



ELLEN HARVEY

Ellen Harvey's work operates within a paradox. It is developed between the projects of "beautification" and the effort to deconstruct notions of beauty. Harvey plays in the social arena of notions of beauty. There is the personal investment in the desire for beauty, formation of subjectivity, or institutional critique. At the Kwangu Biennial in Korea, Harvey dealt with self-portraiture in opposition to the van Gogh *cliché* of the self-represented, tortured artist. She fights against the model of the artist as the one who is emotionally different. The estrangement now seems to search for the order of the common image, beyond the fetishization of the artist as hero. For the visitors, the memory of her piece depends very much on a familiarity with the Western context of portraiture. To deconstruct the idea of portraiture touches the production of self-image by sitters. Harvey will precipitate the cracking of the narcissistic fantasies in this process.

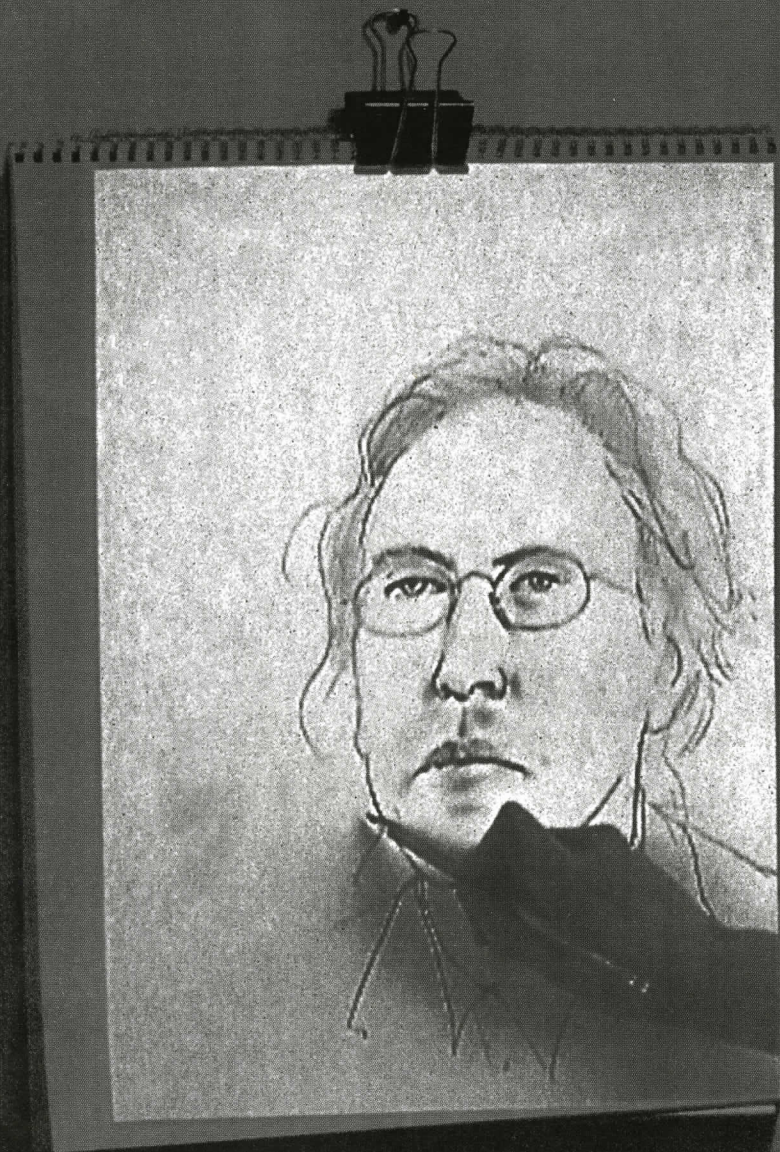
"My work," says Ellen Harvey, "is the use of traditional media to explore what people expect from art, recognize as art, what people mean by *art*. Art for me is very linked to nostalgia." (1) Nostalgia is a feeling very much connected to an idea of a better past or another place, where things were/are better. Harvey works with what she calls "nostalgic technologies" to create ways of seeing the world. Her *New York Beautification Project* is graffiti performed with these "nostalgic technologies." She paints oval landscapes, taken from art history books. Each is a kind of a capriccio displaced from Romanticism, Neoclassicism, or Baroque to the streets of Manhattan. The paintings were done around town, in dumps, walls, stairs, and columns.

In *Strangers/Étrangers* she inscribed her painting in the most unexpected, hidden, and humble spots of the Clocktower Gallery. She has even painted on top of previous graffiti with which she negotiates (or even

negotiates with their authors). This defines rules that avoid a semiological disorder or the political takeover of other people's visual territory. This means the negotiation of her own place in contemporary painting, certainly a territory that is always at the verge of saturation.

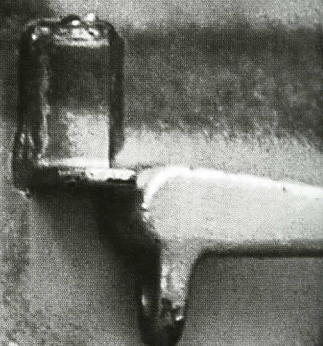
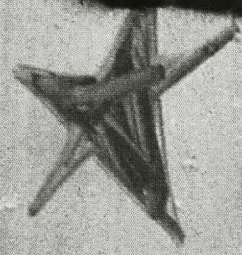
Harvey observes the persistence of the genres, of the media, of taste, of certain aesthetics among the non-expert public. In one of her videos, even the sitter gains a voice to negotiate the fact of being portrayed – i. e., represented – by someone else. "It is so hard for me to understand what people want art for." In social terms, Harvey's doubt is that of the subject that acknowledges the difficulty to understand her social role in a world with no utopias: there is little hope for any future for art except for its exploding role as a commodity. So far, the economy of *New York Beautification Project* seems to be irreducible to a commodity in the market. Harvey is a foreigner to the metropolitan market-place for contemporary art, since it is those works that cause the breakdown of the distribution system of art-as-commodity. However, for Harvey, distribution is not the circulation of goods, but the dispersion of the presence of an image to make accessible to other gazes. Usually, such unexpected viewers are foreign to the restricted group of people of the artistic milieu. Thus the landscapes she copies from books have returned to their condition of being printed matter as she turns them into post-cards to be taken away at the Clocktower show. If, for Harvey, painting is a process of negotiation of its own existence, this also implies the process of its social insertion within the aesthetic clashes between perspectives of the ordinary viewer and the expert's, within the frictions of not-knowing and the excess of knowledge.

(1) All references to Ellen Harvey were annotated from the interview with her on March 19, 2001.





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