

A dark, atmospheric photograph of a building at night. The scene is dimly lit, with several bright, out-of-focus lights reflecting on a wet surface, possibly a street or a pool. The building's structure is partially visible in the shadows. The overall mood is mysterious and evocative.

Keren Cytter

Based on a
True Story

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Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens
and at Centennial Square

Curated by Helena Reckitt

Keren Cytter: The Whole Lie

by Helena Reckitt

Confusion and irritation, as much as pleasure and surprise, are likely responses to Keren Cytter's work. With their looping narratives, images and phrases recycled between scenes and characters, and subtitled dialogues in assorted languages, Cytter's short films confound as much as they seduce. Watching Cytter's work, the viewer is likely to shout, as Bruce Nauman did in his 1968 piece of the same name, "Get out of my mind, get out of this room!" Nauman is one of the few contemporary artists that Cytter has claimed to admire, and his penchant for using repetitive phrases and gestures to create a restless, anxious mood is one shared by Cytter.

Typically completing a film within a month, Cytter works at a furious pace. Until recently her films were shot mainly in her apartment and performed by her friends. The script is the longest part to develop (about 80% of her time, Cytter has estimated), with filming following for two days and editing for a week or two. Despite the films' chaotic feel, improvisation plays no part in their process. "I don't like collaborations," Cytter commented in a conversation with Rhizome; "I think it's a compromise."¹ Writing up to the last minute, Cytter gives actors their scripts the day before filming starts, sometimes the day itself. The strategy is deliberate. "They don't have much space to express themselves, also I don't like so much that they will express themselves," she's explained, adding: "It's embarrassing me to be emotional from the character[']s point of view because I don't care about them so much [...] they all the time sound a bit disconnected from themselves."² Not given the chance to "act," performers end up becoming "prisoners of the text," as writer Travis Jeppesen observed.³

A self-confessed Internet addict, Cytter used to run a blog (sillycatholic.blogspot.com) and regularly uploads

her films onto Vimeo (vimeo.com/kerencytter). Her art captures the intensity of our media-saturated culture, where images, stories and events go viral and we broadcast our lives almost as they happen. She samples voraciously from culture high and low, and draws inspiration from whatever she encounters: fiction by Jorge Luis Borges or Julio Cortázar; films by John Cassavetes or Roman Polanski; slasher movies, film noir, melodramas, chick flicks, or news reports. Sometimes Cytter hears a piece of music and decides to build a film around it. She has a proclivity for middle-brow, schmaltzy numbers, movie soundtracks, and compositions by the virtuoso pianists Ferrante & Teicher, "the grand twins of the twin grands," whose wonky recording of "Jungle Rhumba" she heard in a Jack Smith film and then used for the opening shots of *Four Seasons* (2009).

Working intensively since she graduated from Amsterdam's de Ateliers in 2003, Cytter has made over forty videos (or films, as she prefers to call them). She has also written novels, a libretto, and a book of crossword puzzles; made drawings; and in 2010 established the touring dance company, Dance International Europe Now (D.I.E. Now). Her choice to take on multiple projects seems designed above all to prevent boredom—in herself as much as her audience. It is as if everyone these days suffers from attention deficit disorder. A subtitle in one film, *Video Art Manual* (2011) (not included in this exhibition), reads: "If you offer any human being one second of boredom, he'll think about death." Providing incessant visual stimuli, she piles on sensational devices and lo-fi theatrics, from fake blood to an exploding Christmas tree and close-ups of a masturbating man. She also revels in experimental cinematic techniques: hand-held camerawork, jump cuts, split-screens, double

Cover: Keren Cytter, *Four Seasons* (video still; detail), 2009, video, 12 minutes.

Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Christian Nagel, Berlin.



exposures, non-naturalistic lighting, out-of-sync dubbing, and portentous voiceovers. On occasion Cytter has cheekily lured viewers to her work under false pretenses: mis-stating the running time of the sixteen-minute *Untitled* (2009) as nine minutes when it debuted at the 2009 Venice Biennale, and including one of her heroes, the tennis player Roger Federer, in the credits to *Four Seasons* and *Les Ruissellements du Diable (The Whisper of the Devil)* (2008) although he played no part in these films.

Despite, or perhaps because of, her work's frenetic innovation, it presents legacies of experimental art in a somewhat quizzical light, as if to ask what an artist today can do that hasn't already been done. Treading a fine line between saluting and parodying the avant-garde, Cytter's work combines the desire to make serious art with a keen awareness of the absurdity of this ambition. She has spoken about how she enjoys tricking her viewers "into thinking they are watching an art film, and then inserting something really stupid."⁴ Of the twin poles of seriousness and humour in her work, she has

claimed: "The humour comes out of embarrassment and the serious parts come out of stress."⁵

Giving tangible presence to the camera's materiality is a key avant-garde trope that Cytter has absorbed. For instance, in *Der Spiegel (The Mirror)* (2007), which was filmed in one take, actors step out of character to address the viewer, comment on subtitles, and recite stage directions in between puffs on cigarettes. Meanwhile the camera performs two swooping figure eight movements, of which Cytter has said nonchalantly: "I thought [...] if I'm an artist I need to have some symbolism," and that eight was an easy figure to remember.⁶ In *Avalanche* (2011) a character reviews the camera that the film is shot with while the lens demonstrates the qualities that he describes. Cytter treats both high art and popular culture with a mixture of enthusiasm and suspicion. It's a classic case of wanting to have her cake and eat it too—and then, as in *Avalanche*, making it explode.

Cytter is similarly ambivalent about her work's capacity to evoke emotion. The tricks that she uses to produce

Above: Keren Cytter, *Der Spiegel (The Mirror)* (video still), 2007, video, 4 minutes, 30 seconds. Image courtesy of the artist and Pilar Corrias, London.

strong affective responses—from dramatic music, striking lighting, and sensationalist plots—feel deliberately clichéd. The writer Avi Pitchon, in conversation with Cytter, identified her use of cliché as one that demonstrates “a difficulty that is not only yours, but exists in all cinematic or artistic work—how do you mediate an emotion?” In response, Cytter commented: “A cliché for me is an absolute truth, it is like the practical bible, it is something that passed through many people and it is this one sentence that stuck with them all.”⁷

For all the labyrinthine complexity of her plots, they are perhaps the least interesting aspect of her work. Certainly they are the elements that seem to engage her the least. She has described her stories as “gossip” and claimed that “there’s no story you didn’t hear before,” including those that she tells.⁸ By recycling pre-existing narratives, she avoids the demand to be original. She is more interested in how to structure her stories, with their musical sense of rhythmic composition and repetition, than in details of the stories themselves. Fragmentation and disorientation run amok as her films break narrative conventions. Day abruptly changes to night and back again; characters exchange places and identities; actors appear trapped in solipsistic monologues even when speaking to each other. Locations are scrambled, too, as in a game of exquisite corpse. In *Avalanche*, one minute we are in Berlin (where two actors confusingly discuss moving to the city), the next we’re in London (in the area north of Oxford Street close to the two galleries where the work debuted).⁹ Weather conditions in the film also change mysteriously. First we’re on a snowy street; then we see a runner pumping artificial snow into the set; later, in an arrestingly beautiful scene, snow falls inside an apartment.

Almost everything in Cytter’s aesthetic vocabulary is purloined. She even attributes the start of her making films to an act of theft, claiming, “My father bought a camera and I stole it.”¹⁰ It’s as if she has no choice but to steal from her forebears, reflecting the “anxiety of influence” that Harold Bloom ascribed to Modernist writers. But where Bloom evoked a fierce Œdipal struggle between the generations, “even to the death,” Cytter and her contemporaries revel in their cultural inheritance

and accept their susceptibility to influence. Of critics who have written about her work, Cytter has said, “some say I’m original, some say I’m not original. And I believe all of them.”¹¹

Cytter’s preoccupation with intimate relationships further reveals her attitudes towards originality and cliché. She presents heterosexual love as a hallucination, a claustrophobic script doomed to repeat ad infinitum. The only time people smile is when they are gripped by romantic delusion. The male protagonist of *Four Seasons* confuses the female actor with Stella, à la Tennessee Williams’s *A Street Car Named Desire*. While protesting that her name is Lucy, she seems to accept his version of herself. She dreamily describes how her head was smashed in, her ribs kicked, and she fell to her death. While we never see her harmed, rivers of blood flow from the male character’s arm as he takes a bath. With a nod to the spiral imagery in Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* and its tale of impersonation and sexual obsession, Lucy/Stella repeatedly climbs a spiral staircase, dressed in leopard print and a red sweater like a classic femme fatale.

Indeed, in Cytter’s works sexual desire is a hall of mirrors. *Les Ruissellements du Diable* is based around a photograph of an encounter in the park. The plot is inspired by Michelangelo Antonioni’s 1966 film *Blow-Up*, and the 1959 story that he drew from, *Las Babas del Diablo* by Julio Cortázar. The male and female protagonists are both translators and amateur photographers who enlarge a photograph that might offer clues to a crime. As the film progresses these characters appear to merge into the same person as they smoke the same cigarette and drink from the same mug. Imagery redolent of male orgasm—of wine bottles pouring, taps running, and unanswered phones ringing—is juxtaposed with close-ups of a man masturbating, suggesting that the object of male desire is an unobtainable fantasy, always out of reach. At one point, while appearing on TV, the female actor announces that she’s just realized she doesn’t exist.

While the staging of self is an oft-discussed aspect of Cytter’s art, less noted is how identity is *pre-formed* as much as *performed*. Fate seems predestined, with the joke and the tragedy being that we act as if it’s not. Foreshadowing is made explicit in *Untitled* where the



denouement—of a young boy who shoots his father's lover in a jealous pique—is initially deferred and the events leading up to it repeated. The middle-aged woman in *Der Spiegel* prepares to meet a potential lover, while a chorus of younger women spitefully calls attention to her age and aging body. At one point they cover her in a towel and block her from view as one declares: "Subtitles and young bodies are better than old woman [sic]." The first potential mate to arrive dismisses her, claiming he wants a child, not a woman. A second man, also naked and this time on all fours, states flatly that he has been looking for the woman his whole life, "everywhere but here." This time she rejects him. The sense that these roles will play out endlessly is underlined as characters swiftly exit and reenter the empty apartment. "Woman, woman, where are you?" cries the man; "Mann, mann, wo bist du?" cries the woman, before the film loops to start over again.

Confusing distinctions between performance and rehearsal, both *Untitled* and *Der Spiegel* reference John Cassavetes's 1977 film *Opening Night*, in which Gena Rowlands's character prepares to play the role of a woman who is unable to accept that she is aging. With its comment on the pressure for women to remain young and beautiful, and of men searching for ever-younger lovers, there's a feminist edge to this work. But where Cytter frequently explores sexual dynamics and politics—from gender construction to the melancholia entailed by assuming a fixed sexual identity—it's hard to claim a coherent feminist agenda for her art. Her gender politics are too ambivalent and wayward to line up behind any clear polemic.

Characters speak and behave horribly to one another, but with a lackadaisical aggression that is so absurd it cannot cause offence. Three tales of violence and destruction that circulated on the Internet provide the basis for

Above: Keren Cytter, *Four Seasons* (video stills), 2009, video, 12 minutes. Images courtesy of the artist and Galerie Christian Nagel, Berlin.



Keren Cytter, *Les Ruissellements du Diable (The Whisper of the Devil)* (video stills), 2008, video, 10 minutes.
Images courtesy of the artist, Galerie Christian Nagel, Berlin, and Pilar Corrias, London.



Cross.Flowers.Rolex (2009). A woman calmly serves tea to the police after her husband has shot her twice in the head; a man is stabbed to death within five seconds of stepping out onto the street; another man survives two efforts to jump to his death from the fifth floor of his building. After the second suicide attempt, his girlfriend stands over him and states dryly: “You dumb piece of meat. I guess I don’t miss you. I guess I don’t forgive you.” Technically proficient but unexciting drawings of a cross, flowers and Rolex watch, commissioned by Cytter, complete the installation. Sentimentality is outlawed. It’s “blood, sweat, no tears,” as a character in *Rolex* says.

Things take a more psychological turn in *Avalanche*, where the central male actor claims to hate ducks and women for “the way they talk, the way they walk, the way they eat.” A flashback to a childhood piano lesson with a sadistic teacher suggests the origins of his trauma. Yet where Cytter gestures towards the language of therapy

and confession, her art offers little by way of psychological insight. She revels in speech and linguistic free association but more, we suspect, to indulge in the sound and texture of particular words and languages than to delve deeply into what anyone really means. Evoking this characteristic, an actor in *Avalanche* admits: “To be honest I do not understand a word or gesture around me. I do understand the edge of the talk and the tip of the gesture, that stretches away like a dream to my mind.”

In 2009 Cytter cast trained actors and, for the first time, shot before a live audience at the Hebbel am Ufer theater in Berlin. The resulting film, *Untitled*, differs intriguingly from her previous works. Receiving their scripts a week in advance, this time actors not only learned their lines but they invested them with dramatic and psychological resonance. Their performances tap into a naturalist tradition that is quite distinct from the alienated aesthetic and deliberately “bad” acting that

Above: Keren Cytter, *Cross.Flowers.Rolex* (video still), 2009, three-channel video installation with three drawings. Image courtesy of Pilar Corrias, London.



Keren Cytter, *Untitled* (video stills), 2009, video, 16 minutes.
Images courtesy of the artist and Galerie Christian Nagel, Berlin.



Cytter's films typically cultivate. With a plot that unfolds in real time—and is not subjected to the temporal distortions Cytter frequently introduces while editing—*Untitled* possesses an unexpected narrative cohesion and emotional impact. Perhaps not surprisingly, Cytter has expressed ambivalence about this work, describing the actors' display of emotions as “embarrassing” and “a bit over the top.”¹²

Untitled anticipated the next big shift in Cytter's work towards writing and directing live performance. The idea to form a dance company developed from a commission from the curatorial platform *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want to be Part of Your Revolution*, for a series they were developing around performance. As Cytter explains: “We had to invent dances because we said, ‘we are a dance company.’”¹³ With no background in creating dance, or even much experience watching it, founding D.I.E. Now forced Cytter to abandon her former skepticism about collaboration and to embrace collective processes.

Dancers in the company—themselves untrained—develop their own movements while Cytter takes responsibility for the script and the direction. Performing at venues including Tate Modern, London; Performa 09, New York; and at the 2012 Images Festival, Toronto, D.I.E. Now expands Cytter's longstanding interest in metaphors of rehearsal, performance and theatricality, and in the translation between different genres and media. Combining dance, dialogue and video, the project most of all shows Cytter's determination to take risks with her work—including those of potential failure.

This loosening of directorial control also informs *Mai Thai University*, a 78-hour poetry writing and drinking marathon devised by Cytter with D.I.E. Now that took place in her apartment and various Berlin dive bars. At the end of the designated period, participants met to read their poems, which are presented in the film *Konstruktion* (2010), along with conversational fragments and shots of Berlin. In contrast to the tight authorial

Above: Keren Cytter, *Konstruktion* (video still), 2010, video, 10 minutes, 14 seconds.
Image courtesy of the artist and Galerie Christian Nagel, Berlin.

constraint of Cytter's earlier films, *Konstruktion* explores what happens when we ditch the script and lose direction. The experience of disorientation so familiar to viewers of Cytter's art is here one that she seeks for herself.

¹ Orit Gat, "Artist Profile: Keren Cytter," *Rhizome*, October 11, 2011, <http://rhizome.org/editorial/2011/oct/11/artist-profile-keren-cytter/> ² Keren Cytter, "Keren Cytter interviewed by Marinella Paderni at OPERE/works," Faenza festival arte Contemporanea, Italy, May 23, 2010. [http://blip.tv/festival-arte-contemporanea/](http://blip.tv/festival-arte-contemporanea/fare-arte-making-art-keren-cytter-3810857) fare-arte-making-art-keren-cytter-3810857. ³ Travis Jeppesen, "Keren Cytter @ Moderna Museet," Whitehot, July 2010. [\[museet/2097\]\(http://www.museet/2097\). ⁴ Avi Picton, "Anyone Who is not Mentally Ill Likes a Happy Ending," in *Keren Cytter: I Was the Good and He Was the Bad and the Ugly*, ed. Hila Peleg \(Frankfurt: Revolver, 2006\), 77. ⁵ Alexander Kennedy, "Keren Cytter," *The List*, August 5, 2007. <http://www.aptgloba.org/view/article.asp?ID=451>. ⁶ Keren Cytter, "Keren Cytter på Moderna Museet," Moderna Museet, Stockholm, May 21, 2010. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ACKjiRERcM>. ⁷ Picton, 76. ⁸ Cytter, "OPERE/works." ⁹ *Avalanche* originally screened as four projected works in two London galleries: Pilar Corrias Gallery and The David Roberts Art Foundation, 14 January–12 March 2011. ¹⁰ Gat, "Artist Profile: Keren Cytter." ¹¹ Cytter, "OPERE/works." ¹² *Ibid.* ¹³ Daniel Birnbaum, "True Lies," *Artforum*, March 2010, 196.](http://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/2010-keren-cytter-moderna-</p></div><div data-bbox=)