

**FEMINIST
PERSPECTIVES
IN ARTISTIC PRODUCTIONS
AND THEORIES OF ART**

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MARYAM JAFRI. ART WORK



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I came of age during the heyday in the US of identity politics, as both an undergraduate student studying literature at university (and literary theory, particularly the impact of feminism and post-colonial theory on the reading of the literary canon) and also later as an artist living and working in New York City. Butler's Gender Trouble had come out recently and it had a big impact on art practice, particular film, video, performance and photography based art works. But the understanding of the performativity of gender led to some very simplistic theories that gender was a choice, drag was something you decided on or worse, a commodity, identity was something to be consumed. It was clear to me that though it was important to critique essentialist readings of gender, it didn't mean that the regime of gender under patriarchy wasn't operating in ways that were incredibly subtle, sometimes obvious and sometimes not and that knowledge of the regime and a criticism of it, didn't lead to instant self-emancipation from its more insidious effects, both institutional sexism but also processes and effects that are often unconscious and therefore much harder to fight against. This idea influenced my performance strategy. So instead of fake mustaches, wigs and other obvious signs of masking that are very crude I wanted a more subtle strategy in order to embody the subtlety of how this regime operates, rather than something imposed from the outside, it is as much about effects that are produced on the inside on the subject — and I think psychoanalysis of course addresses this to some extent. Hence also the importance of language in these works.

My earliest performance-based video works (from 2000-2002) focused on language, psychology and gender. The following four videos I will screen all use the close-up shot. I am intrigued by the psychic space opened up by the close-up shot, which the video camera turns into a performative space. The tension between an internal psychic space and an external social space is best articulated in my videos on the level of language where the utterances of my characters suggest both external speech and interior monologue.

Running:

I play three different characters, a man, a woman and a child, all of who offer contrasting versions of their family history. On the most fundamental level the video is actually just one person saying the same thing over and over again into the camera, however through the use of repetition and variation in language, a story slowly unfolds.

Theatre:

In this video I play two characters that can be seen as two distinct people and also as different sides of the same self. The two characters are completing each other's sentences and reliving a moment when both, or perhaps only one of them, first came on stage. What happens onstage parallels what happens off stage, what happens backstage influences what happens onstage. However in the video no stage is ever seen, time and place are presented solely through language. Physical and mental space collapse into one, allowing the backstage world to function in part (but not only) as a metaphor for the unconscious. The language hovers between speech and thought, collapsing stage directions ("i.e. "I enter", "I turn to the left" etc), internal thoughts ("I'm nervous") and conventional stage dialogue into one text, giving the narrative its labyrinthine structure.

Father & Son:

Filmed in a single take, this video is a dialogue for one person. A man talks to his son or alternately, a younger self. The ambiguity is deliberate as a single face shifts between two characters and between speech and memory.



Janus:

In this video I play two characters that speak with the same voice. They both express the same frustrated desire to either completely merge with the other or alternatively, completely separate from each other. The couple can be seen as two distinct people and also as different sides of the same individual.

A more recent example of my work can be found with the video **Avalon** (11:23 min, HD video, 2011). In 2001, in an unnamed Asian country, a man known as F.R., was given \$700 USD by his father and told to make something of himself. F. R. founded a multi-million dollar clandestine company that secretly exports fetish wear to the West. The dozens of mostly female workers believe themselves to be sewing body bags for the US military, jackets for psychiatric patients and props for circus animals. **Avalon** combines documentary footage from the factory with staged scenes, shot on a purpose built film set in Bristol, speculating on the end users of the products. The staged scenes, based upon extensive research and interviews with real life persons, present an actor playing a client of a dungeon undergoing a role-play session purporting to provide intense psychological experiences. In **Avalon I** take the true story of F.R. as the point of departure for a complex meditation on the links between affect, labor and commodity under contemporary global conditions. Juxtaposing the world of the stage with the world of the factory, and performativity with production, the film probes the different but interlocking forms that work takes today, from the production of goods to the production of subjectivity.

Avalon thus was my effort to bring the world of the factory closer to the world of the stage — meaning looking at both as sites for labor, generation of surplus value and production of subjectivities that are economic rather than social, with the result, as Deleuze & Guattari pointed out so long ago, that desire is experienced either as a blocked drive under the guise of alienated labor or as a dizzying imperative to consume. People have commented that *Avalon* is incredibly focused, exhibiting a formal restraint in accord with the erotic restraining devices whose manufacture we are shown. This restraint, this stylization of gesture, brings with it a rigor which almost turns the film into an allegorical tableau. *Avalon's* formal restraint in is indeed concordant with the restraining devices depicted in the film and this concordance was something I consciously worked with in *Avalon* in order to underscore how effectively and absolutely the modern work place harnesses and directs desire towards ends deemed productive. The sites in the five scenes are sites of labor and/or consumption since the flip side of the modern cubicle is the supersized mall, the latter acting as a sort of safety valve for the former. Thus there is no eruption of movement in *Avalon* but neither is there absolute stasis. My aim was to depict desire as neither totally blocked nor totally free but instead tensely hovering between the two. If the recuperation of desire by capital was final and total, there'd be no hope, but at this present historical juncture, there is no clear roadmap for liberation either. Thus an eruption if there is to be one, if there can be one, must come from the viewer.

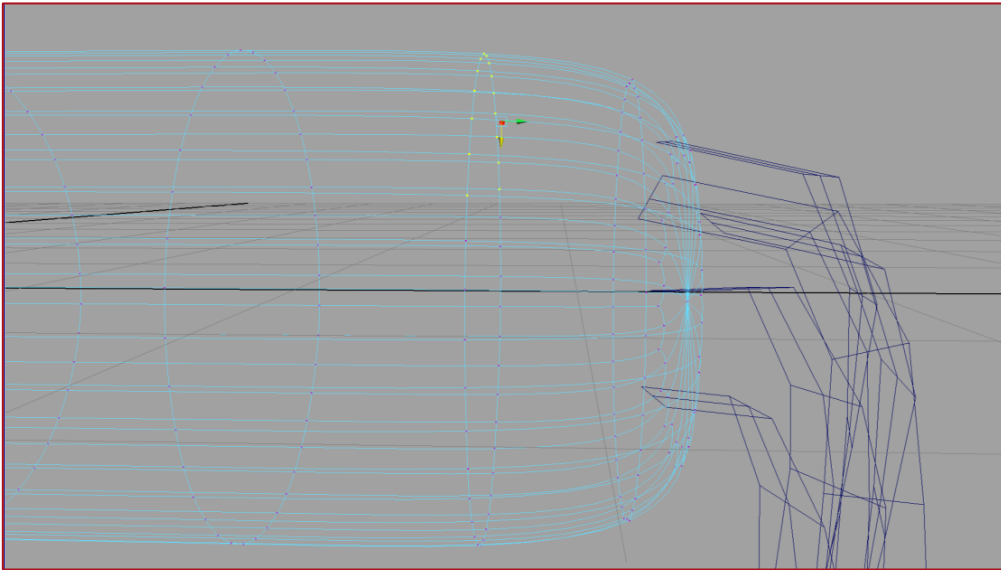




Video Still. Avalon (2011), Maryam Jafri



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Video Still. *Avalon* (2011), Maryam Jafri