

Melanie Manchot Celebration

From the outside, it's just a grey cube sitting on the street behind the Geffrye Museum in Hackney. But inside, the space expands. In the first studio there's a light sculpture made from the reclaimed lenses of spectacles. In the second are some arresting double-portraits, books and photographic paraphernalia, overlooking a peaceful courtyard garden. Upstairs, someone is singing.

This orderly, creative space, with a touch of the Bauhaus, is where the artist Melanie Manchot lives and works with her artist partner and her daughter. It's the place that has come to exert a centrifugal pull on her work. For although German-born Manchot studied in London and has based herself in the city she had, until recently, made no work in England for over a decade. Working in Russia, America, Germany – and living in Berlin for a couple of years, it was a brief visit, back in 2007, and the discovery of an East End photographic archive that set in motion her creative homecoming: “And then, literally as I moved away, I found I wanted to return and make a piece of work in London. Now everything is being made here” says Manchot.

For an artist whose explorations are never explicitly autobiographical, the meaning of this “homecoming” requires explanation. Over the course of a number of meetings in 2009, Melanie Manchot reflects on what has brought about this intense refocusing of her work on the world outside her window and its culmination in an important, specially commissioned show at the Whitechapel Gallery, aptly named *Celebration* which opened last month.

Manchot's body of work has, in a sense, been a series of rigorous explorations of a recurring theme. Her fascination is with the way people behave in public spaces – the way we are by turns in a world of our

own and intensely self-conscious and aware of others. Working through the medium of photography she describes herself as an “image-maker” – using both the still image and moving (though often locked) video camera – she invites people, usually strangers, to do something in front of her camera in a public space. It might be an invitation to kiss Manchot, to undress, to be naked, or to stand in a public place or in front of their home. She makes her creative intentions explicit and the would-be subjects are free to decline since willing participation is a requisite of her practice. The set-ups themselves are orchestrated, and then the subjects enter the space to do what they do. It's at once a highly controlled and a fluid process.

Manchot doesn't make presumptions as to why her subjects agree to participate. Perhaps it's a degree of exhibitionism, of curiosity, of attraction or trust. Perhaps it's just that this tall, beautiful, serious-minded woman with a hint of Jane Fonda in the smile, is hard to refuse. But what is clear, even in the title of the 1999 kissing series, *For a moment between strangers*, is that the artist is participating and observing, using the camera to record and to distance herself from what she's set in motion. For *Security* (2005), Manchot asked handsome Ibiza bouncers to undress completely, in daylight, outside the club doors they control by night. Manchot set up her camera in front of them but watched from a remote vantage point as the men stripped, taking herself out of the picture and any direct influence at the “performative” moment.

Ironically, the greatest controversy surrounding her work came not from intimacy with strangers, but with her mother. As she describes it, “I said to my mother: ‘I want to take some pictures of you. You'd have to take your clothes off.’ My mother laughed.



Celebration (Cyprus Street), *The Portrait* 2009,
photograph: Angus Mill

All images © Melanie Manchot, courtesy Robert Goff Gallery, New York
and Galerie m, Bochum, Germany



She said, 'Okay let me think about it for a moment.' And 3 or 4 hours later she said 'let's try it'. She had editing rights. She'd see every image before it went anywhere. She knew there were all sorts of mechanics to give her control." The first phase of the collaboration – *Look at You Loving Me – Poster* – was shown on street-site billboards – these large colour images of an older, unadorned woman in vest and pants, caused reactions of shock, outrage, disgust. It was the '90s, before Dove's "Real Women" campaign, before the Size Zero furor, "a different time" as Manchot says, and was work that, literally, defined the debate on the representation of ageing and women's weight.

During the noughties, Manchot's preoccupations turned to group portraiture in both Russia and Berlin, and these series are freighted with implicit political and social resonance. Posing in large groups outside public monuments and other locations is a subversive act in the eyes of the Russian State. So Manchot's group portraits of individuals who have elected to participate, are, in the context, small acts of individuality and assertion. But it was during the making of the Berlin portraits – *Neighbours (Berlin)* – re-staging group portraits based on old postcards at the same location, on the

same day a century later – that marked the turning point for Melanie Manchot's "return".

On that fateful visit back to London, Manchot found herself having coffee at the Geffrye Museum. There she chanced upon a booklet about the photographic and film archives of East End street parties – local occasions celebrating national events like coronations and jubilees – which all took place in an East End of a bygone era in the streets around Manchot's home. "In my work in Berlin I was interested in the re-animation of a vernacular image relating to the present and the wider meanings of group portraiture."

These preoccupations were in Manchot's mind when she viewed the East End group portraits and the films: "When I first looked at these archives there was a feeling of the individual agreeing to participate in the collective event; and a sense that the moment of the photographer arriving was an event within the event of the party. I decided really quickly my film will be the coming together of a group portrait," envisaging: "We'll hold a real party for the residents of an East End street. There'll be food and competitions, music and dancing, and then the camera will move very slowly and ceremonially but not intrusively down the street, probably on a

crane suggesting an 'embodied presence' as the people walk ahead and gather together for the taking of the group portrait. The camera will hold a static frame and people will be asked to remain still and quiet. For a moment it will seem to be like a still photograph until people grow restless, and then we will record them dispersing again. It will be a single tracking shot in 35mm colour and will last for 10 minutes – because 35mm film is the closest you can get to photography."

This is the essence of the proposal Manchot submitted to Film & Video Umbrella which readily came on board to support the project and raise funding from the Arts Council and Film London. But even before the involvement of the Whitechapel Gallery, before a street could be chosen and all the money raised, a whole other set of relationships and negotiations had to be forged to engender trust within the community and an authentic response on the part of her subjects and collaborators.

With the planning of *Celebration* underway, another event took place, quite literally on Manchot's doorstep, which came to inspire not only a new work but an expansion of her working practice. Manchot says, "A fight broke out between an old Hells Angel with long white hair in a car and a young super-fit cycle courier on his bike. It began as an animalistic stand-off and escalated into a fight – it was a strange surreal dance in the shafts of sunlight coming down the street." They fought until both ran out of energy trying to save face, but shocked that they'd lost control. The event, which lasted for a few minutes only, stayed indelibly in Manchot's mind.

On another occasion, London rain forced Manchot to travel on the top deck of a bus, and she found herself sitting a couple of rows behind two very young people kissing. "Their smooching became more and more passionate," says Manchot. "They kissed for ever and ever and ever – at times romantic then more demanding. They had totally forgotten about the outside world."

Manchot became aware of more consciously "looking" for such moments. In the London Underground one day, she saw two elderly people quarrelling on the platform packed with commuters – their movements became more and more agitated, but as Manchot approached, no words came out of their mouths. They were both deaf and having their ferocious battle in sign language.

Manchot is restaging these three events – casting ordinary people, not actors, to re-enact her recollection of the events in meticulous detail. She





Above *After the snowstorm*, 2001
Opposite *Portrait of Mrs Manchot, looking up*, 1997



1906

Linienstrasse, Berlin



2006



1905

Amendestrasse, Berlin Reinickendorf



2005

found two young people who'd never met before and asked them: "Could you imagine kissing each other?" She found a Hell's Angel and a bike courier and asked them if they could imagine themselves fighting. And, when she finds an elderly man and woman who are deaf, she will ask them if they can imagine signing a fierce row.

Watching *Kiss* is to find oneself, quite literally, in the artist's seat. The rain streaks the windows, the street lights refract off the glass, the shifts in the speed of the bus underscore the rise and fall of the couple's desire. The kiss seems interminable and the experience of looking on from a fixed position, for a full ten minutes, is mixed – hypnotic and voyeuristic, boring and arousing.

Within a square mile of her home, the artist witnesses events that speak to her themes of intimacy and oblivion in public spaces. This trilogy involves re-staging – where the new participants may be experiencing some of the same emotions of the original people. "In acting this moment of intimacy without being a "real" couple, it attains a reality because it becomes a reality," says Manchot. She gives conceptual form to her emotional reactions to the observed world – both an intellectual and an experiential response to what's before her.

But Manchot constantly interrogates the medium of photography, and has gone through periods of

disaffection with it. "How can you ever represent anyone? The moment you have a character, a subject, you have a change – a performance. *A change of being.*" The solution for her is not strategies for invisibility *a la* diCorcia or Walter Evans. Manchot has no interest in stealing images of subjects or of non-disclosure of her presence. It's as though she is always self-regulating against "false notes" in her work; wrestling with the fugitive aim of recording "truth".

During the Summer of 2008, while talking to two Whitechapel curators who were presenting the off-site project - *The Street* – which the Gallery was mounting during renovations to the main space, a two-stage proposal emerged. Not only would Whitechapel show *Celebration* when the Gallery re-opened, but Manchot would mount an interim show in a vacant shop behind Petticoat Lane as part of *The Street* project.

Manchot says, "Whitechapel is the perfect place for *Celebration* to come into the world. The Gallery has made an incredibly sustained commitment to the East End, to its community." However, of *The Street* project she says: "I'd never done anything like this before, showing my sources, my thought process at such an early stage." In the event, the act of sharing and setting up this archive installation had a major effect on the finished work. "Local people came in and wanted to participate. One man suggested I use

Cyprus Street where the residents held street parties." Manchot virtually came to live on Cyprus Street for five months. The residents understood they were agreeing to participate in a group event – acknowledging their role both as individuals and within their community. This collaborative period meant that on the day of filming Manchot was able to preserve the integrity of her original formal concept, whilst achieving a degree of spontaneity, a lack of self-consciousness from the subjects that makes for a uniquely profound work and original work.

As people step into *Celebration* in the upper galleries at Whitechapel they will see black and white film archive of crowds at street parties from the last century waving at the camera. They will see photographic portraits of some of the people who live on Cyprus Street and they will see the film.

It's a beautiful sunny day. We are travelling with the camera, turning into a narrow street. We hear the sound of a piano playing an old musical-hall tune and voices. A sign in the road reads SLOW. There are flags hung between the trees. People are eating, talking, dancing, sitting outside their houses, casually crossing the street. There's a pearly queen, kids in saris, girls in party frocks – all sorts of faces and races of all ages. The music changes to a base beat as we glide slowly past a DJ's deck. Now everyone is moving towards the top of the street, unhurried, unbothered. They're assembling, waiting,

herding the little kids. Then the buzzing crowd grows quieter and stiller and all look, for a moment, towards the camera, posing for the portrait. After a while the crowd grows restless and people start laughing and talking again, and moving off in all directions. We travel on with the camera, to the end of the street, suddenly startled to see cars and the modern housing blocks beyond.

The mood is optimistic, even joyous. It's at once a sociological record and a staged event. It awakens a past that never existed. It is an uncannily complete animation of the vision Manchot had in her mind's eye three years before.

Perhaps no artist can ever really pinpoint the exact moment when an idea first takes hold. But *Celebration* clearly owes much to the day Melanie Manchot came back from Berlin and turned her gaze close to home.

*And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

– T.S.Eliot, *Four Quartets*

SOPHIE BALHETCHET



From top left down Amina, Robert, Marion, from the series 'The Residents' which forms part of Celebration (Cyprus Street), 2010

Tom, from the series 'The Residents' which forms part of Celebration (Cyprus Street), 2010