

Kaucyila Brooke

"Madame and Eve in the Garden" *The Politics of Desire*

by Stella Rollig

The anonymous brain is always giving birth to apparently definitive conclusions, which are written in indelible ink in the collective book of knowledge to become available from then on for idiomatic deployment whenever considered arguments are lacking. A homophobic statement encountered in English speaking countries goes, if God had approved of homosexuality, it wouldn't have been Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but "Adam and Steve." Clear enough? Kaucyila Brooke uses this "insight" as the inspiration of her photo-novel, *Tit for Twat*, on which she has been at work since 1993. From her point of view, however, the story to be written is not about Adam and Steve (although, in Brooke's *Genesis*, they also put in an appearance), but about Madam and Eve.

The "tit for tat" the title plays on designates a kind verbal exchange in which people simply give vent to their own feelings, rather than offering arguments regarding each other's points. This sort of dysfunctional and unproductive communication is for Brooke the defining characteristic of the talk show. "Tit," of course, is also a word for breast, and "twat," which Brooke has put in place of "tat," is a vulgar expression for vagina. It is not Adam giving up a rib for Eve in this telling, but two women giving sexual pleasure to each other.

Brooke is an artist, the author of theoretical essays, organizer of projects and exhibitions, copublisher of the Web magazine *Site Street*, and, as of this year, director of the photography program at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia, near Los Angeles. A brief summary of her artistic production would note the influence of conceptualism, in particular in its

California variant. John Baldessari's work would be one reference point, also the work of Barbara Kruger. Drawing on this blend of intellectual analysis and elements of mass visual culture and jokes, Brooke uses photographs and video to present her analyses of gender-specific characterizations in both the mass media and everyday communication, which of course is shaped by the former. For the video *Dry Kisses Only* (1990, with Jane Cottis), the authors composed a text track analyzing the classic Hollywood plot from a lesbian perspective, while, on the level of the image, a comic masquerade transpires. The film makers take on the role, among others, of a professorial commentator, and they use special effects techniques to edit themselves into the Bette Davis classic, *All About Eve*.

Innovative creation story. Another consistent theme for Brooke is the question of how to live in a politically conscionable way, of an alternative politics, the unification of political activism, with individual, "private" desires and idiosyncracies. Brooke has had personal experience living in a feminist group house in the 1970s in Oregon, where, in addition to her art studies, she worked as a community activist counseling battered women. Potential house mates at that time had to fill out a questionnaire. Brooke uses it in the 1990s for her installation *Thirteen Questions*. In the text panels appear such seemingly simple and private questions as "Are you messy or are you neat?" The photographs, meanwhile, forge a connection to the problematic outcomes of profit-oriented, rather than democratic, decision-making procedures, with nuclear energy, for example, or world trade in food.

Preceding a chapter titled *Can We Talk?* in Brooke's creation story (adapted by the artist adapted for *EIKON*) is the introductory section *Madame and Eve in the Garden*. Here we are

guided into the story by actual talk show hosts. At the entrance to paradise are gathered the immensely popular stars of real (media) life, with their respective broadcaster affiliations. Included are Oprah Winfrey, Geraldo, Jenny Jones, and others, reporting to their respective publics the hot story of the just discovered "wild innocents" *Madame and Eve*. The language Brooke has them speak in telling the story, in the claim it lays like the media to factuality and omniscience, contains not a hint of self-doubt. Oprah: "And it came to pass that she found herself all alone in the garden, and she learned that her name was Eve."

Eve is black corresponding to a familiar democratic strategy according to which constitutive cultural myths can be rewritten in ways that overcome stereotyped hierarchies. (One thinks of the figures of the Black Madonna or the female God.) On account of their bodies, both Eve and Madame are also fully incongruent with current clichés of female media figures. And they are lesbian, unable to reproduce. Brooke's intention is clear: the essentialized tripartite association among origins, the lawfulness of nature, and heterosexuality, as reflected in the image of the first couple amid unspoiled nature is meant to be recognized as an ideological corrective.

As in the Biblical *Genesis*, the cause of the fall from grace for Brooke is curiosity. Evil is already finding its way into the idyll, in this allegorical picture narrative in the form of the live microphone encountered by *Madam and Eve* at the end of the outstretched arm of the talk show host. The seducing snake is the media. The microphone cable becomes a snare, a lasso, and with it the women are pulled out of the garden. Next thing you know, they are in a television studio sitting on stage.

Televisionary Paradise. *Can We Talk?* opens with the quintessential line of television dramaturgy: "And when we come back..." The television

program, as it undergoes the fragmentation of the age, increasingly becomes a series of promises of a future in which then the truly interesting part will be broadcast, a promise that, naturally, is never fulfilled. In the very first panel, Brooke explodes the dutiful realist association between the talking heads and their talk. The speakers and their text are decoupled. When Oprah announces "the next section," it could refer with equal validity either to the next segment of her show or to that of the artwork. Oprah's colleague Sally declares: "Since conflicts produce higher ratings (for the show), Can We Talk? also asks whether art, literature, history, religion, and science puts limits on our insights into the contradictions of the ego" And it is no longer a talk show, but unmistakably the artist herself who is speaking. Here the didactic Brooke takes over, having Geraldo lecture about how our bodies are "always woven together out of a fabric of race, class, gender, and sexuality."

While in the foreground the set is composed by the talk masters as a patchwork of media theory and discourse analysis, in the background Madam and Eve go on cavorting lightheartedly in paradise. Already, however, they have been captured inside the television. They are already on the way to manipulation, as the dominating (woman,s!) hand on the camera grip suggests.

In the course of the show, Madam and Eve, later Adam and Steve as well, become acquainted with the workings of primitive (which is to say, appropriate for television) communication and knowledge. That, for example, what "may" not be cannot be ("You couldn't be the first pair!"), and that there are such things as authorities that are privileged to have the final say, whereby, in terms of credibility, the show master ranks roughly on a par with the Biblical narrative.

Brooke attacks discursive hierarchies ironically. She challenges us to take apart history as it is written by the powerful, to think it differently. She attempts, however, not to get stuck inside the moralizing, canonical critique of

media and consumerism. For the third part of Tit for Twat, Brooke plans to let Madam and Eve return to the Garden of Eden, where they will be treated to a fashion show and a feast.

De/Montages. Kaucyila Brooke's tools are old-fashioned. She photographs or directs her subjects herself, produces the enlargements, writes the text inserts by hand, cuts and pastes. The form of visual communication she has chosen refers to content-oriented, consciousness-raising art movements. Her work recalls the political intentions of dada, its goal of making obvious one thesis, one message, one appeal. In the combination of these disparate elements, at the seams with which she surprises us, there is 'hopefully' knowledge.

Hannah Höch titled one of her major works, a photo montage of 1919-1920, *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada durch die letzte weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands* (Cut with the kitchen knife of dada through Germany's final Weimar beer-belly cultural epoch). It was a visual-political manifesto, a critique of prevailing conditions in the Weimar Republic. With the concept of the "kitchen knife," Höch formulates a claim to political involvement from out of the female sphere, to an activism conceived at the kitchen table, the core of critical consciousness that necessarily leads to political engagement. This relates to Brooke's work insofar as she also insists on working in low-tech ways suggestive of accessibility and participation. (There is a point to be made from the other side, however, that modern graphics programs process digitalized images more quickly and easily than can be done between the dark room and the montage table, if only for the computer-equipped elite.)

The form of the photo-novel (more popular in other parts of the world than in our culture) is motivated by its claim to clarity and accessibility. Brooke's narrative form is a hybrid of the most disparate influences in visual narration. Italian

photo-romances can be associated with it; just as easily, Catholic votive images, Indian pictorial legends, or the meanwhile international comic strip.

Not to be overlooked are Kaucyila Brooke's aesthetic concerns. Every picture panel in Tit for Twat is a carefully arranged and balanced ornamental whole. The use of colors is also aesthetically motivated. While it is possible to recognize substantive color references from the first panel (the Garden of Eden is in black-and-white, the television world in color), this consistency ultimately gives way to considerations of beautiful design.

And, as in all good photo-novellas, its ending is resolved. In the center of the final panel, Brooke puts the hands of Madam and Eve, in a color reproduction with their fingers intertwined. How could that be read except positively? Our heroines may have lost their innocence, they may have surrendered to the media's grip...and still, when they exit, if only from the studio, they are strengthened. "Eve, it doesn't matter what they say... We were the breakthrough. The first ones to do it! [...] We are the avant garde. [...] The flagship dykes" ~ Whereupon a new origins mythology begins, for future generations of rebels to deconstruct.

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