

A Bike Ride with Melissa
by Ka-Yin Kwok
Kings Artist Run Initiative
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CATALOGUE ESSAY
by Amy Marjoram

“Sweetheart, trust me, I used to be able to walk my bike, drink a can, smoke a cigarette & walk the dog all at the same time.”

“Yeah, that’s talent.”

“No, it’s called multitasking.”

As if to highlight this point, a stubby holder wobbles up into view. Melissa*, having agreed to ride around her old street prostitute haunts with a camera strapped to her bicycle helmet, is taking a passionfruit UDL along for the ride. In many documentaries the subjects seem seduced into a confessional state, ensconced on comfy couches with the filmmaker therapeutically purring, “Tell me about...” But Ka-Yin Kwok and Melissa get down to business quickly. “Hey, you’ve got an hour darling,” Melissa drawls near the start of the tour, adding, “well you can ask questions from here.” In taking charge this way she puts her client, Ka-Yin, at ease.

Throughout the video Melissa makes a course that Ka-Yin manoeuvres. In the first few moments of the video, over a blank screen, Ka-Yin asks, “Do you mind... kneeling (nervous laugh)... Sorry.” Through darkness Melissa replies, “Hang on, is that better?” “Okay, it’s on now,” and the camera starts recording image. This awkward shuffle sets the tone– Melissa consistently comforts with such expertise that perhaps prostitution is a form of therapy, except that it’s nasty and quick. A few minutes later when Ka-Yin gets flummoxed crossing a major road Melissa, the more experienced cyclist, says urgently, “Come with me now, okay, now, now, stay on the inside of me though.”

The St Kilda streets are less beaten up than they used to be, but a street is a street and they are made to move along. We see the Milk bar, the street corners, that Melissa hung about waiting for work and think– it must have been so boring. When she talks about doing blockies, looping around and around blocks, the repetition hardly seems any better than standing still. But now cycling, the streets become coasting video imagery: brain-numbingly average brick fences, picket fences, parked cars, all slipping past on a sunshiny day. This blankness mimics the monotony of hanging around any incidental lot waiting for a client; all place becomes conjoined urban space, Melissa was everywhere.

Ka-Yin expects a lot, “Is this the weirdest thing you’ve done, besides your work?” she asks with audacity so clearly ingrained into her personality that it takes the edge off itself through its naturalness. Melissa replies, “With a camera on my head, yes darling,” adding that she doesn’t mind the camera helmet as she can’t see it and, “what the eyes don’t see, your heart doesn’t feel,” with the odd explanation that this saying derives from her grandfather’s lips when he dropped a burger on the ground. A silly beginning, but this suburban grab at philosophy has a tough undercurrent and has stuck with Melissa.

Not only can she not see the video camera, we can’t see Melissa except for glimpsing her helmeted shadow when it sometimes bounces on to the road. As Melissa speaks it’s like a rough and ready filmic voice over, except with synchronised head jolts that lurch our vantage point about. There is none of that pensive filming that other documentaries exploit to bind subject to location. Melissa and Ka-Yin are not after a heartstring-tugging sob story or inspirational narrative. There is too much reality in working on the streets on and off for nineteen years for any neat plot.

They stop outside the Prostitutes Collective next to the window noticeboard that describes clients who have bashed, raped or robbed sex workers. Melissa explains the Ugly Mugs list pragmatically, “They have a sheet they give you. They do it, I think, once a week.” Matter of fact– you read bad things that have happened so bad things might not happen to you. They leave and the dialogue also lurches away, within

metres Melissa is preoccupied with guerrilla gardening. These kinds of topical drifts suggest a meandering ordinariness to Melissa's street work, but the feeling lingers that like a client we are only getting part of Melissa, what she is willing to sell us.

She refuses, for whatever reason, to go down Grey Street. "Look, we used to for some reason the girls, the working girls, who worked over here used to call the ones who worked up there cheap skates, cheap bitches, yeah. But uhmm..... well, I don't know if its true or not... I always seemed to make the money I needed when and if I worked up there." While describing the Grey street girls as either in scummy tracksuits or slutty looking, she walks past a shop front and we almost get a glimpse of her reflection in the window. Similarly, much of the conversation is a tease of fragments, mostly of Ka-Yin's doing. Ka-Yin often appears to almost lose interest at the most interesting places; she lets the conversation run then reins it back in like a yo-yo. She feigns boredom, to keep us interested. Letting stories collapse as she plays the role of doco-maker, selling us to Melissa and Melissa to us whilst maintaining the pretence of a naive first-time client. Although any deliberateness about this is questionable— Ka-Yin appears genuinely uncomfortable with spill-your-guts emotion, she likes stories served raw.

Normally clients can leave and working girls get back to work but now it's Melissa that's cruising and we're cruising with her. Yet Ka-Yin complicates this apparent role-reversal when she mentions she was propositioned whilst cycling. She says, like any non sex-worker would, "He was in a car, what did he think I was going to do, chain up my bike and then go with him?" To which Melissa swears she's had the same thing happen, cycled home whilst being followed and 'done a client.' It shifts the dynamic of their cycling slightly, knowing they've been moving targets. Ka-Yin jokes, "Maybe he likes the sporty type?" and Melissa replies that maybe they do before catching on to the cheeky absurdity of Ka-Yin's comment.

Only a minute after this Melissa's mobile rings, "I have to go home for a minute darling," she tells Ka-Yin who meekly asks, "Uhhh, so I'll meet you there or?" Melissa ignores this, "Do you want to turn that off?" and with little sense of why, we are cut out.

*Melissa is her working girl name; it has been used here on her request.

Amy Marjoram, 2009.