Shannon Cochrane

Introducing Louise Liliefeldt

Your name is usually the first thing you offer to a stranger when being introduced. In Deaf culture, it is customary when introducing yourself to fingerspell your name *and* show your sign-name,[1] and then offer some information about yourself, for example, where you live or what you do, because you are not just your name. You are the combined sum of life's everyday decisions and circumstances that you don't choose, like family, class, religion or the country you were born into. Add a liberal dose of chance, and this heady mix—better known as context—is the recipe that makes you who you are.

Born in 1968, in Cape Town, South Africa, Louise Ethel Liliefeldt's ethnicity is a mixture of African and European (Zulu and Dutch; Roman Catholic and Muslim). She immigrated to Canada when she was six years old. Her artistic practice spans painting, video, and performance. After graduating from the Ontario College of Art and Design in 1992, she was active in artist-run culture in Toronto, including stints as co-founder/member/programmer/curator for the Toronto artist collectives Anti-Racist, Shakewell, and Pleasure Dome. Louise was a founding member of the 7a*11d collective (which has produced an international performance art festival in Toronto since 1997), and left the collective in 2006. Between 1992 and 1998, she was the Distribution Manager at Vtape. In the early 2000s, she was a sessional instructor of performance art at the University of Toronto.

What follows is an introduction of sorts, to the work of Louise Liliefeldt. She was the performance-laureate for a generation of artists like myself whose practices were born in the early- to mid-90s, and yet, it is possible that some of you are not very familiar with her work. This is an introduction to Liliefeldt's practice because despite her influence on the shape of performance in Toronto during the 1990s and 2000s, or the displays of admiration elicited by mentioning her name even from those who have never seen her perform live, Liliefeldt's work falls into a gap in performance art history in Canada.

This gap is located between the time that the first wave of our performance art mothers[2] unpacked their suitcases, and Liliefeldt's last public performance, *If I Were a Monument*, in 2012[3] after which she quietly, and without ceremony, stated that she would not perform anymore. In this gap, Liliefeldt—no longer a student, and not yet a teacher—would find a space, get some stuff, and follow an urgency to just *make something*. Before the commodification of performance art in visual culture, and the proliferation of the festival format that has helped to mould a recognizable "way of making" performance, photocopied flyers would be taped around every telephone pole, and performances would pop up: in a living room, a bar, a shop, a friend's DIY gallery, on a street corner or in a storefront window. Before the dysfunctional relationship between performance and photography became the new normal, documentation—promptly thrown into a drawer, and never looked at again—was cobbled together with slides, disposable cameras, and someone's Hi-8; either way nobody thought too much about a future history of the work. In this gap, artists didn't have websites, invitations on social media were a glimmer in Facebook's eye, and an academic article written about your work was not required to make it real. Instead, friends would come, look at it, and talk about it because it was the most important thing that had ever happened. We were writing our own theory. This might not be the stuff that the professionalization of performance art is made of today, but it was the stuff that constituted a deeply engaged practice. It was the way we learned from each other how to be performance artists.

Between 1993 and 2002, the majority of Liliefeldt's work exemplified endurance and duration. This involved the artist holding a pose for anywhere from three to eight hours in an often precarious situation—balancing her body on the edge of a roof, hovering over a stairwell, perched on a high shelf or in a tree, or soaking wet and lying face down in a moving freight elevator with a set of house keys on the ground near her hand, just out of reach. There were animals—a headdress in the shape of a bull; full body painting as a zebra or an elk; the artist entangled in the tentacles of a hand-crafted octopus object—juxtaposed with the human animal enduring taxing physical, and as a result, psychological challenges. Painting (her

1 Hearing people who know American Sign Language (ASL) don't always have their own sign name. A sign name is given to you by a member or members of the Deaf community, and is typically indicative of a physical or personal characteristic.

2 I lovingly refer you to the first volume of *Caught in the Act*. Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder, eds. *Caught in the Act: an anthology of performance art by Canadian women*, (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2004).

3 *If I Were a Monument* was performed as part of the Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts at Toronto Free Gallery, 2012.

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

own paintings or the action of) and video (the body in or as projection screen) were elements that often figured predominantly in the immersive environments she created. There was always music, as soundscape and inspiration. From 2002 onwards, the performances became more frenetic, shorter, and with more actions: head dunking, skipping, whipping, and hammering, often on repeat.

The works described in this introduction to Liliefeldt's practice are *Halfwit* (1989), *Lekker I-III* (2004, 2005, 2006), *Ethel: Bloodline* (2000),[4] *Egalitarian* (2005), and *If I Were a Monument* (2012). It is difficult to choose only a few works to describe a prolific career, however, these performances highlight Liliefeldt's ability to craft complex and meaningful portraits of personal and social identity related to race and racism, and political issues related to violence and oppression.

Imagine this is the first time you meet Louise Liliefeldt as an artist: she walks onto the stage, wearing a man's suit. It is made of a dark material, and is slightly too big for her. She is not in her curvaceous, female body in this moment—she is projecting a different power—arrogant, and full of bravado. Liliefeldt is accompanied by the epitome of the "beautiful assistant" who is holding a placard so that the text on it is out of view of the

4 Four of Liliefeldt's performances are given a version of her own name: *Ethel* (1995), *Ethel: Forgive Me Not* (1998), *Ethel: A Warrior's Burden* (1999), and *Ethel: Bloodline* (2000).

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audience. Liliefeldt takes her position in the centre of a pool of light. She is in blackface. Holding a dead microphone to her mouth, she strikes a defiant and aggressive pose, with her fist held high in the air. She moves through a menacing pantomime, taking up the postures and grandstanding of a politician giving an impassioned speech to his brainwashed constituency. This is not a persona or mimed character. She is not a hopeful candidate or a manipulative party leader. She is the world's tyrant. Occasionally, Liliefeldt pauses and holds a pose while the smiling assistant, on cue, holds up her sign. It reads "APPLAUD NOW," and the audience dutifully reacts with increasing intensity. The performance ends when Liliefeldt strips off the suit, and reveals a brightly patterned dress hidden underneath. In her female body once again, she moves through the audience to the beat of a calypso song. The performance is entitled *Halfwit*.

Southern trees
Bear strange fruit
Blood on the leaves
And blood at the roots
Black bodies

LOUISE LILIEFELDT *Halfwit*, Cinecycle, Toronto, 1989

LOUISE LILIEFELDT *Ethel: Bloodline*, presented by FADO Performance Art Centre, as part of the Public Spaces/Private Places series, Toronto, 2000

Swinging in the southern breeze
Strange fruit hangin'
From the poplar trees[5]

Imagine this is the first time you meet Louise Liliefeldt in a public space: you've arrived at the gritty part of the Lakeshore, west of the Jameson bridge, the tennis club, and the Legion Hall. In the distance, you see Liliefeldt bent forward from the weight of a large object on her back. Donned in garb reminiscent of a school uniform, she is wearing a black wool skirt, collared shirt, and tie. Yet she is also herself: she is wearing her signature big, silver hoop earrings, and her nails are painted bright orange. The soundtrack for this performance, a tinny emission from a small speaker sitting at her feet, is a recording of her father playing piano. It sounds old-timey. From before sunset to well after dark, she stands in the sand and supports a large wooden cross, weighing at least 200 pounds, on her back. It is painted bright red, and is covered with family photos. On one branch of the cross are pictures of her father's family, and on the other side, her mother's. Married in 1961, in South Africa during apartheid, Liliefeldt's parents are considered "coloured," a mix of black and white. Where *Halfwit* gives form to the politics of violence and oppression enacted by an individual or a group, the burden the artist bears in *Ethel: Bloodline* describes a more personal story, giving physical shape to the politics of familial history. Who will carry the weight of difference, of indifference? For Liliefeldt, the personal is political and universal. This river runs deep through her practice. More than a thematic, it is the composite ethic of all of her work.

Pastoral scene
Of the gallant south
Them big bulging eyes
And the twisted mouth
Scent of magnolia
Clean and fresh
Then the sudden smell
Of burnin' flesh[6]

Imagine this is the first time you encounter Louise Liliefeldt in a bar (or in the unused refrigeration unit in a former butcher shop, or in an upscale clothing store). Liliefeldt is sitting on a pool table (or a metal slab, or a pristine white display platform) wearing an old-fashioned bathing costume. From the top of her head to the tips of her toes, she is covered in melted chocolate. It covers her face, dripping off her chin. Disguised as herself, she is in blackface again, lampooning your perception of her own identity for your pleasure. The title of this performance is *Lekker*,[7] which is an Afrikaans[8] word for "yummy," "delicious" or "something tasty," and when applied to or related to women, has an obvious sexual connotation. Liliefeldt is holding a peeled banana aloft, and is surrounded by a cornucopia of strawberries and tropical fruits. Over the course of several hours, the audience dips in and out of the picture, satisfying their sweet tooth with the fruit they dip in and out of the chocolate that coats

LOUISE LILIEFELDT ***If I Were a Monument*****, Mayworks Festival of Working People and the Arts, Toronto, 2012**

5 Written by Abel Meeropol in 1937, as a poem protesting racism and the lynching of blacks in America, "Strange Fruit" was made famous as a song recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939, and has been covered by many artists, including Nina Simone in 1965. Music has always been an inspiration for Liliefeldt, and is often an important element in her performance work. If Louise had to choose a favourite singer, I believe she would choose Nina Simone. Of Simone she says, "There was always something to me about Nina Simone. Something raw and real. Dark, sometimes tragic, and then often joyous and happy. Her music was powerful but always made me feel a deep sorrow. I read about her many years ago, and learned that she was a pretty heavy cat in her politics. She sang—literally—about what was happening in her life. I believed her. These same things, I feel in myself." Email correspondence with Louise Liliefeldt. "Strange Fruit" was first published with the title "Bitter Fruit" in the January 1937 issue of *The New York Teacher*, the publication of the Teachers Union.

6 Abel Meeropol, "Strange Fruit," 1937.

7 There were three iterations of *Lekker* performed from 2004 to 2006. *Lekker I* was performed on a pool table in Ted's Wrecking Yard, a bar in Toronto; *Lekker II* was performed in an old walk-in refrigeration unit in a former butcher-store-cum-gallery in Montréal; and *Lekker III* was performed on the occasion of the opening of a short-lived gallery located in Holt Renfrew, an upscale department store in Toronto.

8 Considered the poor man's dialect, Afrikaans is the creole spoken around the kitchen table in South African homes, influenced by the Dutch settlers who colonized the area, and often referred to as "Kitchen Dutch." Afrikaans words are a recurring motif in Liliefeldt's work. *Kitchen Dutch* is the title of two of her performances presented by FADO Performance Art Centre in 2008.

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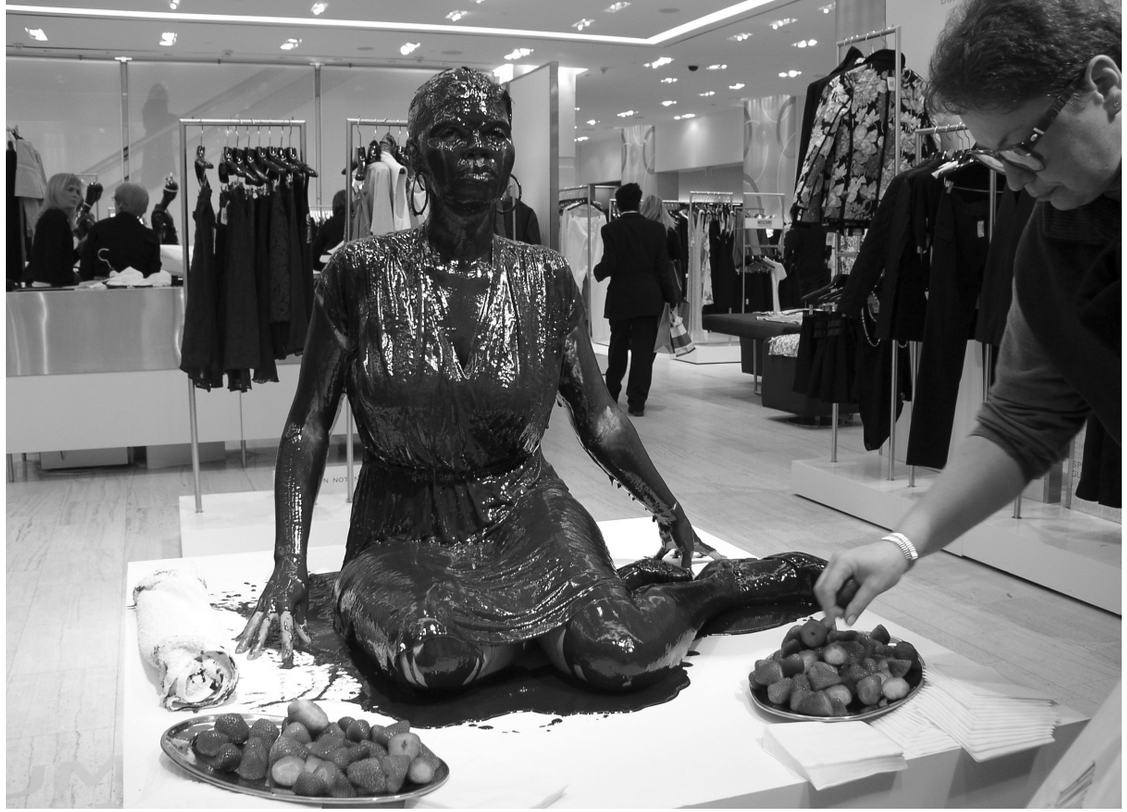


9 Meeropol.

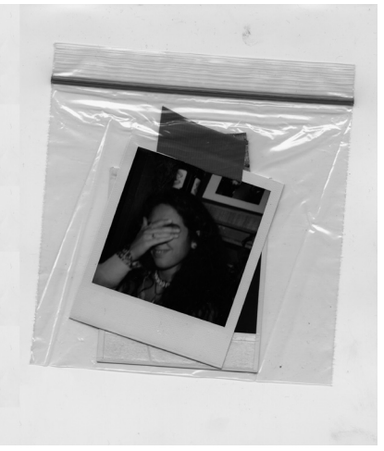
the artist's body. Unlike some of her other tableau performances where she doesn't interact with the audience, in *Lekker*, Liliefeldt is approachable and convivial. You are invited to make conversation with her, and in doing so you experience the meeting of consumer and consumed, spectator and the spectacle. Over time, the tantalizing attraction to the treats on offer, and the scene's exoticism, slowly sours.

Here is a fruit
For the crows to pluck
For the rain to gather
For the wind to suck
For the sun to rot
For the leaves to drop
Here is a
Strange and bitter crop[9]

Imagine this is the first time you have been invited to Louise Liliefeldt's apartment. The space is packed with people talking loudly and passing around beers. The atmosphere changes quickly when the performance begins because the first thing Liliefeldt does is lock us in by barricading the front door, and halts the flow of refreshments by wrapping a chain around the refrigerator and securing it with a padlock. This performance, entitled *Egalitarian*, takes place at midnight in the artist's apartment, which is significant because home is a place of refuge and sanctuary, but for Liliefeldt it is also a place of confinement and isolation. Wearing a black work shirt with the word "SPECIES" printed on the back, she makes a series of actions set to songs she plays on a nearby boombox. On the surface these actions satisfy because they are married to the beat or the tone of the song, but they are also opaque and aggressive. She paints a black box directly onto the wall, her body spotted by the shadows she's created through the placement of clip lamps around the room, positioned behind plants and other bits of furniture. On top of the newly painted black box, she over-paints violent slashes of red by dipping a cat-o-nine-tails into a bucket of red paint, and whipping the wall for the duration of "Clampdown" by The Clash, an ode to the failure of capitalism, and a warning to the working class not to get caught up in the tide of individualism. The repetition of "work" and "more work" in the refrain's backing vocal imbues this action with a sense of futility, and a profound sadness. Packed into her cramped studio apartment, sitting on the floor, in the loft, leaning against all the walls and each other, the audience is a part of and privy to a private ritual. It is

LOUISE LILIEFELDT *Lekker III*, HEADspace Gallery, Holt Renfrew, Toronto, 2004

LOUISE LILIEFELDT *Egalitarian*, presented by FADO Performance Art Centre, in the IDea series, Toronto, 2005



SHANNON COCHRANE

LOUISE LILIEFELDT *Egalitarian* (detail), presented by FADO Performance Art Centre, in the IDea series, Toronto, 2005

intimate and revealing, but it is also awkward. Using a Polaroid camera, Liliefeldt moves through the room, stepping around and over bodies, to take a quick portrait (mug shot or snap shot?) of each person in the room. As our faces appear and come into focus, she rolls joints and sips whiskey, both of which she passes around. She puts the developing photos into small plastic bags, and pins them to her red and black wall in a grid formation. Species or specimen, the faces are a catalogue of family, friends, colleagues, and ultimately, strangers.

Lord have mercy on this land of mine
We all gonna get it in due time
I don't belong here
I don't belong there
I've even stopped believing in prayer[10]

Imagine this is the last time you witness Louise Liliefeldt make a performance: she is in the gallery, wearing an ordinary pair of black jeans, and a khaki green work shirt. She's standing on a milk crate, and holding two buckets at her sides. One of them is full of milk, and the other one is full of water. She stands completely still, staring straight ahead as the audience enters, lines the walls, and settles. Ten minutes pass, and then ten minutes more, and then a few minutes more.[11] She steps down from the milk crate, places the two buckets on the floor, and takes up a third one full of red paint. Using her flattened hand like a large brush, she draws a line that represents a heartbeat on the wall starting in the window wells, and making her way around the perimeter of the gallery. The line is wet, and alive. She steps back onto her poor man's pedestal, and slowly moves through a series of motions that look like the release of physical pain but also conjure African dance, ending in a grimace she holds until her friend Lewanne comes out of the audience, picks up the bucket of milk, and throws it in her face. Louise walks to the window, steps into the window well, and turns to face the audience. She raises her fist in the air. She remains standing there with the milk dripping down her face, and soaking her clothes while the South African national anthem plays.

Would you rather be an idol or an icon? A statue or a monument? From the Latin *moneo* or *monere* meaning "to remind" or "to warn," a monument is an architectural structure that commemorates a person or an important event. As an object, a monument is the avatar of cultural memory and shared history important to a particular social group. When Liliefeldt titles her last performance, *If I Were a Monument*, she is performing her usual sleight of hand, and doing two things at once. As a statement, she is directing our attention to a full circle, reminding us that she is ending where she started. She alludes to the closing of a chapter—after all this might be her last performance. Simultaneously she also asks a question, and without punctuation, it hides in plain sight, vulnerable, and tentative: *if* I were a monument, then what?

10 Nina Simone, "Mississippi Goddam," 1964.

11 Besides being a consummate technician (over the last 20 years, there is nothing more fun or rewarding for me than getting together with Louise to talk through the various intricacies and options of a performance's structural elements—what should go first? Is this material necessary? How long? How much?), Liliefeldt's sense of timing is exceptional. She knows intuitively when and how to push a moment past its obvious climax, allowing for new meaning to emerge. I recall with fondness a video Liliefeldt screened at the 2001 Images Festival. It was a single shot close-up of her face, bathed in blue light. The only indication that the shot was not a still image was the rhythmic blinking of her eyes. Minutes passed (hours!), and we waited patiently for some action. I recall that one audience member stormed out of the theatre. Finally in the last minutes of the video, a single drop of chocolate slowly snakes its way down Liliefeldt's face, and the video ends.

Margaret Dragu

Divining Ms. Irene

THE PERFORMANCE WORK OF IRENE LOUGHLIN

To enter the Land of Writing, one must first climb Procrastination Mountain.

My mountain was a large Black Folder of texts and DVDs about Irene Loughlin. Quick peeks left me intimidated by the academic texts and frozen at my computer screen. I placed the Black Folder beside my TV, and for three weeks averted my eyes.

At the same time, I was obsessed by memories of Loughlin's 7a*11d Festival performance I saw some years ago, in 2012.[1] Irene, wearing a pretty black dress, bending over a school desk. Standing naked except for pantyhose. Rolling herself up in brown wrapping paper painted with molasses. Lying on the floor covered in a mountain of stinky, empty beer bottles. These images appeared in train and bus windows during my commutes, and on the other side of partially open venetian blinds during many rainy Vancouver fall days. My mind's eye returned to these images and smells as if I were stroking a bruise that felt both sore and sweet to rub.

On the phone, Irene Loughlin's soft voice, laugh, and sigh encouraged me to put the Black Folder's written materials aside. "We can just start together in our own way," Irene said, and suggested I begin by viewing her videos.

1 The 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art in Toronto was curated by the collective: Annie Onyi Cheung, Shannon Cochrane, Paul Couillard, Jess Dobkin, Francisco-Fernando Granados, Adam Herst, Johanna Householder, and Tanya Mars.