

Vulva 3.0: Berlin Review

3:04 PM PST 2/13/2014 by Leslie Felperin

German documentarians Claudia Richarz and Ulrike Zimmermann examine attitudes towards women's nether regions in an age when nothing can't be "fixed" by plastic surgery.

Amusing and horrifying by turns, but consistently fascinating throughout, documentary *Vulva 3.0* surveys attitudes towards and depictions of women's genitals through history to the present. Although this voiceover-free survey never preaches, it's not hard to spot that German co-directors **Claudia Richarz** and **Ulrike Zimmermann** are old-school feminists who want to explore how attitudes towards women's nether regions have changed over centuries -- or, depressingly, in some cultures, changed all too little. Obviously, up close and personal images of lady bits in all their glory will severely confine the film's distribution prospects, which in itself speaks volumes about how phobic folk are about this vital part of the human anatomy.

As readers of women's magazines and lifestyle publications will be aware, genital cosmetic surgery is now available to help those who feel unhappy with the appearance of their vulvas, and procedures are increasingly in demand to make the stuff down there look smaller, tidier, more symmetrical, what have you. So, with clinical -- in every sense -- detachment, the opening scenes show female doctor **Uta Schlossberger** injecting a collagen-like substance into a patient's outer labia to make the vulva look more enclosed. ("Very American but it's beautiful," says Dr. Schlossberger, satisfied with her handiwork.)

The filmmakers never come right out and judge anyone for choosing such surgery. However, it's clear from the juxtaposition of footage showing photo editor **Ulrich Grolla** meticulously retouching explicit pictures that the idea that vulvas should look a certain way is something promulgated by the pornography industry. Elsewhere, medical historian **Marion Hulverscheidt** advances the fascinating thesis that medieval depictions of vulvas were much less prurient and sanitized than 20th-century ones, while author **Mithu Melanie Sanyal** recounts the tragic story of **Sara Baartman**, an African woman who was put on public display in the early 19th century for her supposedly "freakish" outsized genitals, and whose biography inspired **Abdellatif Kechiche's** 2010 film *Black Venus*. The intersection of race, culture and sexuality naturally extends into a discussion of female circumcision, explored via footage of campaigner **Jawahir Cumar** showing plainly horrified German health workers the different kinds of female genital mutilation they might encounter among clients.

In a more positive, celebratory mode, Richarz and Zimmermann intersperse images throughout taken from artist **Morgan Hastings' The Big Coloring Book of Vaginas**, which lovingly depicts a variety of vulva shapes and sizes with delicate pen drawings, supplemented by close-up medical photographs. Elsewhere, imagery is drawn from a number of works by pro-pudenda artists, such as **Marina Abramovic's** fanny-tastic *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2006) and slick still photography from publisher **Claudia Gehrke's** yearbook series *My Secret Eye*.

In the edit shown in Berlin, the film ends with an extended sequence where cosmetic surgeons watch a colleague surgically reduce a patient's labia. The operation footage was digitally smeared, presumably to spare faint-hearted festivalgoers, but as a result the scene seems pointlessly extraneous, ending the otherwise compelling documentary on a flat note. Perhaps, like **Lars von Trier's** *Nymphomaniac*, there will be eventually cut and uncut versions in circulation.

Venue: Berlin Film Festival (Panorama Dokumente)

Production: MMM Film Zimmermann, Laura Film

Cast: Uta Schlossberger, Mithu Melanie Sanyal, Claudia Gehrke, Laura Merritt, Wilfried Schneider, Angelika Beck, Jawahir Cumar, Ulrich Grolla, Marion Hulverscheidt

Directors: Claudia Richarz, Ulrike Zimmermann

Screenwriter: Ulrike Zimmermann

Producers: Ulrike Zimmermann, Laura Halding-Hoppenheit

Director of photography: Claudia Richarz

Editors: Daniela Boch, Antje Lass

Music: Roland Musolff

Sales: lauramedia

No rating, 79 minutes