

EGO SHOW

VIBEKE VIBOLT KNUDSEN

The audience steps directly onto the stage in Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen's *EgoShow*, unavoidably becoming part of the show. You can let yourself be seduced, feel uncomfortable, or reject it – but her point is quite simply that without audience participation in some form or another the work does not exist.

Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen works in a region where documentaries, music video, art film, and performance art meet and intersect, all viewed in an anthropological and social-cultural perspective with a large dash of humour and irony added to the mix. Indeed, the ego show is no exception in this regard – it holds all the ingredients for which she is famous. The exhibition is a confident and stylistically assured investigation of the relationships between gender, identity, and society, and in particular of the paradoxes inherent in these phenomena. By telling stories, documenting facts and making comments she will, rhetorically, entertain, inform and move her audience, involving them emotionally and reflectively in what she depicts.

The symbolic stage which the audiences find themselves standing on the moment they enter the room is marked by means of a tight, transparent curtain which the artist copied from a Marlene Dietrich concert. From this place visitors can take a wider view of the exhibition. In the middle of the room is a large metal cage, either end of which is fitted with screens that allow rear projections of videos to be viewed from inside and out-

side the cage. The title of the installation, *CockFight*, refers to the documentary shown at one end of the cage. In the film shown at the other end the artist appears in the costume of a rooster singing a song about itself entitled *CockSong*. The third piece of the exhibition is also a video work. It is projected straight onto the wall like a cone of light in which the artist appears from time to time, belting out a ditty about herself entitled *EgoSong*. The works may seem very different at first glance, but on closer inspection they turn out to have quite a lot in common. Conceptually and structurally they have clearly been conceived as parts of a whole.

CockFight In its point of departure, *CockFight* is a narrative about a sport popular in the Philippines. The place was not chosen at random: Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen is of part Philippine and part Danish descent, and even though she has lived in Denmark for most of her life she retains ties to the Philippines, returning there for several of her productions. In her documentary about cockfights she sought out the large venue of Araneta Coliseum in Manila, where the sport and the gambling that surrounds it has become part of an efficient set-up that stages cockfights every day until late into the night. The video comes very close to being a conventional documentary piece; this contrasts strongly with other of her documentary pieces which consistently make breaks with the principles of detachment and objectivity. The video takes a systematic approach, follows a tight structure, and relates a long story in three brief chapters. The image and sound is supplemented by texts which provide a section-by-section description of the background and meaning of the events depicted, of the birds and the game.

The texts accompanying the documentary tell the audience that cockfighting, *sabong*, is the national sports of the Philippines. The roosters are tended with great care by their owners, who spend hundreds of pesos on vitamins as well as on illegal substances such as strychnine and amphetamines to make the birds more aggressive and ready to kill. The spurs are sawn off and replaced with razors, and regardless of the final outcome,

both the winning and losing bird are in a bad state with punctured lungs, broken wings, or eyes gauged out. The fight is not over until the winner pecks the beaten bird twice with his beak. If he makes only one peck or runs away, the match is considered a draw. The losing bird might be buried by its devoted owner, but if not, it becomes part of a dish prepared according to a special recipe whereas the feathers are used for dusters.

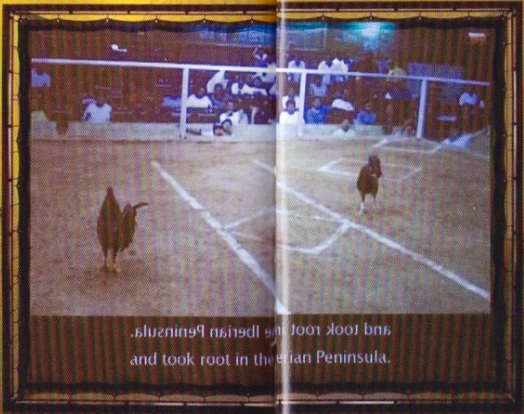
The bird owners identify with their birds; they represent his masculinity, acting as his stand-in in the fight. To keep his vitality intact the owner abstains from sex before a match, and it is said that overall, owners of fighting cocks spend more time training and caressing their birds than they do with their wives in the bedroom. Aficionados of the sport hold the conviction that if a menstruating woman touches a rooster before a fight it will lose; if a widow touches it, it will die; but if a virgin touches it, it will win.

The fight itself focuses on the bookmaker. He is called Kristo because his outstretched arms make him look like Christ on the cross. In a true chaos of bidding he registers all bids, helped only by his memory and a specialised sign language which everyone knows and understands. *Sabong* is a matter of honour; it is based on honesty and trust, and everyone (usually) honours their bets.

With her documentary approach to the subject matter, Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen has a certain degree of solidarity with her chosen topic, but at the same time it takes on a certain twist with its interplay between image and text - this is particularly clear in the section about the birds. Like an anthropologist, Cuenca Rasmussen makes field studies, observing, analysing, and arriving at her conclusions. Like a journalist, however, she also makes critical comments on her chosen subject matter.

The first section of *CockFight* shows an entire fight. Such fights typically last around 20 seconds, during which time a sudden silence falls upon the audience as they follow the action with intense concentration. The violent action speaks for itself in a close-up of the razor around the rooster's leg - an image that serves as the opening image of the documentary. The accompanying text states that the sport can be viewed as a remnant







left over from the Spanish colony days and the frustration that followed in the wake of the Spanish oppression. As the birds weaken to the point where they can barely stand and the camera pans across the audience, the text lists different meanings of words such as e.g. the word for rooster, which is also a word for being proud, whereas the word for „hen“ refers to being cowardly. „Birig“ is the term used for the rooster’s mating dance, but the word is also used about a man making advances to a woman. As in the rest of the video, the audio track consists of real-life sounds and the images alternate between rapid and longer clips, from the fighting cocks to the audience and back again until the match is finally declared a draw because the winner refuses to deliver the two obligatory pecks with the beak.

Sabong is clearly a man’s sport (only a small handful of women appear in the video). The headline to part two, “The Cocks” does not only refer to the birds themselves; it is also a metaphor for man – who appears as frequently in the video as the birds. The section is cut and commented in a manner which makes man and animal seem as one in places.

The opening scene shows a rooster parading the arena, presenting his full splendour. The scene then rapidly changes to one of a rooster pecking at its lifeless opponent. The text comments on this scene by telling us about the rooster’s killing instinct which kicks in as soon as territorial borders need defending. The following cut shows two men confronting each other, each holding up a bird. After this symbolic act the fight begins. The cocks inflate themselves, crow loudly and bask their wings, sending feathers flying as we are told the story about the widow, the virgin, and the menstruating woman. The last part of the section relates the story of the owners’ gentle care of their birds. We see an owner feeding and caressing his bird with slow strokes down its colourful, glossy plumage, and the text tells us that his wife likes him doing that better than hanging out in bars. In contrast to the noise and excitement of the arena, this section moves at a sedate pace; everything remains calm and quiet, even as we finally see and read about the mutilated birds, bereft of all their glory. Everything seems to be taking place in an atmosphere of relaxed dignity.

With the final section of the gambling that constitutes the heart of the game, we find ourselves back in the arena. Everything seems chaotic; the camera zooms in and out between the wildly gesticulating gamblers as the bookmakers dash around making notes of the bids coming in from all sides all at once. The documentary records the body language in its totality, supplemented by close-ups of faces and money changing hands. Thus, it focuses both on the group and on the individuals; on how the individuals interact within the group. The text provides an account of the rules and of what happens if they are not followed, quite literally illustrated with a picture of the arena exit. The whole thing is symbolically rounded off in text and images by a winning bird pecking at its dead opponent and by the two combatants being carried out.

The Cock Like other documentaries, the story of the cockfight itself is an edited interpretation of a particular slice of reality, but it pales against the artist's video performance at the other end of the cage. Here, she appears costumed as a boastful and dilapidated rooster, styled with perfect make-up and bright feathers. Accompanied by a hard electronic beat she dances and raps her way through a song about the cock's ego.

Her performance in *CockSong* begins with close-ups of the rooster staring straight into the camera, and with shots of the head moving from side to side in abrupt jerky movements. Using an almost whispery, threatening tone it enunciates the words „cock – cock suck“. Throughout the entire video, spectators are constantly fixed by the dancing bird who engages them directly with its song, presented alternately in either full shots or close-ups of its eye or mouth – or, with even greater impact, of one eye only. Using an ambiguous, sensuous mix of masculine aggression and ingratiating femininity in her body language and gestures, the artist gives her account of life as it forms itself for a cock ready to fight. From start to finish it maintains an interior monologue throughout the fight; a monologue which shows no faltering of the inflated ego: "Powerful, persistent and proud/a cock makes man's world go 'round", or, "Look at me/I am a deity/important





to society/there's no use in being humble". Even when the cock suffers and is frustrated by being subject to the control of men:" [...] the game would be (much) nicer/if I were a man", even then it has to follow the rules of the game and masculinity:"Lying in the ring in great pain/I check out my feathers, in vain/showing emotions is pointless/I can keep the coolest surface".

As usual, Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen takes a direct approach, having no interest in the finer nuances when she wants to communicate a message. Her performance is spectacular and effective, carried out with a keen sense of precision and timing, and it is hardly a coincidence that her cockfight ends with a dead bird. It breathes its last breath in a long sigh as it collapses in slow-motion. But it is not over yet. In a final cut we see a frontal view of the head, and now we are no longer fixed by the cock's insistent gaze – its eyes are closed.

CockSong is driven forwards by dynamic cuts, a rapid pace, and monotonous pounding music vibrating through one's body as a strong contrast to the third and final video of the exhibition, a piece which is highly minimalist and static in its performative idiom.

The Sun *EgoSong* is nothing less than a song to celebrate the self, an apotheosis, a piece which frames lines such as "I am the centre of the universe" and "[...] pleasing my EGO is my goal". The artist is dressed as the sun - what else could she wear in such a set-up? Dressed in a yellow suit and gold shoes, golden nails, gold glitter and a blonde wig, she presents a luminous figure, the yellow sun disc on her back an integrated part of her character. Bathed in bright lights and accompanied by a single oboe and a clarinet, she communicates her message in a droning, not particularly pleasant voice. She clearly mimes the cabaret genre in terms of both style and atmosphere, standing immobile in front of an equally immobile camera that records her eloquent facial expressions and arm movements. Like the stage curtain, the blonde wig is a reference to Marlene Dietrich – she acts as Cuenca Rasmussen's role model, although this should not be



taken too literally; it merely hints at the surfaces which the artist stages with her song.

Calculating, cat-like and coquettish she sings about the wonders of being on an ego trip, all the while pointing to herself and to her audience. The character's sensitive and confessional self is hardly plagued by subtle self-reflection, as is evident as one peruses the lyrics: "Brand name clothes and objects of quality/help build up my solid identity", "positive credit I gladly embrace/but criticism is so much harder to face" or "I subsist on attention and praise/how to handle responsibility/when selfishness is the utility", and more in the same vein. Everything rhymes, the linguistic puns are elegant (or not!), and the tongue remains firmly lodged in cheek – as is accentuated by the chorus which opens every confession with "Call it a Freudian slip".

EgoShow Throughout the show the *CockFight* documentary is played non-stop, providing cohesive, commenting, and abrasive subtitles to the two alternating performance pieces.

By incorporating herself and her body, the artist communicates directly with the spectators. She also demonstrates a self-awareness which just "happens" to be what the entire show is about. In her performance practice she becomes part of a range of characters who are not necessarily identical with the artist's personal self; this despite the fact that there must, unavoidably, be a certain overlap between personal experience and the statements made. It is clear, however, that Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen is first and foremost objectifying her body as subject matter; the focus on the artist's body can

thus be seen as a means of expressing something that resides outside of its own intimate reality. In her work with identity and subjectivity Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen displays her clearest distance to her own self in *EgoSong* where she inscribes herself in a male character who performs. With its treatment of identity and subjectivity, *CockSong* displays the clearest distance to the artist's own self; here, she inscribes herself in a male character. The borders seem rather more blurred in *EgoSong*, whose form and substance is almost reflexively ascribed to the artist's own gender, the gender she represents. Were it not for the explicit irony of her performative actions, she might be perceived as being one with her character. However, the self speaking – and that goes for both performance pieces – is not authentic, but fictitious.

It is in fact a complex interplay that takes place between the two characters – the cock and the sun, as their stereotypical gender assignments slowly dissolve before the spectators' eyes. In *EgoSong* the woman sings about the shopping culture and the commodification and commercialisation of society that has turned it into a place where identity and lifestyle is something you buy. Family and friends are replaced like merchandise in the narcissistic quest to satisfy one's own needs; a satisfaction which is, paradoxically enough, deeply contingent on external validation. Tradition dictates that women represent the character described in the song, but the artist's contemporary criticism of the modern individual's rampant self-centring and self-awareness makes little distinction in its treatment of gender and identity. After all, what gender is the sun?

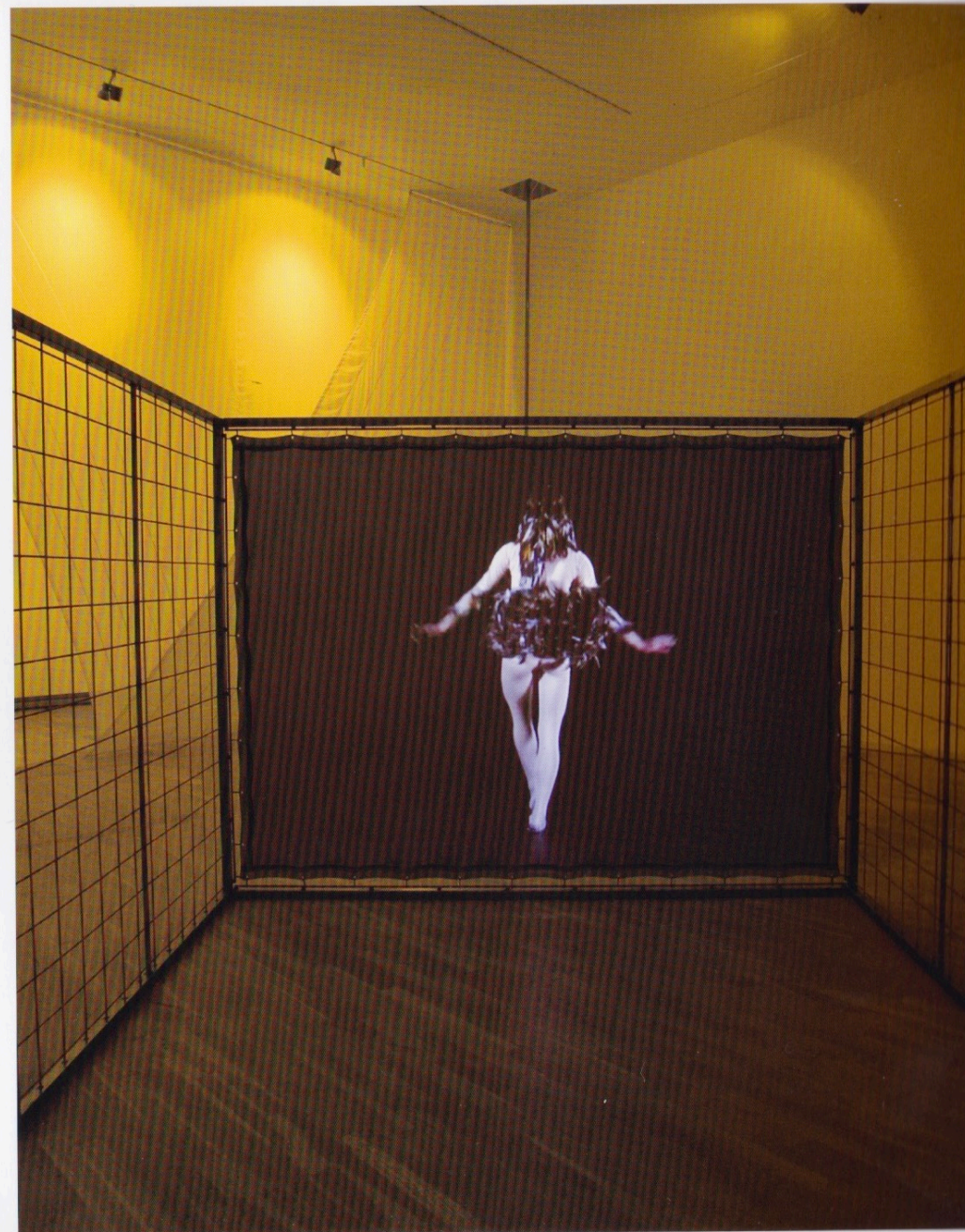
The demonstrative self-aggrandisement is no less explicit in *CockSong*, which obviously

plays on the *double entendre* inherent in the word “cock”. Nevertheless, traditional gender distinctions also threaten to collapse here. True, the rooster is incontestably male, and attention is focused on a stereotypically gendered male behaviour. However, the rooster (i.e. the man) is aware of its lack of freedom and of its impossible winner/loser role in a hardcore macho culture. Nonetheless, his egosong is performed by a woman; just as the whole thing has been staged by a woman as a self-aware, critical comment on a patriarchal society where the social and gender-political codes are basically about the same thing even though they take on different shapes according to geography and culture.

The works put our society and traditional views on gender up for discussion – a discussion where gender, in particular, is gradually displaced, making it difficult to determine which gender is speaking.

Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen’s gendered and artistic crossovers constitute a dynamic staging of historical and cultural differences as well as similarities. She does not, however, posit the stage curtain and the birdcage in her installation in order to recreate time and space as representations; she does it in order to conjure up a striking image, one that affects the spectator. The cage is a man-sized reproduction of the birdcage, and if you enter it you cannot avoid being physically and bodily affected by the violent discharges of energy from either end of the cage. In a way, spectators are forced to be reflexive and emotional co-creators, participating in the events. You become symbolically trapped in the cage and, in the final analysis, in your own self and your own body – just like the cabaret character, who is trapped within her own ego while pointing to herself and her audience.

The singing egos and the bloody ritual of the cockfights are encapsulated by the large curtain and the dramatic spotlights capturing the visitors entering and leaving the room. Thus Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen demonstrates how everything – gender and identity, culture and society – are constructs, presenting this message as entertaining theatre in the midst of all the seriousness.





EGOSHOW

Scenetæppe/(Stage) Curtain. 2005. Ostelærred/Cheesecloth. 13,12 x 5,68 m

The EgoSong 2005

Rund/round videoprojektion på malet væg/on painted wall,
med lyd/with sound, dia.: 2,2 m, 5:13 min.

Komponist/Composer: Dan Marmorstein

Tekst/Lyrics: Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen

Obo: Max Artved

Klarinet/Clarinet: Søren Elbo

Teknik/Technician: Karl Bjerre Skibsted

Kamera/Camera: Jesper Jon Sørensen

Kostume/Costume: Sara Sachs

Redigering/Editor: Niels Plenge

Ide/Idea og/and Performance af/by Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen

The CockFight

Videoinstallation med lyd/with sound, metalbur/metal cage, 2,25 x 5x3 m,
to bagprojektioner/two rear projections: CockFight, 8:10 min., loop, CockSong, 2:55 min.

Musik/Music: Track72

Lyd/Sound: Niels Plenge

1st kamera/camera: Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen

2nd kamera/camera: Jesper Jon Sørensen

Make-up: Mia Dehs

Kostume/Costume: Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen

Medinstruktion/Co-Direction: Marie Rømer Westh

Redigering/Editor: Niels Plenge

Ide/Idea og/and Performance: Lilibeth Cuenca Rasmussen