed within one, socially, not essentially or biologically, is to be aware of the conditions of representation in every aspect of one's own representational practice. ²

This passage is in fact the introduction to Philip's exhibition. In the article Philip discussed all the artists in Subjects in Pictures except for Sandra Meigs and Nancy Johnson, and these two artists are included in the exhibition in order to allow Philip to develop his argument more fully. What is his argument, how does he develop it, and how successful is it? The Vanguard article was quite accessible in its style, something which Philip's development of that article in the catalogue is not. I am ambivalent on the merits of this. Read as a public or informational document, Philip's catalogue essay appears to be near incomprehensible to the average reader. It fails as a tool of education, but perhaps more profoundly it fails - because it promises - to connect with those who would most naturally be his audience and his strength: artists and those who appreciate art. The failure, however, is not to be blamed only on Philip. Read as a treatise, as literature, if you like, it is poetic, logical, and - yes - patient in its argumentation. It succeeds sometimes well, sometimes obviously, as an interconnected series of personal notations by Philip faced with not simply the paintings (which, after all, he has choreographed), but with the task of painting. I said that Philip's essay failed for the average reader. I mean by that each of us when we read 'as the average reader' - something we do most of the time. What is required is simply to read in a different manner, a manner in which the ability of words to carry more than one nuance is accepted. I am therefore not going to 'translate' Philip Monk's argument. I am going to extract passages from it and knit them together as a series of developing fragments in order to 'reconstruct' his argument for you in his own words. I will then close with a brief summary of how I see the argument, and what I think

it accomplishes.

Subjects in Pictures By Philip Monk.

For this exhibition, "subjects in pictures" is to be taken doubly. There are subjects of pictures and subjects in pictures. The picture is a means of depicting subjects as content and representing subjects as individuals: in short, subject-matter and subjecthood.

In subjecting the viewer to its look and construction, the image helps constitute a subject. That construction occurs as an ideological process. For the purposes of this essay, subjectivity is accepted as a social construction.

The subject, like meaning, is never stable. In this exhibition of six women artists, the work is conscious of, if it does not pursue it as a direct theme, the subjection of women in representation. But it is also much more, for the work takes itself as a site for the construction of subjectivity in general and for the questioning of identity. In the case of artists, women are mastering subjects; but as women they are traditionally mastered subjects. Therefore the artist is a mastering/mastered subject. The work by these artists situates subjectivity in and as an order of representation. We are subjected to the image, a "reality" that has the power to constitute our very selves. Whether all the works are as direct as this, all depict one form of the subjective moment, the conditions for the constitution of the subject - and its undoing.

The works by these artists register and display the effects of the image, the process by which one is made into a product, or in other words a subject. The turning of an individual into a subject is an active and continual temporal process by which a static structure is instituted and social relations are maintained. This process has its objective and subjective moments, or rather an objective structure and a subjective process. The works by the artists divide along these "objective" and "subjective" lines. (Objective and subjective are not to be opposed as absolutes in their conventional senses.) Janice Gurney and Joanne Tod rest on the side of the objective (the objective within representation, that is); Shelagh Alexander, Sandra Meigs and Shirley Wiltasalo "err" on the side of the subjective. And Nancy Johnson seems to occupy a middle ground between the two. The paintings or constructions by Janice Gurney and Joanne Tod set up objective relations of power within the work as references to power relations outside it, but also as paradigms for relations between image and viewer. That is, the

objective structures of Gurney's and Tod's work set up the conditions for a subjective (ideological) process to take place. In their own case, that objectivity is shaken by the contradictory positions of the artist that have been described here. (The position of mastered/master.) In the works by Alexander, Meigs and Wiitasalo we witness the image transformed. We are not given an image that can be taken as objectively constituted or that can be received as subjective impression. It is (in other words) neither appropriative nor expressive. The process of ideological transformation is more than implied: its dynamic process is taken over, distorted, exaggerated, ending often in catastrophe. This image of catastrophe marks a limit, a structural and social limit, we could say, that could be posed by the first group of work (Gurney and Tod), but not enacted. Rather than create emblems of failed social intervention, for Alexander, Meigs and Wiitasalo representation becomes a site of activity, of the aggressive struggle of representation against representation. The middle term between these two types is found in Nancy Johnson's drawings. This work starts with the interiorization of the look, and ends in a look that is self-directed, but that directs itself to and from an image.

The artists share a place, a situation and a practice. Their mutual concerns are realized within the processes of content and the temporality of looking.

(Interestingly enough, Philip then goes on to consider each artist in turn alphabetically, rather than by the groupings he has placed them into. This serves to undermine, I suspect intentionally, the absolute quality implied by such grouping.)

Shelagh Alexander

That subjectivity is a process of construction reinforced at every moment can perhaps best be shown in a narrative. There, images and relations recur in a temporal structure that is similar to the construction of the subject or the capturing of the individual in ideology. Shelagh Alexander's photographic work situates itself at the juncture of the image and narrative and pursues two processes. On the one hand it elaborates a process whereby the subject is carried through and positioned in a structure of received images. On the other hand it deconstructs these images in a reconstruction of space. The power and the pathos of the image in The Somnambulist series is really a pathology of the image.

Janice Gurney

For a number of years Janice Gurney has been patiently exploring a complex nexus of inheritances from the past - history, biology and tradition. She situates herself doubly to the images she receives, re-presents and represents, those that come to her as a social (socialized) individual and those that come to her as an artist. It is this double inflection that allows her work to question identity and power relations in history but also in the very situation and practice of the artist. The inseparability of practice and representation leads to fragmentation. Fragmentation is a condition of representation here. The artist enters into identity with this fragmentation, but as a difference, and not a desire for a lost unity. Rather, understanding is achieved through maintaining that division within the look.

Nancy Johnson

The graphic notations of Nancy Johnson's gouaches sketch out the relations that issue in the look. This look facilitates the transfer of a secure identity maintained in a proximate physicality to a problematic identity established at a distance. In this latter, identity is held in an image or the look of another. If this identity is established as a separation in the history of each individual, the direction of Johnson's work has been to probe its ambiguities and seek a resolution on the levels of content, process and image. It is language rather than image that institutes that separation; language sets up the subject-object relation through its predicative capacity. But it recruits the image to a special role. If language also enters Johnson's drawings, and if a psychoanalytic theory underlies the notions of identity and loss there, these drawings try to overcome that separation through the pleasure of making and the pleasure of viewing. Notably at times the text is phonic; its articulation signifies either the pleasure of repetition or an anxious cry at the threat of this cut of separation.

Sandra Neigs

Sandra Neigs' installations are dramas in which actions are focused even though the whole subject may be dissolute or obsessive. They are false scenes, multimedia 'operas' in which pseudo-melodramas of solitude are enacted. These dramas are played out in the space and time of installation, and its moments and actions are recorded in the different media of watercolour (or gouache) and

6

film and audio tapes. Film and watercolour expand and contract moments, focusing and dissolving the scenes in gestures and actions. Both observer and observed are disconnected: the latter unconsciously performing rituals in the midst of activity, the former alienated from action through consciousness. (As Meigs puts it in discussing one of the works:) "That is why gestures were featured. The gesture is the most minimal action. As a minimal, yet willed, event, the gesture contains personal signs, social signs, and worldly objective signs."

Joanne Tod

Representation itself can be taken as a commodity form through which (among other things) women are constituted as subjects and consumed as objects. The image then is no simple presentation, and relations do not exist only within it. Outside of its commodity status, we can determine at least three other relations in Joanne Tod's paintings: relations within the image; a relation of the artist to the painting (but also to the image); a relation of the viewer to the image (but also to the painting). These are not natural relations: the first as the objective support of vision; the second of the transparency of the artist to the work; the third of the immediacy and pleasure of viewing. Just as a depiction is already a social relation, these are all socially constructed positions. And we shall find that they enter into identity with one another through their status constructions. That one's place is a contradictory inhabitation that society cannot resolve is pursued in the image of the "other". Identity and defacement are realized within the structure of this "other". The work reveals the logic of the "other" to be a logic of exclusion. Identity with another takes place then through an identification in what is the same, or rather in what is made the same. Even as a woman producer, the artist undergoes this reproduction.

Shirley Wiitasalo

An exhibition of paintings is not a series of isolated instances; together they compose a space, the space of an installation, a space that includes the viewer; and they construct a frame, that of the gallery. We can designate three spaces successively situated within larger frames: the interior "space" of the painting; the space of the gallery; the space of the "real". What are the relations between them? What mediates the public and private, the personal and the social? What constitutes the subject in these spaces, split between these relations?

What is between these spaces first presents itself as an absence: the frame. Since that which presents itself in an absence is a representation, the frame partakes of that construct, and has a constitutive capacity and function. And the subject is constituted in that split. Mediation occurs through the frame. The frame is not only a container, it is a relay: it mediates the inside to the outside and the outside to the inside, the viewer to a content. Shirley Wiitasalo's paintings address this mock dialogue.

Within each of these paintings we find an internal frame. The inner frame functions to divide but also to display the dissolution of the boundaries between interior and exterior, public and private, and so-called subjectivity and objectivity. It is a fulcrum in the vacillation between containment and catastrophe. But contrary to its appearance, dissolution is a sign of the construction of the interior by the exterior, of the private by the public. The inner frame mimes the edge of the canvas, which is the literal division between outside and inside. By the evidence of the inner frame, however, that division between viewer and viewed is not as secure as the edge seems definitive. The frame institutes boundaries and mediates relations. But because the mediation (in her work) is one of reproduction (whether a TV image, an interior room or external architectural space), a structure mediates or delivers the individual to the social. One realizes that the divisions between the so-called inside and outside are socially set, while the social continuity breaks down that division at the same time, penetrating and determining the private. Wiitasalo's paintings show the construction but also the fragility of the subject in construction.

Briefly, then, Philip Monk attempts to introduce us to an understanding of representation, of pictures, as a subjectivity which is constituted in three parts; and significantly here by six artists who are women. Significantly, because as women they are subjects in our society in a way in which men are not, and that 'subjecthood' enables them to address the social institutions 'paradoxically' from a position of objectivity. It is this gender-related position, a position quite beyond questions of good or bad, right or wrong, male or female as positive or negative attributes; which delivers to these women the (unsolicited) dialectic between themselves as persons and as representers, "socially mastered" and "ideologically mastering". It is not that women artists are better than men artists (or indeed the reverse); it is that both men and women are served at this point by the circumstances of women artists.

This circumstance Philip defines in his understanding of the current power available to representation as having three legitimate modes: an address which critiques the destructiveness of social institutions; an address which critiques the destruction of those social institutions; an address which critiques the relations occupied by the individual between the destructiveness and the destruction of those social institutions. And while Philip registers those three modes separately between three groups of six artists, I would understand him to mean that these modes are in fact simultaneously present in different degrees within the subject-matter and subjecthood of each of the six artists.

What does Philip accomplish here? Whatever it is, I do not believe it has anything to do with being true, or false, because Philip's thesis really only underlines the widely accepted understanding that making art is not a neutral activity in which an individual transcends his or her social conditions, but is, rather, a dialectical process in which the artist's social conditioning and his or her response to it is the subject of that dialectic. And this understanding is so central to the way in which we view art that its truth or falsehood is only an aspect of our seeing. It follows that gender will carry certain privileges, and flaws. On the other hand, it would be difficult to take Philip's positioning of male/female artists literally; I do not think he intends us to see his position as one of social determinism, since there would then be no dialectic. I accept his distinction simply as one which refers to socialization as a function, one which points to a role of representation which engages with our current understanding of constructive meaning. In pointing to these women artists, Philip is pointing to an understanding of representation which has nothing peculiarly female about it, though women may have a particular investment in it.

In stating that Philip has simply underlined a familiar and accepted understanding of the role of art as dialectical representation, that is to say, critical and self-critical socialized consciousness, I do not mean to belittle what Philip accomplishes. I said that there was poetry in his writing. Quite apart from the intellectual range of his thesis, which is no mean feat of elucidation in itself, Philip gives us a feeling for the complexity of the relations we have between public and private. His writing structure is itself a fundamental part of his ability to infect us with that complexity. It is, finally, not what Philip has to say about the artists in this exhibition,

but how he says it, how his writing acts out a parallel to the processes established by the artists, that makes his construction useful, influential, and sometimes arresting. And because this is the case, Philip does in the end return us to the artists as more than representatives for his thesis. His writing becomes an analogue for the paintings, and this does become, then, an exhibition of six - individual - artists.