CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN WOMEN'S PERFORMANCE ART: READING POSTFEMINISM AND THIRD-WAVE FEMINISM

by

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Chapter 3: Making visible differences

The practices of Louise Liliefeldt, Lori Blondeau, and Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan engage sexual difference as inflected by the effects of race, culture, and lesbianism. Analyzing their subjective experiencing of oppressions, these artists relate the personal to social operations of power. They use various performative strategies to counter stereotypes of women as inscribed by racist, colonialist, homophobic and patriarchal discourse, and assert their visibility as differentiated subjects and cultural producers. Each artist employs her embodied presence as a sentient being to interact with her audience and challenge the aesthetic distancing and typical one-way gaze of dominant representation. Through strategic and sometimes parodic self-objectification, these artists solicit the gaze and return it, confronting the viewer's othering tendencies and effecting a reciprocity between viewer and viewed: Louise Liliefeldt turns herself into an image through *tableaux vivant* installations and low-motion performances; Lori Blondeau's witty personae parody Native stereotypes; and Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan capitalize on personae as iconic Parks Rangers to confront tourists with lesbianism. Paradoxically, self-objectification becomes the means through which each artist asserts subjectivity and agency:

> In a culture where the objectification of others is normal and accepted, even profitable, the act of *self*-objectification...is a powerful technique for interrogating and transgressing convention. Self-exhibition creates a dissonance in the harmony of cultural consensus because, in the words of Peggy Phelan, it 'suspends the proprietary relation between body and being' (Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick, 13, citing Phelan *Unmarked*, 204).

Louise Liliefeldt was born in Cape Town, South Africa, and grew up in Scarborough, Ontario. She received her BFA from the Ontario College of Art and Design (1992) and continues to live and practice in Toronto. In 1997, she co-founded 7a*11d International Festival of Performance Art. She is a painter as well as a performance artist, performing nationally and internationally. Liliefeldt's work resonates in the tradition of

tableaux vivant.[37] Liliefeldt "slow[s] time by taking one image and prolong[ing] it," using "low motion, action, repetition, stasis and tension." Although she often performs in gallery settings, Liliefeldt prefers "to create stasis" in the "curiosity and confusion of the public realm."[38] Liliefeldt has developed a wide body of performance work, but I will focus on *Ethel: Forgive Me Not* (1998), *Ethel: A Warrior's Burden* (1999), and *Ethel Bloodline* (2000).

Lori Blondeau describes her heritage as Cree/Saulteaux/Metis and lives in Saskatoon, where she co-founded and directs TRIBE, an innovative aboriginal arts organization. She has been active in performance for about a decade and completed her MFA at the University of Saskatchewan in 2002. Her humourous cabaret-style performances as CosmoSquaw, Betty Daybird, the Lonely Surfer Squaw, and Belle Sauvage interrogate stereotypes of Native women, particularly the Indian Princess and Squaw, and explore the influences of these images in popular culture, media, and art history "on Aboriginal self-identity, self-image, and self definition."[39]

Winnipeg-based Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan have been collaborating since 1989. Consistent throughout their practice is the use of costume and the appropriation of popular icons and genres to shed visibility on lesbianism and its politics. They are internationally famous for their performance and video *We're Talking Vulva* (1990); have created a mock *Life* magazine, *In the LIFE* (1995), and video, *A Day in the Life of a Bull-Dyke* (1995); numerous costumed monologue performances (documented on video) such as *Mary Medusa* (1993), *Object/ Subject of Desire* (1993), and *The Arborite Housedress* (1994); video pieces such as *Good Citizen Betty Baker* (1996); and public interventions such as the condom-dispensing *Smile-Girl*, and the *Lesbian National*

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[37] Liliefeldt's work was included in the exhibition *CounterPoses*, an artistic re-evaluation of "living display," curated by Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick. *Tableaux vivant*, or "living pictures," were popular in nineteenth century North America as a domestic form of entertainment and moral instruction. Fisher and Drobnick sought to foreground "the ethical dimensions of looking and the politics of the viewer-viewed relationship" and how living display can be affirmative of difference (Drobnick and Fisher 2002, 6—7)

[38] Louise Liliefeldt, statement for *Weeping Body* (2002) on the Mercer Union website: <www.mercerunion.org/roadworks/jul27.html>

[39] Lori Blondeau artist's statement given to me at MAWA symposium, October 6-7, 2001.

Parks and Services (ongoing since 1997).[40] Here I will focus on their performance as Rangers in the Lesbian National Parks and Services (LNPS), and recently published *Lesbian National Parks and Services Field Guide to North America: Flora, Fauna & Survival Skills* (2002), as well as their video *Lesbian National Parks and Services: A Force of Nature* (2002).

These performance practices engage the feminist problematic of representing women as particularized subjects, emphasizing feminism's concern with differences among women. Each of these artists analyzes her subjective experience of gender along axes of racism, colonialism, and sexual oppression, to perform disruptions of dominant patriarchal and racist systems of representation. These artists employ performance's presence and temporality to complicate the conventional subject/object mechanics of the gaze and encourage reciprocal recognition between the viewer and the viewed as mutual subjects.

3.1: Louise Liliefeldt

Louise Liliefeldt has developed "Ethel," a persona of sorts, through a series of performances: *Ethel: Forgive Me Not* (1998), *Ethel: A Warrior's Burden* (1999), and *Ethel Bloodline* (2000). Ethel derives from Liliefeldt's middle-name, a name which, in recalling another era, connotes longevity. These performances draw upon her personal history to present a character in time. In an artist statement, Liliefeldt writes:

> My work is predominately concerned with the cultural conventions of spectatorship and the links between expanded emotional/psychological states and physical experience. The politics of identity, especially as it intersects with issues of gender and race, run as a base line through all my work. I mean that I am a woman and (for lack of a better term) 'of colour' and so these two points always play a role in the meaning of each image I create.[41]

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[40] See Video Pool's catalogue for more information about these works <www.videopool.org/catalogue/artists/dempseyshawna.htm>

[41] Louise Liliefeldt, statement for *Weeping Body* (2002) on the Mercer Union website: <www.mercerunion.org/roadworks/jul27.html>

For *CounterPoses*, a festival of *tableaux vivant* performance curated by Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick in Montréal (1998), Liliefeldt created *Ethel: Forgive Me Not*, a dramatic yet intimate installation in a stairwell of one of the exhibition venues. The space was illuminated in red and filled with the sound of a raging wind storm. Leaning out over the stairwell from a platform she had constructed, Liliefeldt appeared as if a visitation, her body held tautly in place by yards of white fabric. Her skin was "slicked in glittering gold" and her "blazing focus was absolute" (Fisher and Drobnick 2002, 9). Behind her on the wall were six wooden crosses: four in a horizontal line, tethered by ropes hauled over Liliefeldt's shoulder and held taut in her hands; and two askew, slipping out of place. At her feet, lay a jumble of fallen crosses, and in front of her, demarcating the space between her and the openness of the stairwell, was a short fence of crosses. Viewers passed beneath her as they entered the bottom of the stairwell, and ascending the stairs, met her gaze at eyelevel upon reaching the landing (fig. 24).

Liliefeldt's body bound in folds of white fabric recalled traditional western sculpture and monumentality. Visiting Venezuela years ago, she had been struck by the number of monumental sculptures of women—heroines, saints and warriors. Her body swathed in cloth lent a sensuality which offset the severity of the wooden crosses. Liliefeldt uses the image of the cross to express how growing up Catholic has shaped her experiencing of the body and sense of self. Although not a practicing Catholic, pleasure, guilt, and the concept of "original sin" have been defined by Catholicism's influence in her life; such doctrine is contested by subtle images of Liliefeldt painted green, lying on a couch in self-pleasure, projected on either side of her cloth-bound figure.[42] Liliefeldt's performance held in tension a saintly stoicism, and defiant pleasure. This performance in Montréal had particular significance as Québec society is deeply inscribed by Catholicism.

Ethel: A Warrior's Burden was created for *99°C/F*, a festival of performance art in Halifax, curated by Gabriel Doucet Donida (1999). Dressed in white cotton pants and shirt, her hands wrapped in white fabric, Liliefeldt, slow and straining, dragged heavy burlap sacks of stones in a figure-eight route from the rear of the gallery, emerging

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[42] Personal interview, March 10, 2003.

through fabric curtains to outside in the sunny cobble-stoned promenade (recalling Halifax's own colonial foundation), and back again; her circuitous route was indexed by the resulting trail of lost sand and smaller stones. Viewers looked on from both within the gallery, and outside on the promenade. Upon returning to the rear of the gallery, Liliefeldt released the cumbersome sacks, loosening her shoulders and coming to her knees to immerse her head for a prolonged period in a square metal bucket. Projected above her on the wall, the image of a hammer slowly and repetitively came down upon her submerged head, augmenting the palpable tension in the room, and its rhythm accentuating the repetition and strain of her activity. The gallery space was transformed and the sense of drama heightened by floor-level red lights that projected her shadow larger than life. Surfacing from the water, she stood hair dripping, breathing deeply and stretching her arms, shoulders and back in preparation for resuming her cycle with the stones. The entire performance lasted approximately three hours (fig. 25).

Ethel: Bloodline (2000) was presented on a summer Sunday afternoon in a park on Toronto's lakefront, as a part of FADO's *Public Places Private Spaces* project.[43] Liliefeldt is interested in creating a moment of stasis within life's fast pace and as such sees more potential for encounters with the public in performing outdoors, or in contexts which connect to the street (for example, through windows, or by extending a gallery performance to the outside as she did in *Ethel: A Warrior's Burden*). In an urban setting, Liliefeldt's stillness is accentuated by the movement going on around her, a contrast that rarely occurs in the gallery. Liliefeldt bore a two-hundred-pound cross for five hours from late afternoon to after sundown. Piano music—Liliefeldt's father playing old standards—wafted from speakers mounted in the trees. Family photos were mounted on the back of the cross, enticing viewers to have a closer look: people stopped to look, to ask questions—people inquired how heavy the cross was and Liliefeldt invited them to support its weight momentarily (fig. 26). This created a sense of immediacy for the viewer, but it was also metaphorical for people acknowledging or understanding other people's strife.[44] Liliefeldt's "bearing the cross" also represents Christian salvation of the

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[43] FADO archive: <http://www.performanceart.ca/spaces/liliefeldt/home.html>
[44] Personal interview, March 10, 2003.

soul, and like *Ethel: Forgive Me Not*, reflects Liliefeldt's ambivalent relationship with Catholicism.

By presenting herself in such stillness, a "five hour moment" in the case of *Ethel: Bloodline*, Liliefeldt creates a moment or situation where people will pause, or stop, incited to do so by her out-of-the-ordinary presence. Tableau requires that people approach her (rather than her going to them), and as such, Liliefeldt's performances often place members of the public in relation to one another and instigate interactions between them. *Ethel: Bloodline* became a rather social piece, catalyzing conversations between passersby. The physical installation of *Ethel: Forgive Me Not* in the stairwell created a tight space at the top of the stairs where viewers converged. Liliefeldt is intrigued with how tableau can generate or alter a pattern of movement in the environment surrounding it. The installation also enabled viewers at the top of the stairwell to watch other viewers ascend, and to identify with others engaged in the same activity. Similarly, viewers were communal witnesses to Ethel's struggle in *Ethel: A Warrior's Burden*, and in order to see the performance had to follow her—physically or by sight—through her labourious route.

As Peggy Phelan might describe it, the durational and physically taxing qualities of Liliefeldt's work define the "Present," "the performer's body" (Phelan 1993, 156). Liliefeldt is inspired by the work of such artists as Marina Abramovic and Mona Hatoum, both of whose pioneering work in performance also explores physical and mental endurance.[45] As a phenomenon, endurance is significant within the history of performance, stressing performance's temporality and the performer's body (at a time when embodiment was/is still largely denied), through pushing the limits of the body and mind. Curator Gabriel Doucet Donida suggests that, through performance, Liliefeldt "inhabits 'anOther' space" (Donida 1999, 12). She simultaneously appears 'elsewhere,' fixed in her exceptional durational exertion, yet the emphasized physicality of her performance and relation to the audience makes her strikingly present. As Fisher and Drobnick posit, performance's foregrounding of presence engages the haptic sense. "Haptic awareness engages the ontology of a performative situation through a kind of 'distal touch,' which perceives the ways energies are galvanized to generate experience"

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[45] Personal interview, March 10, 2003.

(29). Herein is the stimulus for interaction—sometimes spoken, but more often through the exchange of gazes between viewer and performer, the transmission of a kind of non-verbal communication.

Jeannie Forte's interest in language's limitations in expressing the body led her to observe that two "circumstances in which the body is undeniable, when the body's material presence is a condition of circumstance," are pain and live performance (Forte 1992, 251). Liliefeldt places her body under considerable duress in her performances. She is often "stuck," her body bound or burdened, signifying the historical bondage of African and other enslaved people, as well as the literal and symbolic ways in which an oppressed people have been restricted in their movement. Additionally, her use of the projected image of the arm hammering upon her head in *Ethel: A Warrior's Burden* articulates a painful endurance. Forte suggests that one attempts to express pain to another who is not in pain, "in order to move them into action" (251). Forte cites feminist performer Angelika Festa, who through her piece *Untitled Dance with Fish and Others* (1987), similarly communicates pain by being bound by sheets and suspended from a pole for twenty-four hours.[46] Liliefeldt speaks of making performance as a legitimate way to express concerns and questions about being in the world, to communicate in a way that doesn't rely on spoken language.[47] For women, language, as structuring the Symbolic (in which women are denied access to subjectivity and representation), is limited in expressing the body's experiences. Liliefeldt acknowledges that non-verbal interaction pushes what is socially comfortable; the intensity of feeling in such a moment with someone we don't know can be challenging. Indeed, sometimes her glance causes the viewer to look away.

As such, Liliefeldt's performances exemplify the capacity for performance, as Amelia Jones argues in her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, "through its temporality and spatiality, to complicate the [traditional perspectival subject/object]

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[46] Pain is a recurring theme throughout performance art's history, explored by such artists as Gina Pane, Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic, and Orlan. Within the development of performance, Kathy O'Dell argues "pain must be understood as a metaphor for the oppressive level of institutional and political domination in the early 1970s" (O'Dell 1998, 51).

[47] Personal interview, March 10, 2003.

mechanics of the gaze" (Amelia Jones 1998,160). Liliefeldt's use of tableau creates a tension where she is simultaneously "image" and actively performs as agent: her presence as a live, sentient being foregrounds "the ethical dimensions of looking and the politics of the viewer-viewed relationship" (Fisher and Drobnick, 6). In the terms of Jones' reading of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Liliefeldt "activates...the 'temporal structure' of the body, playing out objectivity and subjectivity as performative rather than fixed and so complicating viewers' attempts to locate themselves as coherent in relation to the work of art" (160). Presenting herself as an object/subject to behold, Liliefeldt's performances instantiate a phenomenological "intertwining" of self and other, of viewer and viewed, whereby, as Jones suggests, "the embodied other constitutes the gaze of the subject" (169). Rebecca Schneider relates how performance counters perspectivalism's positioning of "woman as given to be seen but not as given to see" (3):

> the "seen" takes on an agency of her own and wields the unnerving potential of a subversive reciprocity of vision, an explicit complicity, or mutual recognition between seer and seen, who become seer and seer, subject and subject, object and object in the scene of viewing (86).

Liliefeldt presents herself to the viewer as tableau or a slowed image, encouraging the exchange of gazes between performer and viewer and creating a moment where strangers meet as subjects.

3.2: Lori Blondeau

As Peggy Phelan theorizes, performance's confrontation "between the looker and the given to be seen" parallels the recognition between self and other (Phelan 1993, 3). I am reminded of Adrian Piper's performative works, such as the *Mythic Being* series (1975) and her video installation *Cornered* (1988), whereby she confronts the (largely white museum) viewer with racist fears and stereotypes in hopes of catalyzing the viewer to start to unravel, to deconstruct their own xenophobic construction of others (Berger, 80). Lori Blondeau effects a similar confrontation in evoking stereotypes of the Native other, and in particular, Native women. For Blondeau, performance provides a space to