

## FIRST AND THIRD 1987

Video beam projection

'Let me tell you a tale about your country and mine. It's about a young girl who wanted to come to the states. She was working in an office. She wasn't educated, just a poor girl from the country-side whose family had sent her to Buenos Aires to see if she could get a better life for herself. She'd never been to such a big city before, so all the time she is reading and going to the cinema. She liked very much the cinema of the USA especially the love stories. Gradually she is befriended by the man who owns the business where she works. He asks her if she would like to accompany his children, as a kind of companion on a trip they will make to New York. Before she leaves she visits a fortune teller. She is told that she will get a white dress when she goes to New York and that a gringo will come and take her away. Sure enough, her boss brings her a present of a white dress the day they arrive. She is so excited that she changes into it and goes for a walk. But, as she is crossing the street, a car driven by a white man runs a red light, and suddenly she is dead.'

South American woman in her 20s

I began collecting the true stories for this work several years ago. I was interested in the newly arrived 'American's impressions of the States, and her or his ability to come to terms with the contradictory messages of American ideology with its promises of equality, personal freedom and so on. After I had collected about 12 of these stories, I was invited to participate in the Whitney Biennale. This seemed an

appropriate piece for this space as it underscored the Whitney's own contradictory position of being mandated to show only American art: art that is generally from the white middle class, art that is certainly not representative of any other historical subject position. I edited the stories to point out the contradictions at the heart of the lived, everyday experience of many immigrants and minorities. The stories were narrated by actors. Their head shots comprise a series of video projections, each short story separated by a one minute interval so that unlike a news broadcast they would not run together into a continuous flow of disaster. On a metaphorical level these electronically generated projections reveal no beams of light; therefore the walls themselves appear to speak. They can also be presented in a range of architectural spaces generating new meanings in different contexts.

The background of these direct address video portraits lies in the way certain theoretical perspectives have questioned notions of history particularly in relation to film theory and the construction of subjectivity.

In the 1970s history as 'truth represented as past experience' was challenged by new understandings about the way discourse functioned in the terrain of signifying systems. Through analogy to classical realist Hollywood film, Christian Metz suggests that both history and discourse present forms of fiction. Metz develops Emile Benveniste's concept of the difference between history and discourse: 'The story as a system makes it possible to

reconcile all, since history in Benveniste's terms is always a story told from nowhere, told by nobody but received by someone.' While discourse, articulating that which is suppressed by history, is the address of the avant-garde.

Michel Foucault further located history in the terrain of signifying practices; by combining Althusserian Marxism with Lacanian ideas about how the subject is constructed through language, he was able to show how people's daily lives are shaped by institutional discourses outside their control. In this genealogy, history is reduced to the discursive practices that locate subjects and subject positions.

Roland Barthes' work on how it is that subjects are created through the reading of the text was used by Metz to discuss how subjects are positioned through the act of watching a film. He notes that 'In watching a film, I help it

to be born, I help it live, since it is in me that it will live and it was made for that, to be seen, i.e. to come into existence only when it is seen.' These theories implied that the historical subject was to be written out of film theory because we can know nothing about this subject and because this subject was in a fixed position, constructed by institutional practices and the film/literary text.

Recently, Marxist and feminist theorists have begun to question these monolithic and a-historical constructions of subject positions seeking to put back into place questions of race, class, gender and differing terms of reception/resistance. For instance, one question now frequently addressed has been to try to find out how far actual historical subjects (receivers) resist the positioning that institutional discourses set for them. It was in this context that *First and Third* was constructed.



