

BLOUIN ARTINFO

Vrrwkvđ | lqj #k h #Hfrqrp | #Dq #Lqwhuyhz #z lk #Flp p dnhu#
P hœdq lh #J kœj dq

by Sky



Melanie Gilligan, *Crisis in the Credit System* (still), 2008

Goodden, ARTINFO Canada

Published: May 3, 2012

After more than a decade away from Canada, **Melanie Gilligan** – who was born in Toronto, but has become better known across Europe and the US than in her native country (enviable situation that that is) – has recently been staging a return across Canada’s premier art institutions. With 2010 exhibitions at the **Walter Phillips Gallery** (Banff, AB) and **Presentation House Gallery** (Vancouver, BC), Gilligan surfaced again in early 2012 with a show at the **Justina M. Barnicke Gallery** (Toronto, ON). The JMB Gallery has also commissioned a new work by the filmmaker to be produced this summer. The forthcoming video – which Gilligan will be shooting in various sites across the University of Toronto campuses, in addition to a few international locations – adopts a similar form and thematic focus to the work for which she has become known: episodically-framed narratives portending eerie dystopias in which crushed economic systems beget distorted social realities – including, in her latest, intuitive empathy.

Born in Toronto in 1979, Gilligan has long been splitting her time between London and New York. After completing her BA at **Central Saint Martins** (London) in 2002, she was awarded a prestigious fellowship with the **Whitney Museum of American Art**, and has enjoyed a large exhibiting practice since then, including recent representation in a group show at the **Tate Britain**, and a forthcoming solo show slated for NYC's **The Kitchen**, in 2013.

Part of the reason for Gilligan's meteoric rise is the timeliness of her 2008 series, "Crisis in the Credit System," a four-part fictional mini-drama about the recent financial crisis, made specifically for online viewing and distribution. The film, commissioned and produced by **Artangel Interaction**, was remarkably well-timed, but then, its author knew what she was doing years out. Gilligan began preparing for the economic crash in 2005, researching the impending problem long before most economists could tell you the storm was brewing. Then the series, published just two months after the Lehman Bros. crashed, had an audience much larger than one might have anticipated, for an episodic arthouse tale of economic devastation. "People in finances, sociologists, people working in factories -- they were all contacting me about this. It spread internationally, with people watching it in Malaysia, India, South America. It was incredible," she muses. While the following two films "didn't release in the same way," (and one can maybe be grateful for this, considering the nature of her subjects and the economic conditions that, in part, brought about her first triumph), Gilligan's work has established itself for its savvy and informed narratives, but also for the unusual space it occupies – between television, film, video art, and the cacaphony of the Youtube democracy.

ARTINFO Canada recently sat down with Gilligan to discuss her firm intentionality around this elusive platform, her influences, and what comes next.

Political art legends Karl Beveridge and Carole Condé recently cited you in our spring interview with them, as being an exemplar of political awareness among your particular generation of artists. Were you aware of this, and how did you receive the compliment?

Yes, and it was hugely satisfying to read that. I was already interested in their work, and then I got the chance to meet them when I was scouting locations and casting my next film in Toronto, and since then, I've been inviting them to my exhibitions and screenings. And luckily they've been coming; it's been really nice.

I like the way they see their work – the object, for them, is a byproduct. One resulting from a process that involves working in labour struggles, community action, political protest; that appeals to me a lot. They have a popular audience as well as an art audience. Whoever they can address, they do.

There are certain resonances between how they and I work; there are huge difference of course – stylistically, generationally; but we have come to similar conclusions as well.

Do you see yourself as a political artist?

Yes, actually. However, the discussion of art's political efficacy, as many people phrase it, is a difficult thing to talk about. An artwork's being affected by the political strategy – this can lead one down the wrong road, I think.

When I make my videos, I am directing them at a general audience, at a mainstream audience – if I can reach them, that is. I do that in the style of the videos I make. I am adopting a narrative style that can speak to anybody. I want my work to function as entertainment as much as being challenging and thought-provoking, as much as it is theoretical and artful. I want it to be formally challenging in a way that television, especially, rarely is; but I see it functioning politically in that sense, too.

However, the effects aren't necessarily direct. I think my work is effective in non-direct, circuitous ways. An artwork can affect a general state of being or an attitude; it might change the way a person thinks, but it may not affect actions right away.

The issue of context is interesting here. The democratic platforms you've chosen for disseminating your videos must affect the nature of their reception, taking it from high art to something more indeterminately pedestrian – especially considering its episodic format, and (somewhat) camp aesthetic. How have you navigated this divide?

I made a decision very early on that I didn't want to go into script-writing or film production in the 'industry'; I did work as a professional script-writer for a while after art college. But I made a really firm decision that, by in staying in the art world, I could explore much more challenging ideas, I could have a stronger voice there. You're right that it's a trade-off. But it's one I'm happy to make, because I wouldn't be able to say the things I ideally want to, in those larger industries.

However since then, I have been inspired to make works that are more aligned with television formats because television has actually *changed*. HBO has changed things, and longer programming across the board has changed things ... I want to merge internet viewers and HBO viewers; rather than go into the industry, I want to find new spaces that exist between these two things.

My first film, "Crisis in the Credit System," was only distributed online because it was made in the fall of 2008. It was about the financial crisis. And I'd put in several years of research thinking about the subject, beginning in 2006; I'd put all this work into it but I didn't want it just to be seen by a rarified milieu of art screenings. I put my focus on getting it out there online.

Now, I was making the work with Artangel, and there was a certain budget for promoting. I said, let's not bother with advertising it in art magazines or those types of channels, let's focus all our energy on news and internet platforms. I wanted it – I thought inserting it into those contexts would help people see that while this is a fictional film, it deals with a lot of factual information -- albeit it, in

contorted ways. I wanted to deal with the fact that factual information only comes to us in certain forms.

You were researching the credit crisis years before it came to the surface for most people. How were you perceiving – even portending – this before it had truly emerged?

In 2005 I was in a Marxist reading group, and we were reading *Capitol*. I met a theorist who was very interested in the *possibility* of a crisis, and saw a lot of signs there -- and it wasn't just him, but various economists there who felt it was coming. I became obsessed with the topic then, and, that year I wrote the song "Credit in the Crisis System," which later plays in the film, with my band, **Petit Mal**.

So much of our everyday lives are underpinned by this incredible financial system. I thought, if there is this crisis, there is going to be a huge fall-out; it really concerned me. I wasn't happy to just make a documentary, because that format can present information as flat, unnuanced, un-subjective ... I wanted to take a different tack.

Among the aesthetic and stylistic influences you've mentioned, there's David Cronenberg, and CSI, Dexter, etc. But in addition, I see a certain strain of British 1980s television in your video work -- it's grey, sort of cheap, and seems, on a level, consciously contrived for all its easy sentimentality, its big credits. Is this an aesthetic you're consciously referencing?

Aesthetically, my main influence was Cronenberg, both in terms of the way he shoots, the way his films look, the idea of body horror. He took on various issues to do with the body in his work. And the CSI references are more an intellectual interest; I've always had a real interest in popular television and what it tells us about ourselves and our culture. But while I was looking at the incredible viscerality and tension expressed through the body in those programs, I wasn't trying to make my work look like them.

In terms of the British aesthetic you're seeing, though, that's interesting. I think it has to do with the cultural specificity of shooting in London, and the general ambience there. I think there might be an obsessive, post-apocalyptic quality in British '70s-'80s television programs and films, and I might be tapping into that, but it wasn't a conscious choice.

What is the advantage of the episodic format for you? It advances the narrative in stages, but what else does it do for you?

Well, at the time, the only option for getting a longer narrative online was to do it in segments, because the files could only be about ten minutes in length. But immediately once I realized that, I took on the idea that instead of a long narrative, I could work it into the episodic progression of a

television series. I think in a broader sense, television has a real latent potential that hasn't been explored. It inserts itself into our lives in a way that film doesn't; it's banal, it's background, it's in the home. These are things that ultimately change once you bring your work to an online platform.

I was inspired by the theater troupe **Blue Blouse**, which was an agitprop group out of the Russian revolution. They called themselves the living newspaper, and they would perform different news that they were trying to disseminate to the proletariat and workers' clubs. The idea of bringing news to life, and therefore to a more experiential and subjective realm, has an incredible political potential.

The way I see television is that it can come across to us in these smaller bites and therefore be something that we're living with in a more integrated way.

Can you tell us about the next film? You've been working out of Toronto.

Yes. It's still in gestation, but for the first time, I began with a narrative in mind. Before I had a big idea and then whittled it down to a story. This time the opposite seemed to happen. I am writing a film that is about a global revolution happening. And it's about economic injustice. But what is propelling this revolution is that the technology has become available and widely distributed so that people can feel what other people are feeling. A non-verbal, effective experience of another person. This evolution is really caused by the idea that we're not aware of another's hardship, we can't feel it. What happens is that there is an immense breakdown of subjectivities.

As I've been working on this, so many questions have come up. It totally undermines normal conventions of filmmaking; if I was to film you having a conversation with someone, that's very different from you transmitting feelings to another person. There is a lot of complexity in that, in how to capture that. But I am trying to focus the narrative so that it generates questions and contradictions within that problem.

May I ask, are you experiencing things painfully? Are you feeling a great deal of empathy around the current social and economic unrest?

Wow, no one has ever asked that. I guess one can't go through life completely absorbed in what's going on in other places. But there are a lot of situations that are really troubling, like what's happening to people in Greece, for instance. I can get excited when I see people fight back. I can be hopeful when I see people dissent and change their situation. Living in NYC, it's been powerful to watch some of this up close, lately.

But, though I approach my work from an intellectual place, I started to explore the relationship between affect and everyday life with *Popular Unrest*. And things are starting to seep in, yes.

Sign up for our **DAILY NEWSLETTER** and get our best stories delivered to your inbox.

SIGN UP
