

Louise Liliefeldt

25 Artists

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A Letter of Love (2009), a new video by Toronto-based artist Louise Liliefeldt, juxtaposes a set of statements regarding the end of South African apartheid with footage of her own earlier performances.¹ The earlier pieces explored three interrelated issues: collective experiences of both community and oppression grounded in physical labour; the way in which social situations (and their interruption through acts like the submersion of her head beneath water) modulate individual and group perception; and the absurdities of racial figuration, particularly her own body's resistance to a black/white schema. Many of these works centred on acts of endurance and arduous physical exertion, testaments to the capacity of the body—and especially the strength of women's bodies—to persist and survive under the incredible, repeated strains of daily life. Others dramatized aspects of how race is experienced: whether by painting her highly sexualized “mixed” body with chocolate (*Lekker III*, 2004) or ironically donning Zebra stripes (the markings of a uniquely African animal utilized in *A Zebra's Tale*, 2000) in order to provoke an absurd visual individuation of her separate “racial heritages.”

Set against a soundtrack of Nina Simone's *Don't Explain* and *Sinnerman*, the video begins with a fictive letter from South Africa to the artist that scrolls over the image of a black man cropped from the *Cape Times* newspaper: he holds out his hands, demonstrating the manner his wrists were once bound, but also welcoming an addressee, almost gesturing towards an embrace. These words express a desired summons home, a fantastical and succoring call to return that the artist carries in her heart:

I miss you
I think of you all the time
I wonder where you are
If you were here I would hold you
I would love you more than I do now
Please remember that I am here
and that you always have a place with me

A series of quotations follow, each presented in a similar format: responses to the query “What is your life like three years after the end of apartheid?” scroll over photographic images of the respondents as well as a barely-legible backdrop of other statements.

Liliefeldt includes testimonials from across the political and racial spectrum: African workers celebrating changes in their lives, white racists expressing bitterness over the new government and rising tide of crime, well-meaning liberals who nevertheless continue to refer to all blacks as “they,” and African migrants who claim little has changed in their everyday existence. These sharply contrasting declarations of joy, pride, bitterness, grief, and disillusionment collectively express the precarious and fragmentary reality of a “new” South Africa, whose citizens continue to articulate their experiences through the racial categories and historical experiences of apartheid. They also capture diverse, perhaps even irreconcilable, elements of Coloured (mixed-race) identity: a uniquely South African group of European, African, and (sometimes) Malay descent, whose history is often marginalized by nationalist discourses that privilege the white/African divide.

The video clips of Liliefeldt's performances are at once beautiful and horrifying; they show actions that are viscerally physical and yet abstracted from their earlier settings. The segments become imagistic, even spectacular, against the backdrop of Simone's voice: “I run to the river. It was boiling. I run to the sea. It was boiling.” Interpolated between the newspaper testimonials, they raise fundamental questions about embodiment, address, and belonging as video, text, and sound bleed together, overwhelming individual meanings. In the midst of the montage, home becomes a sublime word, a synonym for inheritance. It marks the site where bodies assume the burdens of the other's pleasures and suffering—the inescapable encounter of a shared history.

1 *Liliefeldt includes excerpts from the following videos: A Zebra's Tale (2000), Hunter (2007), Untitled V (2007), Specimen (2007), Untitled III (2003), Lekker III (2004), and Kitchen Table (2005).*