



Mary Helena Clark, *Exhibition* (2022), frame enlargements. Courtesy the artist.

Currents Program 4 Vital Signs

A tall, blonde woman poses beside a concrete wall, her hand pressed to its side. Weeds grow at her feet, giving the scene, captured in an out-of-focus 35mm photograph, a romantic quality. It “appears to be a landscape,” says a voiceover. I am watching Mary Helena Clark’s short film *Exhibition* (2022), which screened as part of NYFF’s “Vital Signs”—a program devoted, as its name suggests, to a kind of animism, or consciousness of living forces in the material world.

The wall in Clark’s film is the Berlin Wall, and the woman standing next to it is the artist and self-described “objectum-sexual” Eija Riitta Eklöf, who fell in love with the wall and, in 1979, married it; the photograph shows the couple on their wedding day. In her home, Eklöf (now Eklöf-Berliner-Mauer) keeps a scale model of the wall, which she made herself.

Eija Riitta Eklöf’s marriage to the Berlin Wall is one of many, many curiosities—including art works, scientific discoveries, and historical events—referenced in Clark’s film. Most prominent is the story of suffragette Mary Richardson, who, in 1914, walked into London’s National Gallery, a meat axe concealed in her overcoat, and proceeded to attack a painting, Diego Velásquez’s lusty *Toilet of Venus* (1647-1651). The painting shows the eponymous goddess resting in a bed of silk, her naked back turned to the viewer. A cherub holds a mirror to her face. At no point in the film do we see the restored painting, but we

do glimpse a black-and-white photograph of the canvas, slashed by Richardson’s axe.

In a statement printed in *The Times* after her arrest, Richardson explained why she’d done it. The *Toilet of Venus* was prized as a representation of feminine virtue, but all over England real women—living, breathing people—were being punished for demanding basic rights. Richardson was present on Black Friday, 1910, when police attacked hundreds of suffragettes protesting outside Parliament, and she later took part in hunger strikes—she was one of several striking women subjected to forced feeding by authorities. In her statement, Richardson specifically mentions the persecution of Emmeline Pankhurst, a leader of the movement, who had been jailed and held in solitary confinement. Richardson’s attempt to destroy Velásquez’s painting was, she claimed, a response to the government’s “slow murdering” of Pankhurst, whom she called “the most beautiful character in modern history.”

The stories of Eija Riitta Eklöf-Berliner-Mauer and Mary Richardson evince common passions and radical commitments—as well as anxieties over meaning and visual reproduction. The Berlin Wall and the *Toilet of Venus* are symbolically potent objects, but they have a certain *elan vital* that precedes semantic definition. “The wall didn’t ask to be built,” Eklöf-Berliner-Mauer has remarked, “just like humans didn’t ask to be born.”

Clark may sympathize with this position. In more than a dozen short films, she has demonstrated an intense interest in phenomenology and object-encounter, often with attention to the materiality of cinema itself. *Exhibition* is full of abrupt shifts, contrasts, musical quotations, and archival sources, like newspaper clippings and drawings. But the film is an intellectual project too, entertaining digressions, developing themes. It

includes meditations on Ilya Repin’s *They Did Not Expect Him* (1884-1888) and on the marvelous, unbounded surface of the Klein Bottle. An accompanying text, read in voiceover by Audrey Wollen, comprises fragments from Sigmund Freud, Jack Spicer, and Agnes Martin (“I am a doorknob”). There are also short lyrical reflections—talk of voyeurism, locks, locksmiths, cracked codes. The film opens with a title card, originally from a Buster Keaton movie, bearing a phrase attributed to Harry Houdini: “Love laughs at locksmiths.”

Making sense of these references is a grueling mental exercise. Maybe it’s better to see them as simply jostling together, with the implication that knowledge is contiguous, artifactual, lived in conjunctures of time, space, and bodily orientation. This seems to be Clark’s idea. In an especially striking sequence, she quotes Mary Richardson’s memoir *Laugh a Defiance* (1953), which tells of waiting, anxiously, at the National Gallery to approach the *Venus* and begin her assault. She’d brought her sketchbook and hoped to spend an hour drawing. Then: smashed glass, five blows from the axe, a gallery attendant slipping on the polished floor. Richardson was immediately apprehended by police. “As I knew no bad language,” she remembers, “I called out all the common objects I could think of. I screamed, ‘you lamp, you towel, you plate, you prison wall.’”

As these lines suggest, a transitive relation to objects may be aesthetically interesting, but it can also distort your ability to see, plainly, what’s in front of you. I pondered this issue when I listened to Eklöf-Berliner-Mauer (interviewed in Lars Lauman’s 2004 film *Berlinmuren*) discussing the fall of the Berlin Wall. She talks not of the wall but of her husband being beaten with sledge hammers. “When I saw this disaster on television, I just left the room and blocked the event for a long time,” she says.

“I can’t deal with it.” There is something in this remark almost disdainful of what is commonly referred to as *real life*—an attitude I detect in portions of Clark’s film as well. In *Exhibition*, she excerpts a film clip showing a suffragette forced to consume eggs through a rubber feeding tube; the horrifying scene is from *Iron Jawed Angels*, a 2004 dramatization starring Hilary Swank. Clark has chosen a bootlegged version, recorded from inside a movie theater, which, per Wollen’s voiceover, “adds room tone, compression, liveness, difference. It is a record of viewing. It is embodied.” Again, a fascinating choice, which privileges the embodiment of the voyeur over that of the tortured activist, and narrates this choice in the language of form.

What is Clark proposing about perception? Experience? That we should minimize what we are looking at and focus, instead, on how we see it—on viewpoints and mediating conditions? There is an honesty in this proposition. We are not watching a suffragette, but an actor portraying her—or a film clip showing a performance—just as it was a painted canvas, not a goddess, not an idea, that Richardson tore into that day. Those are facts. But are they misdirections, too?

Clark has neglected to mention one of the key elements of Richardson’s story—an abrupt rightward turn after the war and ascent to the leadership of the British Union of Fascists. Perhaps this particular fact is too historical, too biographical to mention in a film concerned, primarily, with materiality. Or, maybe it is there, suspended beneath the surface. Impossible to say. Wollen, in voiceover, cautions against making assumptions: “It’s been proven that the edges of things are captured first. The open door becomes the expectant gap.”

NICHOLAS GAMSO