

## Mali De-Kalo's *Relaying #2, 2015, Testimonies on Motherhood Lost*

By Lilly Wei

The woman in the video stands facing the camera and the viewer straight on. In *Relaying #2: Testimonies on Motherhood Lost* (2015), the new project from Israel-based multi-disciplinary artist Mali De-Kalo, there are eight narrators in all, presenting five monologues. The narrators, all women, vary in age, ethnicity, and appearance, but they are not wildly different, all seeming, at first, to be more alike than otherwise. Each represents a mother whose alienated child has left her, and as such, belongs to a community of similarly abandoned women, a community of loss within a culture that permits it. But then again, each represents an individual with her own tale. This singularity emerges as the tale unfolds. The women represented are also unmistakably themselves, specific beings grappling with their personal circumstances and emotions; their personal sense of sorrow, shame, frustration, and helplessness.

The woman stands in her living room, a space that is distinctive in each video, but again, not wildly so: a comfortable setting with furnishings (couches, chairs, perhaps a box of toys, a cello, books, art, plants, a patio) associated with good homes and good mothers. Not speaking, she waits for the rising babble of voices— representing unseen crowds of people in pursuit of commonplace activities—to cease. She holds a script in her hands, lowered in front of her or at her side, as if to emphasize that it is not her story that she will recount, but another's, a woman who must remain anonymous, silent, from humiliation and fear of repercussions. The posture of these women varies subtly. Some of the performers seem somewhat impatient, tense; others are sad or resigned, their mannerisms affected by the words they read. They seem to assume, consciously or unconsciously, the identity of the person who is speaking through them. This is not done in an obvious, theatrical way. It is barely done at all, but the words seem to possess them, despite their attempts at a neutral reading. Their voices also vary, also subtly, from brittle, to wounded and grieved, to brisker, more pragmatic tones, inflected by the spoken words that, after a few minutes, subside into silence.

The narrators, several of whom are gender activists who espouse collaborative acts through solidarity with women, volunteered their services in support of the mothers. Friends of the artist, they participated in the *Relaying* series at her invitation out of a profound sense of empathy. They speak in English, Hebrew and Arabic, with subtitles provided. This trilingual presentation is the heart of *Relaying #2*, emphasizing the universality of its tale of love and sorrow, but more specifically, underscoring the gender inequalities that are rife in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Some of the performers shake the sheets of papers they hold, as if clearing their throats before they begin to read.

The videos (selected from among the many that De-Kalo has filmed) are projected on three walls of the gallery in a loop, timed to play in sequence like a relay. The women hand off the stories to each other, creating a continuous narrative flow that symbolizes the constant recurrence of the events they speak of. As each story is read, the other women stand silently, breathing softly, waiting for it to end. The location of the next speaker is cued by the babble of voices that precedes

each reading, drawing the viewer from screen to screen. Audience interaction also forms part of the relay. The women are life-sized, positioned at eye-level, talking to the viewer as if they occupy the same space, a crucial illusion. The gallery, inside the MECA section at MANA, is wired for surround sound to make the experience as persuasive and as reciprocal as possible.

On the right wall of the gallery that leads to this inner room, there is an enormous projection of the images of the eight women, like a Greek chorus in contemporary clothing, each appearing briefly before vanishing, to be replaced by another. They are a powerful presence, mutely beckoning the viewer inside.

*Relaying #2*, part of an ongoing series, is De-Kalo's most ambitious project to date and debuted in another version, *Relaying #1*, at the Meadows Museum of Art in Shreveport, Louisiana in 2014. A multichannel video installation, it is the culmination of three years of exhaustive interviews that she conducted with mothers who have been rejected by their children. This rejection took place in the unsettling aftermath of a family breakup, the rift between mother and child wrenching, more troubled than ordinary rebellions, the mother often not aware of its scope until too late, or of the father's role in the child's escalating estrangement. De-Kalo adapted the interviews with the help of two writers, compressing hours of recordings into succinct, four-to-five minute monologues that simply but poignantly—all the more compelling for their brevity and directness—describe the mothers' bewilderment and bereavement, their pain, guilt, irrational terror, and feelings of inadequacy as their world is upended. In a mantra of despair, they repeatedly question their identity without their children, saying, "I yearn to be part of her world," "my entire day is in expectation, that she might call," "Did I do something bad?" or, "How did I let my motherhood be taken away?"

All claim that they will always be mothers. Their motherhood defines them, but they come to different conclusions. Some collapse. Others push back, asserting their maternal rights. Some are more hopeful, and say that they need to rebuild their lives in order to save their children, so that they can offer them a home if they return, with a stronger person in it. These attitudes are courageous, progressive in societies still based on patriarchal religious and cultural beliefs such as those of orthodox Jews and conservative Arabs and Christians in which submission to male authority is fundamental. This project stresses the anomaly that, while these societies consider motherhood to be essential, even sacred—they permit few, if any, real rights to the women themselves, to those who give birth, and rear those societies' children.

De-Kalo chooses the single point of view, the straight camera shot, in order not to distract the viewer from the narrative. And by showing the figures in full scale, she makes the filmic space equivalent to the space of the gallery. The anonymous mother, the performer, and the viewer become confidantes and collaborators. De-Kalo, who sited the readings in the home of the performer, not staged on a set, relays these interiors through her multichannel projection to create a continuum that becomes an imagined common home. It is yet another kind of relay, the gallery space recreated as a home that is everyone's home, expanded, open, which the performer, the mother and the viewer (identifying with the former two) inhabit together, sustained by each other.

De-Kalo calls these disquieting stories “readymades” that she retrieves and reconstructs. Her narratives are real and scripted, factual and fabricated, and are meant to be regarded as such. The documentary, once categorized as reportage, now more often than not slips back and forth between the objective and subjective, the journalistic and the aesthetic. It is a format that has demonstrated its extraordinary potential since the pioneering films of the 1960s and 1970s by, among others, Chris Marker, Lynn Hershman Leeson and David and Alfred Maysles.

Reflecting our age of incessant revelation and equipped with all the technology available to do so, video artists and filmmakers—mediums in which the Israelis excel—are redefining the genre, expanding and complicating the documentary’s terrain, finding new and more innovative ways to format the countless stories to be recovered; De-Kalo is among them. For her, the act of telling the stories in “Relaying” is of critical importance, an “act between art and activism,” she says, offering solace, healing, vindication and perhaps, eventually, even justice.

- Lilly Wei is a New York-based critic, writer and independent curator whose focus is contemporary art.