Despite growing refinement in the work of the Berlin-based video artist (and novelist and librettist), her use of cliché and overturned narrative and filmic conventions to address the cosmic struggle between order and chaos still has the power to shock.
OVER THE PAST EIGHT YEARS, Keren Cytter has made more than 40 videos. In them, the young Berlin-based Israeli has unstitched and resewn the range of storytelling and behavioural formulae in moving image with a dynamism that answers the speeded-up reflexivity of culture at large, typically demarcated by the Scary Movie franchise, endless YouTube tribute videos and spoofs or the ‘stars’ of reality TV.

Yet as one of Cytter’s works, the 10-minute short film Les Ruissellements du Diable (The Devil’s Streams, 2008), demonstrates, no matter how familiar the material, there is always room for unfamiliar and even shocking variation. Recently on show at Thierry Goldberg Projects in New York and at the Rotterdam Film Festival, Les Ruissellements is a video without discernible beginning, middle or end. Dialogue (French audio and English subtitles, plus an additional Chinese musical soundtrack added to highlight the influence of Hong Kong filmmaker Wong Kar-Wai) cuts in and out, and credits pop up randomly throughout the production. With time out of sync, the narrative, such as it is, proceeds to blur masculine and feminine, fact and fantasy, viewer and the viewed (one of the characters appears both onscreen and simply onscreen), subject and object, and perhaps even bigger things like the notion of free will. And in the midst of it all is a full-frontal close-up of a man masturbating.

Each of the characters – one a man, one a woman – narrates the other’s story, musing over the different ways it might be told: there’s a meeting in a park, and an enlarged photo of that meeting which they obsess over, separately, in their apartments (cinephiles will note the comparison here with Michelangelo Antonioni’s Blowup of 1967: both films are adapted from the same short story by the experimental Argentine author Julio Cortázar, ‘Las Babas del Diablo’, or ‘The Droolings of the Devil’, 1959). Through their voiceovers we learn that they are translators and amateur photographers: people involved in the transformation and manipulation of language and image, and thus able to effect subtle changes in how the world can be perceived. In Les Ruissellements, reality is unstable, art the only certainty, solipsism unavoidable, and consequently masturbation the only thing that seems truly, graphically and physically ‘real’.

A standard Cytter production lasts no more than a few days, from the initial idea, to filming, editing and then distribution, both through gallery shows and via YouTube. And yet, though a graduate of the prestigious De Ateliers art school in Amsterdam, a winner – at Art Basel 2005 – of the Baloise Art Prize and a prolific solo exhibitor at venues across Europe, including the Kunsthalle Zurich and Vienna’s MUMOK, she occupies the role of ‘the artist’ somewhat uneasily. “I studied art because I wanted to go to New York and wash dishes”, she says somewhat provocatively when I visit her in her Berlin apartment.

What really separates Les Ruissellements from her best-known output is its controlled performances and visual finesse. Where the bulk of her work is more in keeping with the lo-fi appearance of much video art (as opposed to true cinema), Les Ruissellements is notable for its controlled performances and visual finesse – painstakingly composed in shades of jade and ivory, full of atmospheric touches like a curl of smoke or flickering lights – and belies a new interest in objects, reminiscent in places of the work of David Lynch, such as when a close-up of the skin or the surface of a lightbulb is carefully framed and then lingered over.

And yet, despite its strong aesthetic, the literary adaptation (oh, yes, I almost forgot – when not making videos, Cytter has found the time to become an accomplished writer and novelist, and has also composed the libretto for a chamber opera) and the box of mirrors it
In ‘Les Ruissellements’, reality is unstable, art the only certainty, solipsism unavoidable, and consequently masturbation the only thing that seems truly ‘real’
The dialogue tends towards high artifice, full of repetition, rhyme and rhythm that plays on the way familiar tunes demand that we sing along.
on a park bench believes himself to be the director of all he surveys, able to control the action with a click of his fingers. At first everything feeds into his “certainty of my existence as a hero”, yet at the apex of this heightened perception, his mood shifts and the certainty unravels. The world is revealed as “random”. Such unruliness is also built into the fabric of the artist’s earlier work. While it might seem there is no room for improvisational detours, no free will, perhaps, in Cyter’s conceptual strategy, the script is constantly being undermined by the limited means at her disposal. Books, unwashed coffee mugs and other ephemera are left haphazardly around her locations; the amateur actors are often on the point of a cheeky smirk or of fluffing their lines: art and life are quite literally vying with one another for ascendancy.

Recently Cyter has been exploring what can be achieved with trained actors. As with Les Ruissellements, the 2007 work Der Spiegel (The Mirror) has a cast of professionals, which goes some way to calming the raucous, guerrilla atmosphere in many of her other productions. Its fast-paced dialogue is exchanged in an urgent chant between the principal speaker and a menacing chorus of supporting roles, as the heroine, an older woman who wears no clothes, pronounces discordant yearnings: “Dreaming of a beautiful man with 50 years of experience and a teenage soul.” When the longed-for hero suddenly appears, he seems confused, approaching a chorus member before turning to the protagonist and hastily saying, “It’s you who I’ve been looking for all my life.” But thanks to his polished delivery, for once we know that the actor’s befuddlement is intentional, a comment on the interchangeability of desire rather than bad timing or a case of nerves. What results is plainly subject to a more holistic artistic control, more nuanced in its effect and less accommodating of the actual intrusion of life into art.