

## Julie Rrap: Diver, Trickster, Thief. Anne Marsh

Julie Rrap has been diving in and out of art's history for much of her career and often refers to herself as a trickster or a thief. In the 1980s this resonated with postmodern theories of appropriation and feminist interpretations of psychoanalysis, which is reflected in the literature about her work at that time, but in interviews Rrap was also citing Marcel Duchamp who was one of the most renowned tricksters of the Modernist avant-garde.<sup>1</sup>

Continuing to reference the early avant-garde, Rrap appropriated Jean Genet in her series *A Thief's Journal* (1985-6). In one part of the series, *Thief's Journal: Philosophies of the Boudoir*, she included a short excerpt from Genet's text of the same name where he describes the erotic thrill of breaking and entering an apartment. The work was presented as a photo-sculptural installation on six vertically hinged panels that people could walk around. Rrap's handwritten version of Genet's text appeared on the reverse side of the images with different words emphasised on each panel.

This concept of thieving is seen clearly in *Secret Strategies/Ideal Spaces* made during the artist's six-month residency in France in 1987. For this project Rrap photographed paintings in museums which depicted women in compromising positions. She says:

"I often shot just details or off angular, poorly composed tourist shots of the work, which was intended to break their 'ideal' space. I then projected the [35mm] slides and did the rough drawings of the result. These then became the backdrop for my performances which somehow echoed whatever was happening in the painting. Some of them are from rape scenes depicted in paintings with that content ... others seem to depict women trapped within the representation so my action 'frees' them from that state".<sup>3</sup>

Rrap is certainly a trickster inside art history. In the 1980's work she plays with a sense of irreverence and abandon reproducing paintings held in significant museums and using them to create visual statements that contest the representation of the female body. In the earlier series such as *A Thief's Journal* the original artists are named and/or referenced but in *Secret Strategies* the original is not as easily located. In part this is due



Julie Rrap, *Secret Strategies/Ideal Spaces*, 1987, black and white archival print, 157.8 x 120 cm

<sup>1</sup> Anne Autre. Rrapports—Julie Brown-Rrap interviewed', in Julie Brown-Rrap—Theory of Games, exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Mori Gallery, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Julie Rrap in correspondence with the author 15 December 2021.

to the heightened performativity of this series. Although Rrap is acclaimed as a performative photographer and often uses her own body in her practice, this series blurs the distinction between performance art and its photographic documentation. There is a characteristic irreverence as the artist literally jumps into the ruined image of the other, the woman in art history that she is attempting to liberate. The result is that the artist breaks the screen of illusion for the viewer. *Secret Strategies* highlights a bad or poor aesthetic where the artist's body becomes blurred as it breaks into and reconfigures the 'ideal space' of art's sanctuary (the museum) and ruins its history.

At ARC ONE in 2022 Julie Rrap will revisit six images from the series *Secret Strategies/Ideal Spaces* and exhibit them in relation to a new video-performance work titled *Drawn Out* where she will create a video portrait of her own body in charcoal. On one level the comparison will be between a youthful and a mature body but Rrap will also be emphasising the performative in her practice. This aspect of her work has not been prioritised in the art historical literature to date despite the clear biographical evidence that links her to performance art and the avant-garde.<sup>3</sup>

I see Rrap revisiting *Secret Strategies* because of its renegade experimentalism. The way in which she depicts the figure of woman jumping into the paintings she has so joyfully destroyed through layers of mechanical reproduction, appears to me as a type of vigilantism that is seductive in much the same way that Genet describes in *A Thief's Journal*. The action is political, irreverent, criminal, and it is made with the female body acting out: literally jumping into one context and making it another.

The new work will also address identity and agency. In *Secret Strategies*, the artist is clearly performing as the other, placing herself in the position of the woman represented in the paintings. In *Drawn Out* she will be presenting her own body, thirty-five years later. In doing this she is creating a work about self that is perhaps building on her monumental video-performance *360 Degrees: Self Portrait* (2009). This work showed close-ups of the artist's face that appeared to be under duress. The mechanism that made this work possible was a life-size wheel that rotated the artist's body over and over again as the camera captured the face. A remarkable performance in itself but represented as video.

The intersection between endurance performance and its representation on film is an area that has not been thoroughly acknowledged in Rrap's career. *Drawn Out* promises to emphasise this again as the artist presents a live drawing process of herself captured on video. The drawing is a kind of haptic expression as a naked Julie Rrap rolls back and forth over paper secured to the floor. Here she marks the parameters of her body in charcoal. She can't actually see her body as one entity in this process, it is not an object of her gaze. What we see is the writing and erasing of a body in pieces, a fragmented body, a body that wears the erasure of the drawing on its skin. The work addresses the representation of the female body in a complex way, leaving the viewer to contemplate the multi-layered relations between the artist's body, the gaze and the agency of the female subject in representation.

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<sup>3</sup> See 'Interview with Terence Maloon', *Art and Australia*, 33:4, Winter, 1996, pp. 518-527. Republished in Julie Rrap, *Anandale*, NSW: Piper Press, 1998, pp. 114-121.