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Dialogue: the work of Shelly Silver

Ann Huber-Sigwart interviews Shelly Silver

'Nature is not a separation of water from air or the sky from the earth... but a "working together" or a "playing together" of those elements. That is what we call ecology. Music, as I conceive it is ecological. You could go further and say it is ecology.'

(John Cage For the Birds Marion Boyars Publishers, 1995 p. 229)

The work of Shelly Silver is all about interconnected spaces, a working together of reality and fiction, of thought and of imagination, similar to the description John Cage gives of nature and music, an eco-system where the one cannot exist without the other. The following dialogue was developed by email in November 2001.

Ann Huber-Sigwart: I am interested to know more about your use of the fairy tale. In *37 Stories about Leaving Home* (1996), a folk tale is told alongside the interviews of a group of women from different generations talking about their lost memories or dreams. The interweaving of these two different moments in the narrative emphasises the dilemma each woman seems to experience in her life, especially in relation to either her mother or her daughter. One young woman talks about her mother not being able to love her and another about her inability to confide in her. This sense of ambiguity is then enhanced by the Japanese folk tale of a young woman stolen by a monster, an Oni, who is finally saved by her mother. The folk tale inscribes the whole work and the life stories of these contemporary Japanese women in a mythic time, as if it all belonged to an unchangeable or universal time.

Shelly Silver: There are several reasons I used the Oni story in conjunction with the interviews. First, I thought the folk tale would provide a narrative space that would structurally arc over the whole of the film: framing the film in a storytelling time with a beginning, middle and end. I also thought it would function to pull together the, at times, disparate interviews between and among families. I also very much liked the difference between the neat, matter-of-fact telling of this fantastical tale as opposed to the more complex, intimate, open-ended hanging threads of the women's stories revealed in the interviews.

At the same time, the folk tale grounds the work in a much broader history. The interviews were done with three contemporary generations of Japanese women, spanning the twentieth century, whereas the folk tale refers to a much older time and provides a way in which the distant past could talk to and inform the present. When I was living in Japan, I was struck by the way different layers of history/time – ancient,

dusty post-war, current day – which existed side by side in contemporary Tokyo life. This contiguity of (non-linear) times created an atmosphere unlike any that I had never experienced in Europe or the United States.

Ann Huber-Sigwart: How do you understand the different realities of the tape, which run in parallel, constructing a more complicated narrative?

Shelly Silver: I think of several quick references: from the A.S. Byatt story 'The Eldest Daughter': **“I always believe stories whilst they are being told,” said the Cockroach. “You are a wise creature,” said the Old Woman. “That is what stories are for. And after, we shall see what we shall see.”** Bruno Bettelheim in his *Uses of Enchantment* talks about fairy tales, giving access to the unconscious in ways other forms do not. Calvino in his book *Italian Folktales* makes the bold assertion that **‘folk tales are real’** as they represent **‘the catalogue of the potential destinies of men and women’**, giving access to a complex space where **‘above all, there must be present the infinite possibilities of mutation, the unifying element in everything: men, beasts, plants, things’**.

For me, the Oni story gives access to this complex space where daughters disappear into clouds, monsters get drunk on sake and a priestess appears and disappears at will. This jump into another logical space, a space organised by a different logic, with rules and boundaries all its own, occurs in many of my works. I think most directly of two narrative videos: *Are We All Here?* (1984), where three people involved in a love triangle, and with a ringing of a doorbell, change into each other at all the most inconvenient moments and *The Houses That Are Left* (1991), where dead people can communicate with the living through various consumer electronic devices. In this tape, one of the many quotations I **“borrow”** is a short fragment from Nietzsche: **‘If the possible has become the impossible, I allow myself to believe that the impossible must become possible.’** This quote, the first half of which recognizes an awful wall/block, the second half which wishes for a solution over, under or around this wall, is very possibly the conundrum at the core of my work.

I have an underlying belief in change, even when faced with what must appear as an untenable situation, and a distrust of established systems of thought. Not surprisingly my subject matter gravitates towards events, people and places that are already caught up in drastic change. I take pleasure in sliding the logic that we usually take as bedrock concepts/ building

blocks of our society, identity and reality and which have to do with the organisation of society, time, gender, identity and power. Or, relating more directly to the act of filmmaking, questioning the boundaries between what is considered **“truth”** or **“fiction”** or the use of an authoritative **“I”**. I have this huge desire, really I could call it a necessity, to imagine something different.

Of course, in *37 Stories About Leaving Home*, it is not just any fairy tale that I used. It is a very rare type, one that focuses almost entirely on the interaction of women, in particular the mother/daughter relationship, as opposed to the much more common daughter/evil stepmother dynamic. The women in this story appear both very everyday and ordinary, and yet finally, take on amazingly courageous, heroic dimensions. I love how three generations of women – mother, daughter and ancient priestess – manage to save themselves by the simple act of revealing their **‘most important place’**, a Japanese euphemism for female genitals. The Oni and his monster cohorts are so incapable of looking upon this **‘most important place’** that they end up laughing so **“hysterically”** hard that they vomit huge amounts of water, allowing the boat containing the women to get away. I mean this is really a story! It would take too long to decipher all of it from a psychoanalytic view properly here, but just to point to the difference in use of and reaction to this **“place”**. The monsters seem to have a reaction tied to fear of castration, absence or void, whereas for the women it is a place where things happen, a powerful part of their body to be used. The women effectively use/ exploit the monsters’ fears to block and thwart them, enabling their escape. The story doesn’t end typically either, with a heterosexual marriage and children. It ends with the mother and daughter happily reunited – sailing into the sunset, so to speak. I’ve read an awful lot of fairy tales over the last few years and have never found an equivalent.

Ann Huber-Sigwart: In the story of the Oni, this ‘most important place’ metaphorically gives the women their freedom back, yet still the tape feels very nostalgic. The black and white shots, the slow motion, the music, the children, the laughter all make it sad at times as if, in a way, the women you present are still trying to escape the Oni? Or are they perhaps seeking themselves?

Shelly Silver: I don’t think the images are nostalgic, if one defines nostalgia as a longing for the past. I would say that my use of these kinds of images has more to do with

what I was talking about before, a mixing of past and present, where all eras are somehow present or lurking in the grain of contemporary culture.

We are all involved in escaping from the Oni, and this is not so simple as getting onto the fastest ship or taking off some clothes. There are so many personal and inter-generational tensions as each woman describes her own contradictory choices and desires, as well as the conflict with external and familial expectations. One hears, on the part of one mother, Tomoko Hanawa, who is president of her own business, the wish to be like her father: **'He worked hard, but also did stuff he liked. Not my mother, who worked, worked, worked, not for herself, but for others. My ideal was to live a life like my father. For my mother, her husband was everything. No matter what he did, how unhappy he made her, she remained obedient. She sometimes says to me, "Take better care of your husband. Don't defy him, I didn't raise my daughter to act that way." But I don't listen to her.'** We then hear from her teenage daughter, Kyoko Hanawa, who rejects her mother's choice to be independent and says **'I feel that men have to protect women, and a woman should follow her man. I don't want to be a strong woman. I want to stay a "cutie."** She then complains of how her mother is **'not very family-oriented so if I become a mother, I don't want to be like her.'** Finally, towards the end of the tape, the mother tearfully admits that she **'wants to work less, and spend more time with the family, and give them lots more love'**. I get the feeling that there is no adequate solution to this dilemma.

In another family, the daughter Emi Aoki says that **'because my mother got married and had children, she sacrificed many things she might have done. Sacrifice is a strong word – but I think she did. Since I was a child, I decided never to sacrifice myself like this.'** But later she answers about her own future: **'Maybe I'll be making movies, or painting or writing, I don't know. What's important is that I create something. But without being a burden on anyone. I don't want to do anything to depress my boyfriend, or my mother or father.'** There is another level to this sense of heaviness which comes with the use of these black and white slow motion images, connected to the inevitable loss that comes with time, ageing and the finiteness of life. The tape starts with very early childhood memories, some told by very old women, and it ends, finally, not with the heroic rescue of the daughter, but with death. This pressure, both to live one's life fully within the time allotted, as well as

to make connections between loved ones while there is still time, imbues a sense of urgency to many of the stories.

Ann Huber-Sigwart: In *37 Stories about Leaving Home* the women appear to be caught in a system created and recreated by themselves. Do you think that this is specific to the lives of Japanese women or do you think it crosses borders of place and experience?

Shelly Silver: It is always complicated to say who is responsible for creating and recreating the system that one lives in. But certainly many of the stories these women tell are about their search for an acceptable way to live in the system they were born in to. In terms of their relationships with each other, mother, daughter, grandmother, one gets a sense of great love and intimacy, but also imbalance, ambivalence, and unfulfilled and contradictory expectations. I get nervous talking about "*Japanese women*" as there are only ten women in the tape, all of whom are living in the Tokyo area. It was never my intention to try to present a cross-section, which is why I wanted to put a specific number into the title, to remind the viewer of the finite scope of the work. That said, I think there is something which crosses, as you put it, the borders of the specific places and individual experiences of these particular women. I can only talk about this on a very personal level, in so far as so much of the thrust of the women's answers (as opposed to the details) reminded me of my own life and the turbulent relationships between my own mother and grandmother. Certainly in the sense of the impossibility of living up to contradictory, self-imposed, familial and societal expectations. I got the feeling that, historically, things have moved at a much more accelerated pace of change in terms of the lifestyles of the last three generations of Japanese women. Takako Kawauchi and Kura Tosaki, two of the women in the film, both lived through enormous upheavals: the Tokyo earthquake and Second World War. The American occupation seems to have had a huge influence also, in that the Japanese culture was flooded with American movie ideas of romance, love and individuality, which were all concepts that had been approached completely differently in Japan until then. A lot of these women talked about how they grew up comparing themselves to a kind of American ideal which was completely divorced from their day to day reality. Of course, this image, this "*ideal*" didn't exist in America either.



Shelly Silver *37 Stories About Leaving Home* videostills

Ann Huber-Sigwart: *37 Stories* starts with a sort of introduction setting the story into the context of a search. ‘In the City of New York, in the continent of North America, there lived a dissatisfied daughter who was convinced that she was living under an evil spell. And so after suffering from it for many years, she decided to leave home... Luckily, in the faraway land where she found herself, rocks and trees and trains and cars could be gods. And so she started collecting 37 small stones, of varying sizes and shapes. She then took these stones and carefully placed them side by side, not in a straight line.’ **This search goes on throughout the whole work and is present in other works as well. Is it you who is seeking to understand, in order to find or define a new space?**

Shelly Silver: Yes. All of my work starts with a question or a feeling of discomfort or uneasiness, which leads to a kind of quest. I did see myself in this fictional fragment of a story of a daughter who must leave home, even though I was using it as a narrative device. This voice-over locates me within the tape: that I am a daughter, as opposed to a mother and a daughter; that I am from New York and suffering from an evil spell. Here, as in most fairy tales, the specifics of the spell are not elaborated on, leaving it to the viewer to imagine or project what this evil spell might be. The collecting of 37 stones refers to my work in directing and editing this piece, and acts to forewarn the viewer that although the stones are carefully chosen and placed, that there will be no straight line to what they are about to see.

Ann Huber-Sigwart: As far as I can tell, it’s only in the work *Former East/Former West*, that you use the word “P” directly to locate your position as narrator/ filmmaker. **Why did you find it necessary to do that here?**

Shelly Silver: Much like the introduction of *37 Stories*, in *Former East/Former West* it was crucial that I give the viewer several basic facts to situate myself and the piece. First, the date I started shooting, which was 1992, two years after the Reunification of Germany, and second that I was shooting in Berlin and was a newly arrived foreigner in this city. The opening voice-over also includes what I saw was my original impetus and curiosity for starting to make the tape: an exploration of this city that had been divided for 45 years and that had come together seemingly overnight. What did it mean from a linguistic, ideological, practical and emotional point of view? What did East and West Germans now have in common besides a common language? What I didn’t say in the opening was that this was the first time I was living away from the United States for any extended period of time, and that one of the reasons I had left was my own disenchantment with the political situation in the US. The questions I was asking Berliners about democracy, freedom and history were personally very much on my mind. So the opening voice-over at the beginning over black – before the first picture starts – functions as a starting point, locating it somehow outside of the film itself. After this, my voice purposefully disappears. I put the voice-over at the beginning,, over black, before the picture starts, locating it somehow outside of the film itself. Once the first image



appears, I wanted the viewer to experience part of what I had experienced. Rather than holding the viewer's hand throughout, I wanted to give them a certain autonomy; to be, in small part, in my position of having to make sense of this seeming chaos. Of course it was constructed, very highly constructed, but in a way that one can't sit passively back and absorb, one must pay attention and make one's own connections and jumps.

The organisation of the film is simple. It's basically a compilation of answers to 25 questions about certain key words that have to do with the notion of national identity, as well as the specific words that were being bandied about at the time of the *Wende* (freedom, socialism, democracy). However, while the structure may be simple, the answers to these questions, both in terms of range and complexity, are not. Whenever I watch it I think of how I would answer these questions, and one of my most successful screenings was in Kuala Lumpur, when the audience discussed these words not in terms of Germany, but from their own point of view drawing on their own experiences and country.



Shelly Silver *Former East /Former West* videostills

Ann Huber-Sigwart: In *Former East/Former West*, you interview people, for the most part, in the street whereas in an earlier work, *Meet the People* (1986), they are set against a dark background, and in *37 Stories about Leaving Home* the women are in their houses. The cityscape, the open spaces, the changing seasons and your use of the sometimes harsh straight cuts, as well as the very rapid rhythm you develop, give the tape a lot of spontaneity or even confusion.

Shelly Silver: *Meet the People* is a work of fiction where everything was written and staged. I wanted to explore here the slippery slope of truth, fiction, identification and the media. Why do we really believe and identify with characters on television, all the while knowing they are actors and actresses? How can someone "*become*" someone else, how much information is necessary? What is a "*real*" person, particularly when you put this person in front of a video camera? It was shot as if I was doing a very straight, relatively in-depth interview with a character from an advertisement. I located each character in a neutral blackness in order that the only clues to their identity, aside from what they say, was the extensive costume, hair and make-up job they all had. These were characters lifted out of advertising, so it was important to be precise. This shooting against black was very popular at the time, both for advertisements and for documentaries, a fact that I found quite interesting and tried to exploit.

In Japan, my curiosity was about the personal choices these women had made. It seemed appropriate to film them talking about their private lives in their homes. For Berlin, however, the situation was totally different, and I felt that

the markets, boulevards and squares were where the tensions were being played out in these “public” shared spaces of Berlin. I shot the interviews pretty much in medium shot; without linking them to large establishing shots. The viewer can glimpse the background, but it’s not always possible to locate exactly where each interview is taking place. In this video about “former” co-ordinates, it was up to each person interviewed to newly locate themselves, saying what or whom they identified and believed in, and where they felt they were from. This is in so many ways what the film is about. A strange phenomenon did grow out of this decision, though. When I showed it in Germany, it became a kind of guessing game for some people. They became very invested in being able to guess if someone is from the East or West, and they often guessed wrong. The quick rhythm was driven in large part by the fact that people often responded with short answers. Most interviews, though, were surprisingly long, averaging 20 to 30 minutes, in spite of the fact that they were done on the streets, at times in bad weather. People were very eager to talk to us, even standing in line for us to interview them. The hacksaw editing also reflected my own personal experience of being there at that time, feeling the tensions, hearing all of the different points of view. Being in Berlin at that time was a little like watching a car crash, and I think the tape has this atmosphere also.

Ann Huber-Sigwart: The installation you completed recently, *Rooster*, deals with the notion of change in a very different way. In this work you again use a folk tale, which stands in the foreground, and the whole tape is structured around it. The people you present are without a voice, although you address the changes within someone’s life again.

Shelly Silver: The basis for *Rooster* is a traditional Eastern European Hasidic folk tale, told by Rabbi Nachman of Bratislava in the eighteenth century about a prince who decides he’s a rooster. I had read this story a number of years ago, and there was something about it that stopped me in my tracks, similar to my initial reaction to the Oni story. When Beate Engel, the curator of the Stadtgalerie in Bern, approached me last spring to do something for her gallery in conjunction with the Bern Music Biennale, whose theme this year was related to Judaism, I thought initially my work had nothing to do with this. Then I remembered this story and decided I could do something. The story, told very flatly without psychological description, details and emotions, tells

the story of a prince who suddenly decides he’s a rooster and his families’ failed attempts at curing him. Finally a wise man appears, who doesn’t provide a cure, but more of a compromise solution. He acknowledges that the prince is indeed a rooster, but convinces him that it is in his own best interests to act like a man. What interested me in this story was not only the sudden decision of the prince that he is a rooster, but the basic destabilisation inherent in the idea of changing into someone or, in this case, something completely different. For me, there was something haunting and yet wildly optimistic underlying this ability to change, even if the change is a complete fantasy transformation, even if the change implies being killed or eaten. There is also something very poignant in the tale: some unspoken loss. Perhaps it’s the unspoken threat or danger in remaining a rooster, or the compromise and sadness of having to live as something one is not. Hidden somewhere in the story is also the unspoken shadow of insanity.

Ann Huber-Sigwart: The installation of *Rooster* was spread out over the space, inviting the viewer to follow a trail through the gallery and then to listen to the whole story. This was the second time your work dealt with space on an architectural level. Were you using the three-dimensional space to bring this sense of danger across to the viewer who, on entering the gallery, was immediately confronted by the huge images of people looking out of the frame, sometimes dressed or naked, sometimes wearing a little crown or a mask ?

Shelly Silver: I designed the installation specifically for the cavernous basement space of the Stadtgalerie, a former cellar of a slaughterhouse. Even though it’s been renovated, it still retains something of its former self: damp, dusty and old. The first large room has a high, vaulted brick-ceiling, and I thought of this as a kind of “welcoming room” and this is where I projected a large vertical projection of people, shot from head to slightly above the thigh, looking directly out at the viewer. This was to be the viewer’s entry into the story, an entry without spoken language, and I thought of this variety of people, with and without clothes, crowns and mask, as “*The Prince*.” Together they projected an interesting play of discomfort, tension and quietness. Each image lasted for about 35 seconds. I had told the people filmed to stay still and look into the camera, but of course I didn’t expect this and this never in fact happens. A hand is clenched.



Shelly Silver *Rooster* videostills

Someone starts to sway. Eyes drift. Some people look quite proud and defiant, others nervous, human and fragile.

My previous installation, *Cache Parmi Les Feuilles/Hidden Among the Leaves*, a collaboration with the Swiss artist Nika Spalinger for the Museum of Art and History in Fribourg, Switzerland, was the first time that I had dealt in such an extensive way with the moving image in space, and I must say that it was both enlightening and great fun. I loved breaking things apart into three-dimensional physical space, to set up rooms, passageways or different kinds of seating arrangements. The viewer's expectations can be shaped in a whole different way. Nika is very good at creating new spatial relations and atmospheres within spaces, both social or non-social areas which encourage different kinds of behaviour in the viewers. The installation was an experiment in quasi-public spaces, where people, circulating in a dark maze-like space, could watch in complete anonymity, a variety of intimate video images of people shot in public spaces: the delicate wrinkles on an ear of a passenger on a tram, a mother lifting her child by her fragile head, a nude girl pouring water into a public pool. In the centre of the installation was a kind of internal park, an enclosed room with benches and brilliant illumination; a social space where people could sit and see each other, but also a place, due to its overly bright lighting, where one felt overexposed the minute someone opened the door and looked inside.

Ann Huber-Sigwart: In *Rooster*, were you also motivated by the curiosity of people's reactions in asking people to undress in the unfamiliar space of your studio, then giving them a crown or a mask to wear? The encounter with these images is quite an experience and, after a first moment of bewilderment, one starts wondering who one is looking at and, as you mentioned, the details become very telling.

Shelly Silver: Ah, you make it sound almost kinky, which it wasn't! I just thought, in my typically naive way, 'Oh, I want the installation to start with this large projection of naked people. Where shall I find them?' I didn't think consciously of the difficulty of finding them or the experience of shooting them until they were actually in front of me. I asked all my friends, all my friends of friends, and had a limited response and then I put the word out on several email discussion groups I'm part of. This got a much better response, which surprised me. To come to an unknown loft in Soho and undress for someone you don't know, simply because you are part of the same internet discussion group, I didn't expect people to do this. During the shoot, I tried to make it both formal and relaxed, setting up a bunch of equipment, some of which wasn't really necessary. The actual experience revealed a curiosity on both sides, a kind of



interacting curiosity. I think many people came for the experience of seeing who I was, what I would ask, as well as how they would react. My work is always about curiosity, and it was a plus in this case to have the people I filmed curious and intrigued too. I got a real pleasure out of small unexpected things, like how people would totally change when they wore the crown or the mask.

Ann Huber-Sigwart: *The story of the rooster is told in a rather lively way on the video with a lot of music and noise, drawing on the genre of children’s television. This piece stands in total contrast to the portraits of the people or to the tape with the animated dead chicken or the image of the corn being stripped bare. How did you conceive these very different moods and moments in the work?*

Shelly Silver: The second, smaller room of the installation, which is a connecting room behind the projection, is much smaller, more intimate and protected than the entry room and also in complete darkness. It contained three monitors and large rectangles of hay for people to sit on. The hay gave off a wonderful barnyard smell. It is in this space – I thought of this as the “*story*” room – that the Rooster tale is recounted.

I started intense work on the tapes for this room at the beginning of September. I wasn’t sure how I was going to illustrate or animate the story and time was tight, as the installation was scheduled to open on 18 October. I started to do some basic animation of objects, and then the events of 11 September occurred. My studio was pretty close to the site. Chinatown was closed down for weeks and I also lost my phone/ internet service. So I would go across the street to the vegetable store and buy some corn, and then next door to the butchers and buy an “*old chicken*”, and would spend my day animating the corn being “*undressed*” frame by frame, kernel by kernel (there are approximate 350 to each cob!) and sewing strings to the chicken, trying to get its eyes to remain open during filming. Animating poultry is strange work, almost like a greasy form of knitting! During this process, I really

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couldn’t say how I was influenced by the smouldering ruins I saw smoking out of my back window, but somehow I’m sure there was a connection.

I wanted to tell the Rooster story the way it was written, in a linear way, but I also wanted to give a feeling of fragmentation, displacement and radically different kinds of time. In the front room there was the quiet and contemplative space of the large projection, marked by small shifts of weight and expression. Then in the centre of the second room, there was the erratic, fast-paced time, which hurtled from beginning to end (only to begin again) of the main story tape. Although this “*storytelling time*” was somehow familiar, echoing the genre of children’s television because of the erratic quality of the editing, animation and music, the effect of it was more jarring than soothing. Then there was the terrifying manic time of the two other monitors in the back room. One, standing vertically, was placed directly under the main story monitor, functioning as a support or pedestal. On this monitor there was a never-ending loop of a corn turning, losing its kernels, one by one. Then in the corner of the room, like a small, unwanted visitor or bad omen, there was the other monitor positioned directly on the floor, on which a dead plucked chicken, with skin resembling a very pale white man or woman, was endlessly and somewhat jerkily flying. There is something in the endless movement of these two objects that is, for me, terrifying. In particular, the image of the dead chicken that flies continuously, never getting anywhere, is both compulsive and nauseating, like an endless death or the threat of endless death. The projections of people in the first room are filmed in a quasi-documentary, real-time manner, whereas, in the back room, all the inanimate and dead objects jump around crazily. I think there is something about the combination of these two kinds of images that gives the installation and story a kind of weight. The overall effect is deliberately disconcerting.

Ann Huber-Sigwart: *In this installation there is something about the story and the music that calls up*

the terror often found in fairy tales. The ensemble seems like it should be innocent and cheerful, but really ends up being problematic and sombre.

Shelly Silver: I think you're right. Below *Rooster's* mild-mannered exterior, a simple retelling of a children's tale adorned with obviously fake toy crowns, animated doll house furniture and baby food, there is a real subliminal threat at work. The unspeakable desire for as well as the terror of change, the ramifications, the retribution that such a change might bring. The euphoria of permutation, as well as the terror in the face of such a change as well as its hideous and wonderful ramifications. To bring it to, perhaps an overly simplified level, I do, as a woman, as an American, in hundreds of personal and public ways, feel caught or trapped in a logic not of my own making. I also feel, ever present, a threat to my existence: the threat of being marginalised financially, in my ability to make my voice heard. I also think there's a real threat to messing with the fragile systems of logic that we, as human beings, have set up in order to be able to live in the world. The systems that make one able to function as a social being are often the same systems that are used to oppress us. It's a very terrifying and liberating thing to realise that with just a small shift to the right or left, the redefinition of a word or the relocation of a boundary, there opens up another space where the preconceived meanings we normally give to things fall apart.

I'm thinking now most directly of the work I'm currently editing called *Suicide*. A feature-length fiction, it follows several strange months in the life of a failed filmmaker who is contemplating taking her own life. Finding it unbearable to remain at home, she starts travelling aimlessly with a digital video camera in hand, and it is what she films with this camera, her eye and voice, that lead the viewer through the story. This project is "*out there*" for a number of different reasons, one of which is connected to the sanity or lack of it of the main protagonist, which I happen to play as the eye behind the camera in the film. This was a somewhat insane decision on my part, a decision which will have strange repercussions in my personal and public persona as I'm sure some people will mistake or confuse me with my hapless heroine. *Suicide* deals with issues of travel, public space and the desire to escape one's own personal identity and history, in this case, in the shiny clean spaces of late capitalist society. But it also finally turns on two taboo and critical subjects which define the borders of our culture: suicide and incest. It's a wild ride,

mostly due to the completely unreliable, wacky, wildly creative as well as lethally self-destructive heroine that I had to follow around for the last year, as she attempts to create and carve an internal story, what could be her story, onto an external world.

In one sense, all my work is somehow about liberation. The liberation that would come of crashing or at least damaging established systems. But liberation isn't simply like the turning on or off of a switch, especially when the structures are not only external, but also buried deep within oneself. Gramsci wrote in his *Prison Diaries*, '**The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born – in this interim a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.**' There is no such thing as stepping outside into the warm sun, after a particularly rainy day. Problems, weights, histories must be confronted and this is painful work. I think it is painful work even to imagine things as being different, both from the side of the aching desire for such a change, as well as the fear of disappearance, that nothing will be left without it. Change always threatens chaos or punishment. Perhaps this is why I attempt to say things in what is outwardly the most open, friendly and clear way and to provide a clean, clear structure – an outward American smile – like a "*secure*" familiar story space. I believe one of the great advantages of stories is their ability to safely lead us to unsafe places we would not normally think to visit.

Shelly Silver's exhibition *Rooster* was at the Stadtgalerie, Bern, Switzerland, 16 October - 18 November 2001.

Ann Huber-Sigwart is an independent curator and writer now based in Bern, Switzerland. She is currently writing her Ph.D. on large international art exhibitions in the late twentieth century at Middlesex University, London.

Shelly Silver is a video artist and filmmaker based in New York. Her work is distributed by Electronic Arts Intermix in NYC (www.eai.org), Video Data Bank, Chicago (www.vdb.org), Montevideo/Time Based Arts, Amsterdam (www.montevideo.nland) and V tape, Toronto (www.vtape.org).