

# To Belie the Dragonfly: Elisabeth Subrin's Rhetoric of Silence

Elisabeth Subrin's video *The Fancy* (2000) is an interpretation of the life of the artist Francesca Woodman. The video explores the ways in which Woodman's work and her artistic voice have been kept tightly controlled by the artist's estate since her tragic suicide in 1981. Rather than exploring Woodman's work through traditional biographical tropes and representations of her photographs (which are under strict copyright protection), Subrin instead uses narrators to describe the photographs at length, and features filmed recreations of Woodman's work using contemporary women.

A narrator in the video relays a haunting story that Woodman's father told her as a child, claiming that "a dragonfly would sew a girl's lips together if she ever lied." This singular statement reveals much of the thematic concerns of *The Fancy*, and Subrin's body of work in general. She poignantly explores throughout her films and videos the silencing of women's voices and their desperate struggle to be heard. Woodman's father does not proclaim that the dragonfly will sew a child's lips together, but more specifically, a girl's lips, making the story of the dragonfly an all-too-familiar exhortation. Women should be seen and not heard; their voices must be controlled.

But Subrin defiantly gives women back their voices. Her work deals with women's personal desire to find their voice (both literally and metaphorically) and acts as a protest against the suppression of women's voices by all manner of patriarchal authority. As Subrin notes, "Almost everything I make that deals with feminine language has been a metaphor for power. Not being able to speak is both a pathology, but also a form of resistance to patriarchal forms."

Subrin, an artist and filmmaker, considers three of her works—*Swallow* (1995), *Shulie* (1997), and *The Fancy*—to be a trilogy of sorts, dealing with women and "speculative biographies." *Shulie* is a shot-by-shot remake of a 1967 documentary about Shulamith Firestone (fig. 1). Originally created by four male filmmakers, Subrin co-opts their voice as her own thirty years after the original was made. Then an art student at the Art Institute of Chicago, Shulie would soon explode onto the feminist scene as a radical leader and author of *The Dialectic of Sex*. But the moments shown in the film are before Shulie develops the voice (both oral and authorial) that would make her so famous.

Shulie's ability to speak is consistently stifled throughout the film. Though clearly intelligent, her bumbling speech makes her appear unsure of herself, particularly when her work is critiqued by her professors at the Art Institute. Surrounded by an intimidating, all-male panel, she is vigorously interrogated. Even while insisting she answer their questions, the instructors simultaneously interrupt her and offer patronizing feedback. They repeatedly call her "so young!" in an effort to invalidate her voice and experiences, and when she briefly hesitates to say whether a painting is finished, an irritated professor interjects by stating "it's not a difficult question." Despite some half-hearted protests, Shulie eventually resigns to the panel in defeat. While this scene is disheartening in the original version of the film, the viewer of Subrin's 1997 re-interpretation is comforted knowing that Shulie's voice will not stay suppressed for long.

In *The Fancy*, and virtually all of Subrin's work, allusions to mental illness in women are frequent, particularly Freud's linkage of women with hysteria. Women diagnosed with hysteria could not be heard, only discredited and viewed as sick. The Victorian props used by Woodman in her photographs seem to consciously harken back to the heyday of Freudian hysteria diagnoses. Subrin captures the "psychological, dormant, and dark places" where Woodman's photographs originally took place, and has contemporary women re-enact and repeat them. In Freudian terms, the compulsion to repeat is a means to deal with trauma, further alluding to Woodman's psychological turmoil. Subrin notes:

"When you look at her work, it's so clearly about her suffering and she keeps repeating the same idea....If you imagine the physical actions she was using to make the blurry, beautiful moments in her photos, they look completely hysterical. I have people enacting those gestures and when they repeat the same kinds of tremoring and twitching as Woodman, they all look very troubled. There's a lot of subtext alluding to mental illness there that isn't really dealt with properly."

The symbolic role of silence in Subrin's video is further reiterated by several references to Ronald Reagan in *The Fancy*. The viewer hears a voiceover of Reagan giving a speech and Subrin notes that Woodman's suicide took place on

January 19, 1981, the eve of his inauguration. Reagan's relentless policy of silence in regards to the AIDS crisis is well-known and was viewed as a blatant betrayal of leadership. The AIDS awareness organization ACT-UP adopted the slogan "Silence=Death" in response to Reagan's refusal to acknowledge the crisis. Reagan's own muteness parallels both the silencing of Woodman's voice via her suicide, but also her father's story regarding the dragonfly and the suppression of the female voice.

*Swallow* is the story of two young girls dealing with depression and anorexia nervosa. Anorexia can be linked to language disorders, and the inability to interpret certain non-verbal cues can make communication difficult. Subrin believes that "so much of anorexia from the theoretical standpoint is about your relationship to your mother—being fed—but also, not eating and denying the body has a certain resistance to language." The idiosyncratic camera techniques, disjointed cuts, and long periods of silence used in Subrin's work helps the viewer understand the mental confusion of the characters and the ways in which language becomes problematic for them.

In one scene from *Swallow*, a girl is shown taping a magic marker to the end of a gun and using it to slowly write the words "Dear Mom and Dad." The power—and also danger—of language is visible in this one act, making the gun both an empowering tool and a phallic interjection on the girl's words. She is shown multiple times in the video pushing a microphone ever further away, a self-denial of voice mirroring the self-denial of food in anorexia. But gestures such as these are also left ambiguous— is this a defiant, rebellious act, or dangerous self-censorship?

Earlier in the video, the same girl is shown using white-out to cross through words in a large stack of books. The difficulties of language are further referenced by the dictionary that appears unopened on the girl's desk. As she meticulously counts her calories for the day, the noise of the pencil is exaggerated, almost deafening. Typewriters and telephones are shown, but she is never able to use them to communicate. She tries to type with a pen held in her mouth, and even by clumsily banging a hammer on the keyboard. Subrin herself is shown screaming into a microphone, but you cannot hear her no matter how vigorously she yells. The narrator of the piece yells the words "she wore brown corduroys and a blue sweater in the middle of July!" She repeats the phrase incessantly at different volumes and with different inflections, yet the implication is that her words are never heard.

Books, toys, and even a drawing of a woman's uterus are clearly labeled in *Swallow*. The girl's need for archival organization is a desire for knowledge and control of language. But that very archival system symbolically omits women from the power of language. Like the uterine drawing, women are there only to be studied and examined by the patriarchal authority of the archive.

Subrin openly declares herself a feminist artist, without feeling limited by the term. Yet she understands that many contemporary women resist the feminist label and associate it with radical, militant practice. "What's so sad about that definition," decries Subrin, "is that it's from the position of men. It's feminism as defined by men." When asked what young women artists today can do to help de-stigmatize the word, Subrin replied simply, but powerfully:

"Just use it. Just use the word."

Subrin's statement reiterates the power of language and the need to metaphorically "believe the dragonfly." It is imperative that these dictates used to control women's voices by those in positions of power (such as Woodman's father) are exposed as false and damaging. The compulsion to repeat can go beyond its Freudian associations with trauma. The repetition of language itself can be transformative, reinforcing its own power through each and every repeated utterance, if only that language is not suppressed.

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Elisabeth Subrin is represented by The Video Databank. For more information, visit [elisabethsubrin.com](http://elisabethsubrin.com).

Works directed by Elisabeth Subrin that are referenced in this essay include: "The Fancy" (2000), video. 36:00; "Swallow" (1995), video. 28:00 and 'Shulie' (1997), super 8/ 16mm. 37:00.

The author interviewed Elisabeth Subrin on Oct. 23, 2013 and she cited an article by Nancy Zucker, et. al., "Perception of Affect in Biological Motion Cues in Anorexia Nervosa." *International Journal of Eating Disorders* vol. 46 no. 1, Jan. 2013.



## 遮掩蜻蜓：伊丽莎白·沙柏林对沈默的修辞

To Belie the Dragonfly  
娜塔莉E·菲利普斯

伊丽莎白·沙柏林的录像作品“幻想”主要是解述艺术家弗兰瑟斯卡·伍德曼的一生并探讨伍德曼的家人压抑着她的艺术创作及展览的行为。在1981伍德曼自杀身亡之后，她的家人仍旧全权掌控着她作品财产权。因此，沙柏林没有办法使用伍德曼的摄像。她最后只好利用现有的女演员及详细的表述去重新呈现伍德曼的艺术作品。

影片里，沙柏林讲述了一段小时候伍德曼父亲告诉她的恐怖故事——“说谎的人嘴唇会被蜻蜓缝起来。”伍德曼的爸爸并不是说蜻蜓会将小孩的嘴唇缝住，他强调着说蜻蜓会将“女孩儿”的嘴唇缝起来。他把这蜻蜓故事转化成恐吓小孩的教条——女人要的是外表好看不要多话，还有女人的想法、声音是应该要被控制的。这一小段话严苛地现出女性的声音是如何被堵绝，还有女性希望被聆听的挣扎。这是幻想一部片的中心，也同时是沙柏林个人作品的重心。

沙柏林将女人的声音还给了她们，她的作品体现了女人希望寻找自己的声音的愿望。（不论是字面上表述的，或象征的）她抵制了男性主权欺压女性的情况。沙柏林指出：“几乎我所有的作品都是呈现重整女性主义的声音，而这个是女性主义力量的象征。”不能表达自己的声音虽然是一种病症，但也同时一种希望阻止重男轻女的现象。”

沙柏林说她的三部片：吞咽(1995), 舒莉 (1995), 还有幻想 可视为一组三部曲，这三部曲探讨着女性议题及“假想式的传”。舒莉是一部录像重新逐格拍摄1967年有关舒勒蜜丝·费尔斯通的纪录片（解1）。纪录片原本是由四位男性制作的，在三十年后沙柏林选择使用他们的声音来诠释自己的想法。舒莉，一个芝加哥艺术学院的学生，跻身成为激进女性主义反动首领，并写下了性的辩证一书。在影片中出现的却是展现舒莉在找到她自己的声音（写作和言语的声音）之前的模样，但这也是使她有名的原由。在整部片中，她持续使用着这种断断续续的方式演说。虽然她的演说聪明易懂，但她迟缓的说话方式让人觉得她不清楚她自己要是得是什么；尤其当她的作品被艺术学院批阅时，却被一群不友善的男性团审问。她的指导教授在逼问她答案的同时也打断她的回话并给她相当私人性的回馈。他们不停的说她还太年轻。以此，打断她的话并否定她的个人阅历。当她犹豫不决去回答是否她的油画已经完成时，一位生气的教授又打断她说这又不是个很难的问题。舒莉的争论只有一半被听到，而终究她也被打垮了。在原版电影里，这场景实在是令人沮丧，不过在沙柏林1977的重新拍摄版本观众总算可以放心了，因为她的声音并不会被埋没太久。

在幻想、以及大部分沙柏林的作品中，她总是采用佛洛伊德学说里对女性歇斯底里的研究并以此阐述女性患有精神疾病是常见的。当女性被诊断有歇斯底里时，她们却当作只是生病而没有被重视。在伍德曼的摄影作品中，她经常使用维多利亚时代的物品。似乎希望不断地重视佛洛伊德地歇斯底里症。沙柏林佛洛伊德的学说来算，她这强制性地，不停的重复的行为隐射了伍德曼精神上的不稳定，也是为了处理心中的伤痛。沙柏林注说：

“当你看到伍德曼的作品时，很清楚的看到她的挣扎，还有她那不停重复的同一个想法。想像她在创作那些模幻，美丽的刹那时她的精神状态，那些影像全是歇斯底里的。”当那些女人们在重复模仿伍德曼的那打颤和抽搐的姿势时，她们每个人都看起来都像疯了。其中这里有许多对精神病的间接暗示都不是很完整。伍德曼的双亲一直也都严谨的守着着她的精神问题的秘密。”

沈默是沙柏林的片中的一个要点。沈默将故事延伸到对雷根总统的重新审视。影片里可以侧听到美国雷根总统的演讲，而伍德曼就选择1981年1月19日雷根就值典晚傍晚自杀。雷根对爱滋病严重的危机取以沈默无情的政策，这被视为他对领导权的公然背叛。爱滋病意识组织 起义 决定使用“沈默代表死亡”口号抗议雷根总统不该忽视爱滋病的危机。伍德曼自杀所产生的沈默与雷根的失语同时在影片里播放，之後也在伍德曼父母亲抵制发行她的艺术遗产时互相呼应。

吞咽是关于两个年轻女孩处理忧郁症与厌食症的故事。因语言失调症或无法解读某些特定的肢体语言所产生的沟通障碍是可能导致厌食症。沙柏林相信：“有许多的厌食症起因从理论上来说是跟患者与母亲的相处有关－被母亲喂食；但同时进食不足或人身体反应对语言沟通之间的抵触也会造成厌食症。”沙柏林使用特质摄像技法、分离剪接法、还有长时间的死寂画面，这些电影技法去让观众更接近有精神混乱症的人的想法，也呈现了为何语言会对这些患者造成问题。

在吞咽中有一个镜头：一个女孩将迈克笔用胶带捆绑在枪的一端慢慢地写下”亲爱的妈妈和爸爸“。语言的力量及其危险性是在这个行为里变得清晰可见，在着女孩的话里，枪转化为充满力量的道具，像阴茎般的插入物。她在片中好几次都将麦克风推开，这个自我否定的行为就和厌食症者否定食物的行为一样。这种强行为已经不再是模棱两可了，这行为是一种挑衅？反叛？或是危险的自我省察？

在电影里的前面，同一个女孩用涂白液划除一大堆书里的文字。在书桌上有一本没有打开的字典，用这个字典用以加强引申使用语言的困难。过於夸张的噪音，刻写铅笔的噪音与她仔仔细细计算每天吃的热量的画面同时播放。虽然有拍到打字机或是电话，但她却从不用它来沟通。她用着嘴巴咬着铅笔来试着打字，甚至还使用锤子笨拙地在打字机上敲打。沙柏林自己对着麦克风尖叫，但不论她如何惨叫，都听不到她的声音。电影里叙述的声音尖叫着“她在七月中穿着咖啡色灯芯绒还有蓝色的毛线衣！”她一直以不同的音量和语调重复着同一句话，这行为含义着她的声音从来没有被听到。

在吞咽里，女孩将书，玩具，还有甚至女性子宫的素描都做好清楚的文字标示。女孩希望清楚整理物品的欲望是因为想要了解与控制语言与文字。在这个清清楚楚标示好的系统下，却把女人从语言的力量里排除了。就以女性子宫的素描为例，女人只是用来被男性建立的档案库研读和检查而已。

沙柏林公开地表示她是女性主义艺术家，且不觉得自己被女性主义这个词所束缚。但同时它也了解许多当代女性主义艺术家拒绝被贴上女性主义的标签，而采用较激进、好战的做法。“让人难过的是词的定义”沙柏林说“是男人的角度去替这个词下的定义。女性主义居然是由男人来定位的。”当问沙柏林现代女性艺术家要如何替女性主义着个词去掉污蔑的成分？她简单并强有力的回答说：“就是用，就是去用女性主义这个词。”

沙柏林的声明重申了语言的力量，还有为什麼需要暗喻上地“相信蜻蜓”。这是为什麼要迫切地展示这些限制女性表达的规定是错的、是负面的。这种强制性的重复行为已经超出弗洛伊德理论的创伤学说的范围。只要语言是不被限制住的，这些重复不止言语是可以被转化的，是可以藉由每次的重新表达去加强的自己的力量。