

Dorit Cypis makes art about our physical lives and sexual psyches.

Combining elements of installation, performance, and photography, Cypis's work



has become controversial not only because it addresses sexual issues, but also because it does so without regard to

orthodoxy of any variety. This interview took place in her Minneapolis studio on the afternoon of January 4, 1990.

# AN INTERVIEW WITH DORIT

BY VINCE LEO

**Vince Leo:** Dorit, I know you've been making art for a long time, but I'd like to start with a question about your recent installation piece *X-Rayed*. The first version was a collaboration involving several people. One of those people, someone you photographed clothed and unclothed, threatened you with legal action rather than have her image projected in your work. Why do you think she reacted so strongly?

**Dorit Cypis:** Well, to begin with, the word collaboration is problematic. I create a context and a structure on my own, and I have to take full responsibility for that. Once I establish that technical and conceptual structure, I invite people to participate in fulfilling the work. For *X-Rayed*, there was a musician, a composer, and two people as photographic subjects. One was a young child and one was a woman. I also worked with several people to create the mechanisms needed for the slide projections.

To answer your question, though, I don't think I can speak for the woman I photographed, but I've gone over and over what happened, trying to perceive where the trouble began. When I originally went to New York to shoot the photographs, she and I talked extensively, discussing the subject matter of the piece, and specifically the question of how a woman can allow herself to be looked at while simultaneously remaining in possession of her own body. I invited this person in particular because of her background in performance and because I knew that she was asking some of these questions in her own work. She was interested but scared, as I was. I went into this with trust in my own convictions, and in the question, but I didn't know what the answer would be, or what it would take to find out.

I shot the photographs in her apartment in New York City; I asked her to respond to the question as naturally as she could. Of course, it's not exactly natural when you're being photographed, but that was the edge I wanted to create. I remember being very self-conscious of my position as the photographer and identifying with her as the subject. My taking the picture, her giving herself to my camera, all those things were really alive and part of the situation.

I went back to New York about a month later and showed her all the images of herself, and she requested that about half a dozen not be shown. Those were taken out. As for the rest of the slides, I was to edit them into a sequence that fit into a larger body of work. And so in some ways she relinquished her images to me and to the larger work.

That was the last time she saw the images until I came back to New York to install the project at the Whitney Museum. I think that as soon as she saw the images projected fairly large—11 x 13 ft.—and on a permanently installed cinema screen, she felt uncomfortable. That's when things started to fall apart. I had commissioned her to create a performance work within the installation of *X-Rayed*—to give



her representations a voice—and during this performance the tension between us became public. The issues were obscure to both of us. Emotions were high. We weren't speaking to each other. She felt violated. I felt betrayed. After the Whitney show closed, I received a letter from her lawyer forbidding my use of those images, for any purpose; not even as documentation in a discussion of the issue.

So that's factual. The rest is my projection. In my mind there were two levels: one is the problem surrounding who owns what in terms of the work as a whole and the images in particular. The context I created in the work was highly evocative, and it definitely charged the images of her—it was different seeing her images alone and her images in the project. The other level is about her represented body as naked or nude—as a communication of the private self, or as a posed public body. I think she became naked through the work, and she realized it, and that flipped the project over the edge.

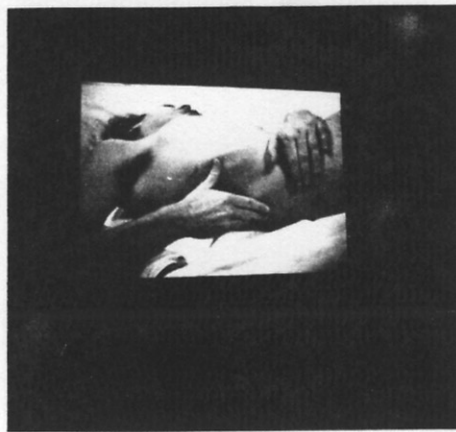
But this had everything to do with the question I was asking: can a woman possess her own body while being looked at? For me to ask that question honestly meant I had to provoke all of the underlying historical, psychological, and legal problematics locked in the question. It stimulated all of those layers, and so we had to deal with them.

**VL:** Your next work was actually a lot like *X-Rayed* except that you substituted images of yourself for the slides you

were now forbidden to use. You became the subject, and the work became *X-Rayed (altered)*. Did that experience change your mind about your own role as photographer in the earlier *X-Rayed*?

**DC:** I was devastated by what had happened. I took the whole thing really seriously—trying to look at my own responsibility as a woman and as a photographer. It was a year before I could revise the project, because I wasn't ready emotionally. But I finally decided to substitute images of myself for images of her to keep the idea alive. This was the first time I had let anyone else photograph me and the experience was terrifying. My body was going up on an altar and I'd be saying, okay, here's a body, go ahead and project onto it. I had to feel that I was strong enough to take those projections.

Right now, I'm clear enough about the problems of projection that I can distance my psyche from my represented body to take your look and allow that look and still be in possession of my own body. I don't want that to sound trite, because it wasn't an easy thing to achieve. The first time I saw the slides, I hated them, because I hated my own body. There's a huge amount of shame and repulsion involved in accepting your own flesh. The first surface of repulsion is a cultural/sexual confusion about whether you're guilty for having a body that looks like a Reubens—a fully female sexual body. But underneath that I felt a lot of grief seeing and sensing the gap between myself and my body. Everyone suffers it—it's the separation between spirit and flesh. There's a lot of sadness in ultimately having to accept that body as the place where I lie. After I had worked through this, and filled in a historical and cultural backdrop, I got to a point where I could look at those images with eyes from the other side of the screen. This time I saw a beautiful body. It was innocent and sincere and full of integrity; it was asking questions about itself.



Left to right: Ann Marsden, from Dorit Cypis's *YIELD (THE BODY)*, 1989, color photograph; Lyn Hambrick, from Dorit Cypis's *YIELD (THE BODY)*, 1989, color photograph; all others: Dorit Cypis, *X-RAYED (ALTERED)*, 1989, slide installation

# CYPIS

That's when I realized there was no problem with the representation; the problem was with me in my projection over the representation. It's what lay inside my psyche and inside my body, inside my mind, inside the cells of my body that perpetuated the distorted, hysterical representation of sexuality. The perpetuating monster is within myself, and every viewer has to deal with the same thing.

**VL:** In between these two works you took a trip to the East—to Japan, Thailand, and Indonesia, and you photographed in Bali. This is happening right in the middle of an intense self-analysis of your role as a photographic author. Did photographing in Bali have any bearing on the issues or on your decision to restage *X-Rayed*?

**DC:** In Bali, I was very conscious of myself as a photographer. Besides what had just happened with *X-Rayed*, there's the whole 20th-century phenomenon of tourism, and the possession of those people by Western countries. There were hundreds and hundreds of tourists taking pictures everywhere all the time and I was there and I was white and I had a camera and I was taking pictures all the time too. I felt very vulnerable having the camera. But I got involved with the local people in a very daily way; I befriended individual Balinese and was taken in by a Balinese family. Their relationship to the camera was very different from what I had presumed. They know television and a lot of them have instamatics, and they're very used to being photographed. It was not an intellectual problem for them.

But there was one incident that really coined it for me. I was traveling with some Balinese and American friends and we met up with a family that invited us home for dinner. I spent time with one young Balinese and I remember him giving us each a picture of himself: the one I have is of him dancing a ritual dance. Then he asked me if I would take a picture of him, and he added, "Please remember me." To him, that picture was an extension of himself—he had no confusion about that. He knew who he was, where he came from—he was confident and fully present in himself. The photograph did not cause him to question that. It does in our culture because we are not seated in ourselves. Photographers personify that split. The Balinese didn't see me as outside of them, whether I was making photographs or not, and I began to see them as not outside of me.

**VL:** Your experience with *X-Rayed* appears to have opened an entire range of issues for you. In a more recent work called *Yield the Body*, you asked several women photographers to photograph you unclothed. The amazing thing about this piece is that it seems to gather meaning from two positions usually held to be mutually exclusive: on the one hand, you're reinforcing the importance of the individualized photographic author; and on the other hand, you claim authorship for yourself as subject of the photographs. Are these pictures about being nude or being naked? And how did they get that way? Was it you or the photographers?

**DC:** It's both, plus it's you as the viewer who determines the ultimate reading of those photographs. Basically, I was asking three questions in that project. The first was explored in *X-Rayed (altered)*—how can a woman allow herself to be looked at while remaining in possession of her own body? That question I was posing to myself. How does a woman look at another woman's body?—that was being posed to the women photographers. The third question was, where is the threshold of projection between the photographer and the photographed? Or, whose body is really

being represented—is this my body they're photographing or what they know of their own bodies? Of course, all three questions are being posed to the viewer, so whether I'm naked or nude in those pictures is a shifting gestalt.

**VL:** *Yield (the Body)* was exhibited a few months ago in the now infamous "Against

Our Vanishing" show at Artists Space in New York. I know that this piece wasn't the reason the National Endowment for the Arts threatened to withdraw their funding of the show, but the fact is that your work is now coming into contact with a larger—much larger—political force, one that would probably find it unacceptable. Have the Helms Amendment or the new policy guidelines at the NEA had any impact on the way you work or what you're working on?

**DC:** I'm extremely conscious of it; and in that way it certainly enters my work. It's actually validating something I sensed or assumed several years ago—that we are in an era in which our survival is contingent on our ability to deal with our sexuality. So, in a sense, I'm not surprised by what's going on. I feel optimistic that the whole group of issues is now out in the open. It encourages me to keep going. But it's also an indicator that what I'm doing is on the mark, that my cultural questions are real and important.

**VL:** I hate to keep asking about your problems, Dorit, but you've also been hassled by photo labs, right?

**DC:** (Laughing) It doesn't stop! One lab processed the original slides for *X-Rayed*, but added a letter saying they refused to continue processing my work, and that if I was going to continue to create these kinds of images I'd have to go elsewhere. I was furious! I was furious with their assumption that I was making pornography, and even more, that they took it upon themselves to stop me from creating work based on their interpretation of those slides.

**VL:** But your work is open-ended and full of sexual content. It seems like it would be no problem at all to jump track and misapprehend it.

**DC:** I decided a while back that I'd create work dangerously. My work isn't logical or rational—it's complicated, interwoven. It's not binary; it's more like a labyrinth. But I know that sometimes I'm misunderstood. In Virginia, *X-Rayed (altered)* was installed a block away from a porno theater and, over the holidays, several men came into the gallery and asked where the movie was. Then again, a few days earlier a younger man took his clothes off and jumped and danced around the same space nude. The other people just looked on. Perhaps they thought he was part of the piece.

**VL:** Is there some kind of cultural virus in your work? Something that gets into people and maybe thwarts their expectations or opinions of nudity? Maybe changes forever the way they look at something like pornography?

**DC:** I'd be a fool to say no, but I have no way to judge, no way to test effects. I have no desire to legislate what people see or how they see. At its best, my work exposes for the viewer who he or she is. For me, the success or failure of my work doesn't hinge on what people see, or how people see, but on whether they become conscious of what and how they are seeing. If they don't, then my work has failed. But if they do it doesn't matter what they see, whether it's pornographic or fear-inducing or pleasurable; as long as they realize that they are part of what they see, then the work has succeeded.

**VL:** Okay, this is a big question, but if your work succeeds in some utopian way, will it begin to clear up the issues around representation and authorship, or are we going to be faced with a complex web of permissions, understandings, and contracts forever?

**DC:** I quite often wake up in the morning and go (clapping her hands) "Goddamnit, why am I waking up with fear? Why can't I just coast through this day and be wonderful and glamorous and happy?" To me that's the same as

asking, why can't we forget all of these issues surrounding photographic representation? In one sense they're ridiculous, but the fact is they reflect a much more serious and much more deeply encrusted problematic within the self. The problem is not so much the picture or the permission to take the picture. The problem is with *allowing*, with the notion of surrender without feeling defeated. We don't know how to love ourselves without feeling abandonment. We don't know how to love without feeling betrayal. We don't know how to love erotic fantasies without fear of sexual violence or feelings of guilt. Those are the real problems. The end result—how we're represented—is simply a reflection, it's not the thing itself. If we want to let go of all those issues, we've got to deal with the deeper, more entrenched emotional issues that are just perpetuated within ourselves and which propel us to recreate the same culture of impossibility. I don't think you can go from the outside in or from the inside out, I think you've got to do both simultaneously. You've obviously been thinking about it, Vince. Do you have a solution?

**VL:** Well, no actually. But I'm continually amazed by my four-year-old daughter, Grace. She loves to have her picture taken, and she's captivated with looking at slides of herself and her friends. There's just no problem there for her.

**DC:** The difference between Grace and me is 34 years of living in this culture—of being violated physically and psychologically. A lot of this violence is perpetrated by representations. When I was raped several years ago in my apartment garage in Los Angeles, as the man was trying to penetrate me and screaming, "Why am I doing this, why am I doing this? I don't want to, I have to!"—all I could see was this billboard outside the garage of a woman in a gym outfit with her legs spread and an Evian bottle between her legs. The caption read "Reach My Peak." The man who was raping me was violated by that image just as I was being violated by him. That has everything to do with not wanting to have a picture taken of yourself. It also has everything to do with what motivates me to try and get underneath those images to find out what it is within myself that I can recoup in order to reverse that feeling of inevitable violation. It has everything to do with my learning to live not like a victim.

**VL:** I once heard a rumor about a gay man who realized that AIDS was going to change gay culture as he had come to know it. So he decided to document that culture—the bathhouses, the clubs. But because he was afraid of incriminating people through photographs, he packed up a sketch pad and made his documentation that way. So the question is, why hassle with it? Why not just chuck photography altogether and hire some illustrators?

**DC:** I think my work is tied to photographic representation and photographic seeing. I think I'm also conscious of the irony of being imprisoned by it. In '87, a gallery dealer refused to show some of my work, even though he had just been raving about some nudes painted by Egon Schiele. Eventually he admitted that the only real difference between the two bodies of work was that mine was photographic—that's what made it dangerous. It's crucial for me to repossess how I look—that same "how I look" that was taken from me photographically. To succeed I have to repossess photographically, repossess the very devices that stole my look away in the first place, that stole me away from myself.

Vince Leo is an artist and associate editor of *Artpaper*.

