



Minnette Vari  
The Calling, 2003

Stills from two-channel video

## Minnette Vári's ritual of penance

by Sue Williamson

"I will go beyond anything I will do in my life for the sake of art", Minnette Vári once said, and never has the artist's commitment to challenge herself physically, emotionally and artistically been more apparent than in *The Calling*, a twin channel video currently screening for the first time in South Africa, at the Bell Roberts Gallery in Cape Town.

It is the tension that is created as the artist naked, and with strange appurtenances strapped to her body, starts to crawl across a narrow balcony wall high above a city in the pale light of a very early dawn, the wind whipping at her hair, that gives *The Calling* its character of a powerful contemporary myth.

The feline grace of the burdened figure, the fact that this ritual is taking place at the break of day, a time of new promises, the elevated position above the city, the very real possibility that a gust of wind, a shift of weight could topple the artist from her perch suggests a ritual of penance, of absolution, taken, perhaps, on behalf of the metropolis spread below. The seriousness of the purpose, the difficulty of the task fills the screen.

In other moments of the film, the Vári figure morphs and dissolves in and out of existing statuary, reinforcing the idea of a mythical guardian of the city, musing over what happens in the streets far beneath. Shot in black and white, the metropolis is a blend of three cities, Johannesburg, Brussels and New York, a cityscape of lit up skyscrapers with mine dumps sliding by in the background, "the new Jerusalem, the radiant city" presented in a series of shifting pans.

The insistent soundtrack includes the growling grind of heavy machinery overlaid by a womens' chorus singing a work composed by the mediaeval nun, Hildegard van Bingen, and at one point in the video, Latin text, which translates as The City of Gold, appears in the clouds and dissolves. Is this then, a romantic vision of Utopia?

Hardly. The heroic vision is tempered with a strong sense of irony. The artist describes it as "an impossible city, a fictitious metropolis, a metaphor for how we are, how we put together our own identities." When asked whether she regards Johannesburg, in particular, as her home, the artist replies: "It is so my home, so not my home. In a strange way, the foreigners who come to the city belong more than I do."

The question of identity, who belongs where, and what this entails, has other ramifications for the artist, who has also said that it is harder for her to show work in South Africa than elsewhere - "on foreign soil one always slips into exoticism."

Vári's artistic practice has always been to insert herself into difficult moments, into other identities, into making herself a tabula rasa for a chosen web of ideas. Although her work has always been highly engaged and engaging, with *The Calling*, Vári has reached a new level of accomplishment, both in concept and in form. And whereas earlier work was tied distinctly to a South African context, this latest piece is timeless and universal, an instant classic. The video is accompanied by three fine elongated black and white stills in a series entitled *Sentina*, which encapsulate the themes of the piece.

December 3 - 20

Bell-Roberts Art Gallery, 199 Loop Street, Cape Town

Tel: 021 422 1100

Fax: 021 423 3135

Email: [suzette@bell-roberts.com](mailto:suzette@bell-roberts.com)

Website: [www.bell-roberts.com](http://www.bell-roberts.com)

Hours: Mon - Fri 8.30am - 5pm, Sat 10am - 1pm

Artthrob review of exhibition: Bell-Roberts Gallery Cape Town, December 2003. [www.artthrob.co.za](http://www.artthrob.co.za)