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Shari Halt's Paradoxical *Breast Wishes*

Shari Halt, *Breast Wishes*, Galerie Oboro, Montreal. March 28 - April 26 1998

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ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

MONTRÉAL

SHARI HATT'S PARADOXICAL *BREAST WISHES*

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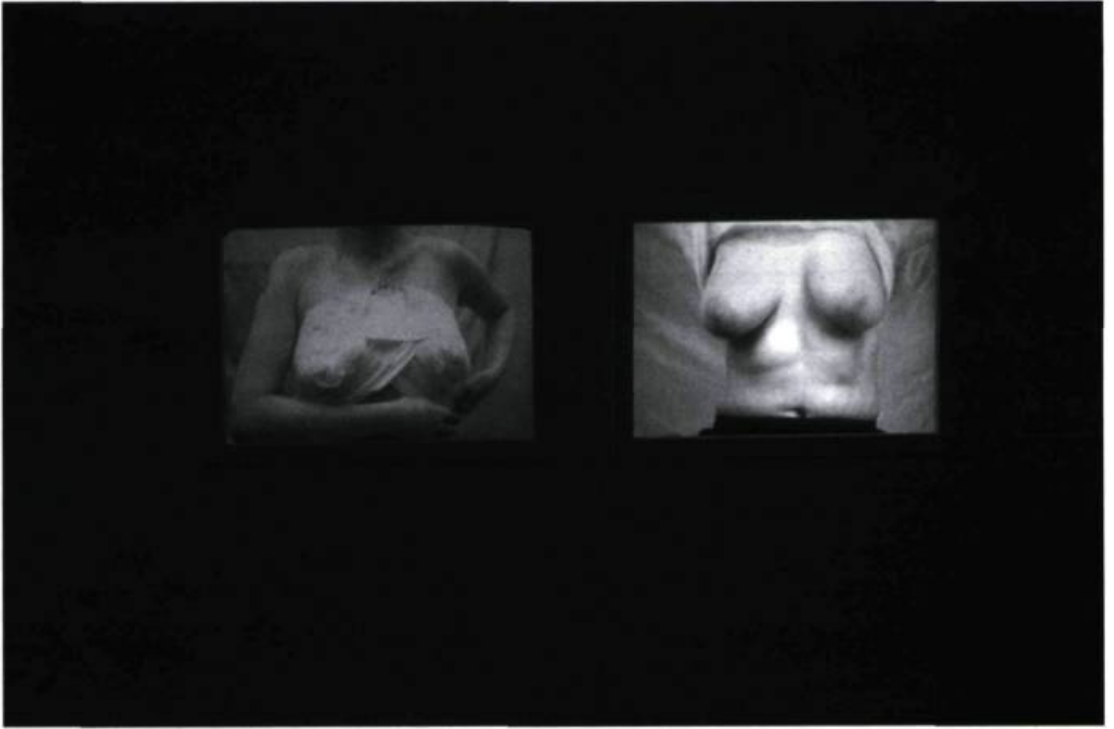
Shari Hatt, *Breast Wishes*. Audiovideo photographic installation in progress since 1993. Detail. Photo: Denis Farley.

Shari Hatt's multi-media installation *Breast Wishes* is made up of five components: a binder containing breast-specific pop culture objects as well as testimonies of breast-related experiences by women; an audio work of the same testimonies; two video monitors set up side by side, showing on one screen the artist removing surgical bandages from her breasts, on the other a series of anonymous women taking off their bras; a photographic grid of eighty-four women's breasts; and finally, two panels, modeled after a butcher chart, which follow the course of the artist through two of her three breast surgeries. When looking at these works the paradoxes inherent to Hatt's "best wishes" emerge for the spectator's consideration.

The first paradox lies in the "rummage sale reception" that informs the moment of reception of the largest work within the installation, the grid of eighty-four photographs of eighty-four women's breasts. Those of you who are aficionados of both church basement rummages and garage sales will know what I am talking about — the moment when you first enter the hall or step onto a stranger's yard to survey objects innumerable spread out in no certain order for your approbation, a kaleidoscopic impression of commodities whose chaotic ordering in that moment refuses any kind of ranking within the set. This

"rummage sale" sensibility cuts a swath through evaluatory differentiators like good/bad, so for the viewer the "ugly" flip-flops with the "beautiful" in her or his attempt to evaluate, to appraise, to choose. Only after prolonged looking do individual elements distinguish themselves from the heterogeneous profusion and present themselves for appraisal. Even then, ranking, editing, selecting is difficult.

This experiential dislocation takes place at a key point in Hatt's work, and helps work against the myth of the standardized, beautiful breast. In order for breasts to be understood as aesthetically pleasing or sexually desirable, they are dependent on the consensus-building of popular, homogenized, collective appraisals of "images of women". The opposite experience takes upon viewing the photographs of the breasts of eighty four women laid out on a grid. Is the prevention of understanding these women's breasts as *sexual* due to their variety in shape, size, colour? Does this dazzled abundance refuse the closure which is a prerequisite to aesthetic authorization? While several of these women certainly bear the markers of "beauty", this is lost in the excess and disjointedness of the larger display. In so doing, it both creates a space for the establishment of Hatt's paradoxes and is itself mobilized by a paradox between the refusal of ranking through the insistent repetition of the anonymous many — where sense dissol-



Shari Hatt, *Breast Wishes*. Audiovideo photographic installation in progress since 1993. Photo: Denis Farley.

ves into non sense – and the disordered variety within the many: the “rummage sale” aesthetic.

The best wishes of Shari Hatt’s *Breast Wishes* go on to be played out through an additional, layered series – the title of the show is taken from the porn movie *Breast Wishes* – but the breasts in the show are precisely positioned as non-pornographic through a multi-pronged refusal of the popular sex ideal of homogeneously shaped breasts. As well, while a significant portion of the installation is given over to many women and their multiple, anonymous experiences and bodies, it is situated in relation to the intensely personal calvary of Hatt’s three breast surgeries. The anonymity of the many versus the almost-unbearable vulnerability brought about by the exposure of the one is played out in its sharp relief in the video installation. The viewer is positioned as a spectator in relation to two experiences : to repeatedly act as the first witness (even before the artist) to the results of the third breast operation, by watching a video of her removing the surgical bandages and the deliberately casual, banal act of eighty-four anonymous women removing their bras. Paradoxically, Hatt’s “stripping” away the bandages creates an enormously affective moment which may be read through her tremulous, hesitant hands, collapsing any distance between her and the viewer, while the banality of the many women “stripping” their bras flatly refuses *any* affective engagement. Both these gestures in turn refuse the pornographic moment of the strip-tease by taking any possibility of a

tease out of their strips. The affective investment of the show rests here and continues in the documentation of Hatt’s operations which are mapped out onto a butcher’s chart. In its usual context, the butcher’s chart carves out the choicest areas of meat “cuts” onto a diagram of a farm animal as an aid for the consumer’s selection. This diagrammatic approach is redeployed to tell one woman’s passage through the medical system. No paradoxes here but rather a critique within the professional doubling of butcher/surgeon and object doubling of farm animal/woman. What is the viewer’s position in relation to this ? The most important paradox rests in the conflicting messages that the show communicates : that “women have the right to the choice to modify their bodies”, and “the uniqueness of every woman’s shape is a thing to celebrate”. The strength of this installation lies within the refusal to resolve these two positions as well as all its other contradictory aspects.

In *Breast Wishes*, Shari Hatt’s best wish was to have her personal experiences function as an affective kernel – around which the experiences of many women could be formed – which would elide the homogenized, stereotypes of “images of women”. The political of the many would be formed around the personal of the one whose affective investment would function as an irritant, driving forward the formation of a common understanding.

MARGOT BOUMAN