

PRESS RELEASE
JAVIER TÉLLEZ

La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc (Rozelle Hospital), 2004
18th March - 6th May 2006

Opening: Friday, 17th March 2006, 6 - 8pm, Peter Kilchmann Gallery

The Peter Kilchmann Gallery is pleased to announce an exhibition of the Venezuelan artist **Javier Téllez** (*1969 in Valencia/Venezuela, lives and works in New York). In the context of the exhibition *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc (Rozelle Hospital), 2004*, the artist shows a video installation with the same title, which was originally produced for the last Biennale of Sydney, and a second video work entitled *El León de Caracas, 2002/03*.

A red velvet curtain dominates the exhibition space of the gallery. A simple black board is hanging on the wall, similar to the common models, which were used in old classrooms. With white chalk, twelve English female names are written on it. On the other side of the curtain, a very quiet female voice is to be heard. If one follows the voice, the visitor can see a double projection as well as some chairs placed in the darkened room. On one side, one can see a 40-minutes film, entitled *Twelve & a Marionette*, which portrays twelve female patients of a psychiatric hospital (Rozelle Hospital, Sydney). Javier Téllez co-operated with these women for one month. They report in different ways on their experiences with mental illnesses such as depression, or schizophrenia. One woman, for instance, is talking to a marionette, a melancholic song accompanied by piano can be heard or there is a woman who reading out loud from her diary. It is remarkable, however, that apart from these expressive contributions, the narrations about personal experiences and social stigmatization due to their mental illness outweigh. The question about the relationship between the conception of norm and mental illness repeatedly emerges. On the one hand, the women speak of restriction of the personal freedom by institutional power, while on the other hand, they discuss the question of God. Between the portraits, there is a recurring module, which shows a tracking shot of a long and deserted hospital corridor. These sequences are accompanied by the aria *Erbarne dich, mein Gott* from Bach's St. Matthew passion (1727). The film ends with a camera track into a closed room, in which a woman seems to be lost in thoughts and listens to the mentioned music played off a record.

In the context of this co-operation a 90-minutes film was developed, which is shown on the opposite side. The artist brought a copy of the classical silent movie *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928) by Carl Theodor Dreyer to the hospital mentioned above. Téllez and the women watched the film twice and then decided to rewrite the subtitles. Each woman wrote her suggestions on a black board. The original film tells the story of a young pious woman called Jeanne of Arc, who is confronted with a tribunal consisting of powerful theologians. She is accused of heresy and threatened with death penalty by this tribunal. Nearly three quarters of the film show the questioning of Jeanne of Arc by her judges. In the last quarter, the action is accelerated in order to find its climax and finish with Jeanne's martyrdom and simultaneous striking down of a national uprising. In the new version by the female patients, the happening of the film is shifted on the text level into a psychiatric hospital. There the protagonist – taken involuntarily to hospital – is diagnosed with a paranoid schizophrenia. She feels confident to be Jeanne of Arc and due to this statement, she is accused to be crazy. The chaplains take on the role of psychiatrists who decide over her mental condition. Jeanne of Arc opposes the treatment and is condemned to death. Similar to the original film *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc*, in his video *Twelve & a Marionette* Téllez uses the same cinematic methods of *close ups* and shows huge shots of the patients' faces. These shots remind the onlooker of scientific pictures taken for physiognomic studies and pictures of delinquents taken by the police. The interaction of the two films permit to change the viewpoint and gives us the possibility to review our prejudices and clichés towards people with mental illnesses.

In the video room the second work, entitled *El León de Caracas* (2003), is being presented. The video shows a somewhat strange procession consisting of six uniformed police officers marching the roads of Caracas, who carry a stuffed lion on their shoulders. The procession is not only accompanied by curious spectators but also by the well-known Venezuelan song *Popule Meus* (18th century). This procession realized by the artist strongly reminds one of religious processions, during which relics are frequently carried along the streets. The lion is the town's landmark and the heraldic animal of the Venezuelan capital, which was founded in 1567 by the Spanish conqueror Diego de Losada and was originally called Santiago de León de Carácas. It is interesting to mention that the current president ordered the elimination of the lion from all kind of national papers and media of Venezuela. This official act can be related to this work. The lion – a symbol of the colonial era – was removed due to ideological reasons and Téllez' work therefore comments the policy operated by Chavéz and his way of handling the historical inheritance of his country.

The works displayed in the exhibition are pointing out a proceeding and recurring topic typical for the artist. Since the beginning of the mid-Nineties, Javier Téllez has often worked together with mentally disordered people in different hospitals worldwide. In his family surrounding, he got to know how to handle people with mental illnesses as his parents were both working as psychiatrists. His artistic work is characterised by site-specific and unorthodox collaborations with patients. As the artist penetrates the social area of the psychiatry and reveals structural problems, he questions the power of such mechanisms and examines the existing life circumstances of people with mental illnesses. Moreover, he is especially interested in the relationship between normality and insanity and the investigation of its cultural history. According to a statement by the artist, the institutions of a society are reflecting themselves in the psychiatry, which demonstrates power and exclusion. Javier Téllez was included in the 2001 Venice Biennale with his impressive work entitled *Choreutics*.

Text by Javier Téllez

La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc (Rozelle Hospital), 2004

A film made in collaboration with female patients of a mental institution in Sidney.

A film about them and us.

A film about emotions.

A film about a film made by Carl Theodor Dreyer in 1928.

A film about a silent film deprived of their original intertitles.

A film that appropriates Dreyer's classic film edited with a set of 174 new intertitles created by the patients of Rozelle Hospital with a soundtrack composed of music and sounds also made by them to provide a new narrative for the original film.

A film about seeing the screen as a blackboard that can always be rewritten.

A film that employs Dreyer's flattened images of bodies and things as a Rorschach test in order to diagnose the psychiatric institution through the patients responses to a blank screen.

A film that, as Dreyer's film, is a film about faces: "The camera penetrates every layer of the physiognomy. In addition to the expression one wears, the camera reveals one's true face. Seen from close-up, the human face becomes the document"¹

A film that, as Dreyer film, is a film about text: "Oh! But....Joan of Arc is also words!"²

A film about the relationship of text and images: "The text constitutes a parasitic message designed to connote the image, to 'quicken' it with one or more second-order signifieds."³

A film about contradictions: "sometimes too, the text can even contradict the image so as to produce a compensatory connotation."⁴

A film about the doubling of language as a homage to Artaud's poetics of sight and sound.

A film about death and resurrection that translates Dreyer's depiction of martyrdom in the XV century to the context of a contemporary mental institution.

A film about the trial of the society vs. the individual.

A film about the normal and the pathological.

A film about the relationships between the patients and the institutional staff.

A film about the over-coding of diagnosis.

A film about the inscriptions of the law in the body of those who are condemned: "There would not be point in telling him. He'll learn it on his body."⁵

A film about mental illness.

A film about psychiatry.

A film about the state.

A film about reason.

A film about a lost film.⁶

1. Bela Balazs. Quoted by Andre Bazin in *The cinema of cruelty*. Seaver Books, NY 1982, p. 20

2. Carl Th. Dreyer. From an Interview. *Carl Th. Dreyer*. Edited by Jytte Jensen. The Museum of Modern Art, NY, 1988, p 58.

3. Roland Barthes. *Image,music,text*. Hill and wang, NY, 1988, p. 25.

4. *ibid*, p .27.

5. Franz Kafka. *In the Penal Colony*. The Complete Stories, Schocken Books, NY, 1971, p. 145.

6. The original version of Dreyer's *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc* was considered lost until 1981 when a print was found in the closet of a psychiatric institution outside Oslo in Norway.

The artist will be present at the opening. For more information, please contact Cynthia Krell +41 44 440 39 31 or c.krell@kilchmann Galerie.com