

Tari Ito - "Self-Portrait 1996"

This piece expresses a woman's sensual experience of her body and her skin. It is visualized with body movement, latex rubber objects, and both video and photographic images. And, in the last scene, I hold a conversation with the projected image of my own face, a video camera shooting me as I perform, and announce my sexuality.

I started the performances on "skin" seven years ago. It became an opportunity to reexamine the relationship between the inside and the outside of the body, and then between the self and the others. Finally, this series developed into "a dialogue with myself." I suspected that I closed myself off from other people because, although I knew I was a lesbian, I did not identify myself as one publicly. I came to believe that if I did not do something to release myself, I would never be able to move forward. This inner motivation led to the confrontation with sexuality in "Self-Portrait 1996."



When I performed this piece for the first time, in January 1996, it was very difficult. I was so terrified to utter the words "I am a lesbian" that I have no memory of performing the following scenes on that occasion. So, beginning with the second performance, I changed the order of the scenes.

As I continued to perform the piece, I became aware that it is not only about freeing myself. It is also an appeal for the recognition of others like myself, sexual minorities.

The fifth performance was for a lesbian audience for the first time, and I realized that the coming-out scene made no sense in such a context. Since then, when I perform in the lesbian community, I aim for an affirmation and sharing of the lesbian's sense of her body.

In Japan, which is of course a patriarchal society, women's gender is ignored. There are virtually no critics here who comment upon art which takes as its theme women's sexuality, and the issue of sexual minorities is even less likely to be discussed.

I have now performed "Self-Portrait 1996" nine times. But I am left with a deep regret about one particular performance - the second one. It was in February, and was sponsored by Setagaya city government at a local women's center in Tokyo. An official said to me "Don't use the word 'lesbian'." After much agonizing, I changed the words to "a woman who loves women." No matter how I look at it, I feel I failed. So, doing this piece continues to be a healing and a fighting for me.

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Photo: "Self Portrait 1996", by Ayano Shibata

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