

## *Relaying: Testimonies of Motherhood Lost*

Israeli-born Mali De-Kalo is a multidisciplinary artist with background in painting and photography. *Relaying: Testimonies of Motherhood Lost* is a capstone of De-Kalo's earlier work and research on the relationship between art and motherhood

The video testimonies in this project are the result of research that De-Kalo conducted over the past three years: interviews with mothers forcibly estranged from their children due to breakdown of the family unit. These interviews were then adapted into monologues of women who have been denied motherhood for 5, 10 years, and even longer.

In *Relaying*, De-Kalo highlights not only stories about loss, but also of reconciliation and power. Some women overcame estrangement to regain contact, demanding their natural right to be mothers to their own children. Schisms between parents and children are common occurrences, but for mothers they are enveloped in the sense that they have failed as mothers in particular and as women in general, silenced by shame, guilt, and public disgrace.

Each monologue in *Relaying* is the testimony of a mother. Unable to reveal themselves, their testimonies are told by other women who host these stories in their home, in their body, in their native tongue. Spoken in three languages, English, Arabic, and Hebrew, *Relaying's* multilingual storytelling is the very heart of the project: one woman voicing the silence of another. This ambiguity of storyteller and author is crucial, as De-Kalo emphasizes the universality of this social phenomenon.

Each testimony's unadorned, head-on, single shot take highlights the storytelling itself. Staring straight into the camera, these women confront the viewer, and the line between film and reality is compromised. *Relaying* uses cinematic strategies of storytelling, yet unlike cinema offers interactive viewing. In this video environment, confrontation is fickle: it is stylized and yet disarmingly real, scripted yet taken from life itself.

In this video installation, life stories function like Duchamp's readymades, found objects that De-Kalo deconstructs and reconstructs. Women's lives and women's stories are the material here, remolded and remade into cohesive video logic where one reader appears to be listening to the next, bearing witness, blurring the boundaries between speaker and listener, between artist and viewer

The women reading in *Relaying* are passing on and performing. They are *Relaying* these mothers' stories. This estrangement and loss did not happen to the women in these videos. Some are not even mothers, but they read these mothers' words in order to give way to this social phenomenon, to transform self-hatred and secrecy into relief.

For *Relaying*, De-Kalo chose video installation as the most effective method of reconstructing these women's lives. Viewers are led from one storyteller to another, from one room to another,

into a new artistic realm of a home rebuilt, a home that holds all of these women's stories. The nature of video installation is one of multiples and relationships. Unlike mainstream art's traditional focus on single objects, De-Kalo uses multichannel projection to rebuild a home for these eight women.

This is an art project of a phenomenon that has no voice. *Relaying* exists in that uneasy space between art and activism, where public attention confronts social change. In giving testimony, there is an element of resolution. Exposing these mothers' personal traumas to an attentive global audience could potentially transform into a process of healing, both personal and social. What is the healing power of retelling?