#### **RED: The Gendered Color in Frames**

This video art exhibition points out the biased inscriptions of the color red toward female issues and women's images in a society formed by its gender aspects. Reflections and thoughts on red as a gendered color are discussed here to broaden the context of the exhibited video works.

#### From Pink to Red

To begin with the reflections of red as a genderd color, the history of the biased colors pink and blue may be illustrated, because in Western culture the practice of assigning pink as a variant color of red to an individual gender began in the 1920s.1 Until the 1940s, pink was considered appropriate for boys because being related to red it was the more masculine and decided color, while blue was considered appropriate for girls because it was the more delicate and dainty color, or related to the Virgin Mary. "When colors were first introduced to the nursery in the early part of the 20th century, pink was considered the more masculine hue, a pastel version of red. Blue, with its intimations of the Virgin Mary, constancy and faithfulness, was thought to be dainty. Why or when that switched is not clear, but as late as the 1930s a significant percentage of adults in one national survey held to that split."2 Since the 1940s, the societal norm was inverted; pink became considered appropriate for girls and blue appropriate for boys, a practice that has continued into the 21st century.3 Though the color pink has sometimes been associated with negative gender stereotypes, some feminists have sought to 'reclaim' it. For example, the Swedish radical feminist party 'Feminist Initiative' and the American activist women's group 'Code Pink: Women for Peace' use pink as their color. The pink ribbon is the international symbol of breast cancer awareness.

Pink is chosen partially because it is strongly associated with femininity. This femininity is a sociological construct, formed by society and its practices toward the biased sexual inscriptions on biased sex and gender practices.

A study by Anya Hurlbert at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, UK,<sup>4</sup> states, that women might prefer pinker shades because - in cultures where pink represents girlishness and femininity - they have learned to identify with it. And she adds that the Chinese women in her study, who grew up without commercial toys such as Barbie that promote pink to girls, showed an even greater liking for pinkish hues than their British female counterparts.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, if the pink color describes the color of the weaker sex and gender, also accomplished through its soft tone, it means an inscription on women and their partially reduction on a lower level, which, of course excludes equality.

However, 'pink' did not become assigned as a 'feminine' color in Western culture until the late 1940s. Did you ever wonder why Cinderella and Snow White wore blue dresses? It is because blue was considered a more feminine color decades ago. Pink is a variant of red and was considered masculine in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The Nazi's designated homosexual men with the pink triangle in the concentration camps because their orientation towards other men and masculinity (and a more culturally masculine color association made sense). There is nothing 'innate'

about color preference on the basis of sex; it is entirely culturally assigned. The problem with biology in explaining human behavior is that it often serves to harden current societal norms into something unmoldable and innate. It unfortunately often has served a role in justifying horrendous cultural norms (racism, sexism, homophobia), such as identifying sex on the basis of a color. All it takes is a basic understanding of history to realize that societal association with colors and genders is an extremely new concept.<sup>6</sup>

### Red as Indicator for Female Sexual Availability

In this following study 'red' serves as an indicator for female sexual availability, illustrated and concluded by Andrew Elliot and Daniela Niesta, psychologists from the University of Rochester. By this color psychology study, but also linked to biological references, red, the color of love, is an aphrodisiac for men, - literally and figuratively - a reply to the age-old question of what attracts men to women. Red makes men feel more amorous toward women and men are unaware of the role the color plays in their attraction. This is a first empirical support for society's enduring love affair with red and it is the only work to scientifically document the effects of color on behavior in the context of relationships, where much is known about color physics and color physiology, but very little about color psychology. From the red ochre used in ancient rituals to today's red-light districts and red hearts on Valentine's Day, the rosy hue has been tied to carnal passions and romantic love across cultures and millennia. Although this aphrodisiacal effect of red may be a product of societal conditioning alone, the authors argue that men's response to red more likely stems from deeper biological roots. Research has shown that nonhuman male primates are particularly attracted to females displaying red. Female baboons and chimpanzees, for example, redden conspicuously when nearing ovulation, sending a clear sexual signal designed to attract males. "Our research demonstrates a parallel in the way that human and nonhuman male primates respond to red," concluded the authors; "In doing so, our findings confirm what many women have long suspected and claimed that men act like animals in the sexual realm. As much as men might like to think that they respond to women in a thoughtful, sophisticated manner, it appears that at least to some degree, their preferences and predilections are, in a word, primitive." In the study and experiments, the women shown framed by or wearing red were rated significantly more attractive and sexually desirable by men than the exact same women shown with other colors, and when wearing red, the woman was also more likely to score an invitation to the prom and to be treated to a more expensive outing. The red effect extends only to males and only to perceptions of attractiveness. Red did not increase attractiveness ratings for females rating other females and red did not change how men rated the women in the survey's photographs in terms of likeability, intelligence or kindness. The current findings have clear implications for the dating game, the fashion industry, product design and marketing.7

# Red in Religion as Prosperity, Fertility and Doom

In religious symbolism, red, as the color of the pomegranate, is a very strong character for love, life and fruitfulness, but also for seduction, power, superiority, blood and death.

In context of women and sexuality it is a symbol for a woman's failure and doom, either by offering the forbidden fruit and being through this the personified reason of tremendous troubles, or by eating the forbidden fruit as a symbol for forbidden sexuality and being later again the personified reason for tremendous troubles again. The other way around it is associated with women in a very fruitful way, by indicating fertility, giving birth and life.

Jewish tradition teaches that the pomegranate is a symbol for righteousness, fruitfulness, and some Jewish scholars believe that it was the pomegranate that was the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden. The pomegranate is mentioned for example in this quote from Solomon, "Thy lips are like a thread of scarlet, and thy speech is comely: thy temples are like a piece of a pomegranate within thy locks." - Song of Solomon 4:3. The pomegranate as a calyx shaped like a crown has been seen in Jewish tradition as the original form for the proper crown.

In Ancient Greece, the myth of Persephone, the chthonic goddess of the Underworld, symbolically uses the pomegranate as a fatal fruit, where Persephone was kidnapped by Hades and taken off to live in the underworld as his wife. Her mother, Demeter, went into mourning for her lost daughter and thus all green things ceased to grow. Zeus, the highest ranking of the Greek gods, could not leave the Earth to die, so he commanded Hades to return Persephone. It was the rule of the Fates that anyone who consumed food or drink in the Underworld was doomed to spend eternity there. Persephone had no food, but Hades tricked her into eating six pomegranate seeds while she was still his prisoner and so, because of this, she was condemned to spend six months in the Underworld every year. During these six months, when Persephone is sitting on the throne of the Underworld next to her husband Hades, her mother Demeter mourns and no longer gives fertility to the earth.

In some artistic depictions, the pomegranate is found in the hand of Mary, mother of Jesus. The fruit, broken or bursting open, is a symbol of the fullness of Jesus' suffering and resurrection. In the Eastern Orthodox Church, pomegranate seeds may be used in the dish kolyva, as a symbol of the sweetness of the heavenly kingdom. According to the Islam, pomegranates grow in the garden of paradise. In Hinduism, the pomegranate (Sanskrit: Beejpur, literally: replete with seeds) symbolizes prosperity and fertility, and is associated with both Bhoomidevi (the earth goddess) and Lord Ganesha.

#### Red as Political Statement

Red as a color of bloody fight, resistance and power of the suppressed class becomes a political color. Traditionally associated with socialism and communism; in Europe and in several Latin American countries, red is associated with parties of social democracy, and often their allies within the Labour movement. A red flag is a symbol of left-wing politics, in particular of Communism. It has been associated with leftwing politics since the French Revolution. Socialists adopted the symbol during the Revolutions of 1848 and it became a symbol of communism as a result of its use by the Paris Commune of 1871. During the same historical periods, in the United States, within the First Wave Feminism (~1848~1960) Elizabeth Cady Stanton organized the Seneca Convention in the year 1848. Her plan was something unheard in the U. S. at that time: "to discuss the social, civil, and religious condition and rights of women." In this context, women's political movement can be associated with the color red, in the sense of an emancipatory movement against gender suppression and of women's liberation ambitions of red sisters.

## Walking in Red Shoes

Lermontov: Why do you want to dance?

Vicky: Why do you want to live?

Lermontov: Well, I don't know exactly why, but... I must.

Vicky: That's my answer too.

The Red Shoes, initially a symbol of female subjectivity, life and freedom, here inverted to the male suppression of that freedom of a woman's choice for her own life, and later the reason for her failure.<sup>8</sup>

**Evelin Stermitz** 

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  In reference to: The Red Shoes, film, directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger, United Kingdom, 1948.

Rdeča kot superiorna barva je skozi zgodovino, kulturo in vero pridobila različne pomene v svoji simboliki. Na splošno je z rdečo barvo povezana dvojnost pomenov, ki so razpeti med življenje in smrt. Kot destruktivno in nevarno jo povezujemo z agresivnostjo pa tudi z vitalnostjo in močjo, z ognjem, krvjo in ljubeznijo, pa zopet nasprotno z agonijo, s hudičem in peklom, prostitucijo in spolnostjo. Rdeča se lahko pojavi kot žaljiva in vsiljiva, barva jeze in hkrati ljubezni. V svojem bistvu rdeča simbolizira močna čustva, prvinske nagone in impulze.

V odnosu do žensk ta močna in premetena barva postane barva spola v okviru različnih kontekstov. V izbranih videodelih so predstavljeni simbolni ženski pogledi na različne pomene in predstave o rdeči barvi.

Videa Flux, avtoric Kike Nicolela in Suzy Okamoto, in Ophelia, avtorice Iris Selke, obravnavata žensko v rdeči obleki, ki jo lahko interpretiramo v povezavi s spolnostjo, žensko močjo in pogubo. V videu Airport Revisited Dube Sambolec je rdeča uporabljena v tekstovni strukturi, ki osredišči jaz ženske in katerekoli druge družbene skupine, ki ni dovolj zastopana ali pa je zatirana in spregledana znotraj socialnih struktur in jezika. Video Rain Barbare Agreste obravnava kri kot simbol v kontekstu življenja in smrti. Ana Grobler v delu Super Ultra na kritičen način obravnava temo menstruacije. Kika Nicolela v Ecstasy Poem v počasnem posnetku primerja dva obraza iste ženske (igralke Liv Ullmann), ki hkrati gledata v kamero. V eni polovici kadra je portret mlade ženske, ki je na vrhuncu svoje lepote, v drugi polovici pa na njenem portretu že vidimo sledove staranja. Michelle Handelman v videoperformansu Folly & Error prikaže dve ženski, ki se v skupnih rdečih spodnjicah, kot eno samo telo, gibljeta skozi pokrajino v obskurni koreografiji. Red Velvet, delo Evelin Stermitz, simbolizira abstraktne konotacije rdeče barve v kontekstu samega medija in uporabe/zlorabe moči in seksualnosti.

Red, as a superior color, has gained various meanings in its symbolism during history, culture and religion. In general red is associated with a duality of meanings between life and death, as destructive and dangerous the color is related to aggression but also to vitality and power, to fire as well as to blood and love, and in contrast to this to agony, also associated with devil and hell, prostitution and sexuality. Red can appear as offensive and intrusive, a color of rage and love. Basically red symbolizes strong emotions of profound urges and impulses.

In relation to women, this powerful and ingenious color is gendered in various contexts. Aspects of female connotations and narrations of the color red are symbolized in the selected video works.

The woman in a red dress is foregrounded in the work Flux by Kika Nicolela and Suzy Okamoto as well as in Ophelia by Iris Selke, with flowing connotations of sexuality, female power and doom. In Airport Revisited by Duba Sambolec, red is used in a textual structure to centre the self of a woman and of any other group that is underrepresented, oppressed and neglected in social structures and language. Blood is the symbol in the work Rain by Barbara Agreste in context of life and death and in Ana Grobler's video Super Ultra, where the theme of menstruation is articulated in a critical perception. In the work Ecstasy Poem by Kika Nicolela, the artist compares two faces of the same woman (actress Liv Ullman) looking at the camera in slow motion. Whereby in one portrait the portrayed woman is young and at the peak of her beauty, in the opposite frame she is already aged. Michelle Handelman visualizes in Folly & Error a performance of two women related together with a red pant as a singular corpus, moving through a landscape of nature in an obscure choreography. The video work Red Velvet by Evelin Stermitz symbolizes abstract connotations of the color red in context of the media itself and its use/abuse of power and sexuality.

# RDEČA: barva spola v videoizsekih / RED: The Gendered Color in Frames

14. maj – 11. junij 2010 | Galerija Photon



Mednarodna razstava videa / International video art exhibition

14. 5. – 11. 6. 2010 Galerija Photon / Center za sodobno fotografijo Ljubljana Otvoritev v petek, 14. maja 2010, ob 20. uri. / Opening view on 14 May 2010 at 8 p.m.

Kuratorica / Curated by: Evelin Stermitz

Sodelujoče umetnice / Participating artists:

Barbara Agreste (IT/UK), Ana Grobler (SLO), Michelle Handelman (USA), Kika Nicolela (BR/USA), Suzy Okamoto (BR/USA), Duba Sambolec (SLO/NOR), Iris Selke (DE), Evelin Stermitz (A/SLO)



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Odprto: ponedeljek – petek: 11.00 – 14.00 / 15.00 – 18.00 Produkcija: Zavod Kolektiva Koprodukcija: Društvo Photon

Projekt podpirata: Mestna občina Ljubljana – Oddelek za kulturo, Ministrstvo za kulturo

Sponzor: Center projekcije





