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Lili Reynaud-Dewar

IN CONVERSATION WITH HELGA CHRISTOFFERSEN

BEDROOMS

Helga Christoffersen For your recent exhibition at the New Museum you showed a constructed bedroom and it was not the first bedroom you have made. Where does this idea of the bedroom come from and when did bedrooms start to become part of your work?

Lili Reynaud-Dewar The very first bedroom I made was in 2013. The idea came while I was working and living at Augarten Contemporary in Vienna as part of a residency. I had a beautiful studio space located in the middle of a public park, with a large glass façade allowing all the joggers, strollers, and families to see me working. I found this situation of exposure quite inspiring... maybe because I was also living in the apartment located on the floor above, and I kept going up to my apartment and down to the studio. In the work I wanted to make use of this movement between spaces and establish a private space in the public premises of the institution.

(H.C.) You originally defined the bedrooms as a one-year project under the title *I am intact and I don't care*. It ended up traveling from one kind of institution to another – the gallery, the biennial, the art fair – but always involved a similar set of components, including an ink fountain set in the middle of the bed. This was all in 2013. Then in 2014 you started to add more elements and expand on the idea of the bedroom. You showed miniature beds and, recently, four large beds, all with speakers installed in the middle instead of the fountain. And recently at the New Museum you covered the walls with curtains soaked in ink.

(L.R.D.) Yes on the curtains I somehow overexpose literature, using text from Guillaume Dustan's first book *In My Room* from 1996, which depicts his life as part of the gay scene in Paris in the 1990s. I thought of the first beds, with their ink fountains, as metaphors for literature – “monuments” to literature and to writers who used their own lives and bodies as material for their writing, making intimate details public. For the final iteration of this series of bedrooms I did a performance at Frieze Projects where I read Dustan aloud for an entire day. The next step was to move beyond the metaphorical and to include concrete readings of literature in the form of sound, with speakers replacing the fountains inside the beds. I initiated this series in 2014 and titled it *Live Through That?!* after a text by Eileen Myles in which she discusses her relation to her inner body and, more specifically, to her teeth. Occasionally, the speakers also play techno trans music by Macon, someone I collaborate with often. Recently we launched a 7-inch record compiling all the tracks Macon has composed for the different bedrooms, the tracks often incorporate readings of texts by Duras, or Dustan or Myles over the music.

(H.C.) There was also another origin of the bedroom. Some time prior to the first bedroom piece, you started teaching classes out of your hotel room in Geneva as part of your professorship at Haute école d'art et de design. These classes were literally taking place in your bedroom. How does this connect to the work you later started to make?

(L.R.D.) This seminar came out of a reflection on teaching art and hearing about figures such as Michael Krebber, who is a professor at the Städelschule in Frankfurt. There is a whole mythology around his classes. He doesn't teach *per se*, he doesn't evaluate the works





Live Through That (Index), 2014 Black & white video (mute), 6' 38" © Lili Reynaud-Dewar Courtesy the artist and Kamel mennour, Paris previous pages: I am intact and I don't care, exhibition view, 12th Biennale de Lyon, 2013 Courtesy: Galerie Emmanuel Loyer, Vienna and CLEARING Brussels, New York (pp. 82-83)

of his students; they meet in bars and talk about art in general or travel to see exhibitions. I wanted to adapt this pedagogical trope to my own situation – that of a rather young woman artist who stays in a hotel when she travels to Geneva to teach. I also wanted to escape the school itself and find a more convivial context, as well as to get my students to access some parts of my private life, to make myself transparent for them. In pondering the question “How can one teach art?,” I thought of something else that doesn’t seem to be contained within one strict method or mode of transmission: literature.

When I showed one of the *I am intact and I don't care* bedrooms at Le Consortium in Dijon, I invited my students to show their work inside the bedroom. For this particular exhibition we had focused on Dustan’s writing, so a lot of the works were also loosely related to him, and we performed readings of his texts. And more recently, for the 5th Marrakech Biennial, I decided to collaborate with the students once again, focusing on literature by European and American writers who had moved to Morocco and Moroccan writers who had moved to France. Many of these texts were about sexuality and private matters, about points of overlap in their writing – how they influenced each other and knew each other. We spent the four months before the biennial reading these books in the hotel room in Geneva, and then we went to Marrakech, where, for one week, we stayed in a hotel room, reading these texts together, sometimes the entirety of the books we had selected. Our reading was streamed live in one of the biennial’s venues, but we did not allow any visitors and did not even see the rest of the biennial. The social aspect of the exhibition was completely discarded.

DANCE

(H.C.) A central element in many of your shows are videos of you dancing, at the New Museum of the four floors of the building between exhibitions UNCLEAR. Can you talk about these performances and how they came about?

(L.R.D.) Dancing like this developed very gradually. It initiated in my studio during the summer of 2011 when I was working on contributions for different publications. One of them was for a fanzine called “False Flag”, published by my friend and the musician Hendrik Hegray, who sometimes performs in my work. The contribution had to be a series of images and, incidentally, I realized that I was the first woman ever invited to contribute. I wanted to state this through a feminist gesture and decided to display my naked body within the pages of this fanzine. The images show me moving my sculptures around in the large studio I was renting at the time.

I was also working on a contribution to the book *Cosey Complex* by Maria Fusco and Richard Birkett that focuses on the figure of Cosey Fanny Tutti, the famous performer and musician from Throbbing Gristle. Cosey used her body a lot in her work, both in the porn industry and through extreme performance within the arts and music scenes. I wanted to pay a tribute to her way of using the female body, this kind of radical self-exploitation. As my contribution to the book, I decided to mimic the poses of Cosey that I found in images of her performances.

A similar figure that I was also interested in at the time, when I was thinking about a radical but empowering use of one’s own body, was Josephine Baker. Coinciding with the images of myself in my studio, I also started making short videos and interpretations of Baker’s dances. After watching some of the few films that exist of Baker dancing, I filmed

myself repeating just one move again and again in the studio, in silence, thus making the performance quite abstract, more like some minimal, de-incarnated interpretation rather than an actual masquerade or truthful copy.

(H.C.) So these three points of departure led to the dance videos?

(L.R.D.) Yes, for all these works – depicting myself in the studio, mimicking Cosey, and the interpretation of Baker’s dance – I covered my body with dark makeup so that it is impossible to know exactly what the color of my body is when turning the videos black and white. One imagines that it is black, but it might be dark blue or purple, for instance. This was important because it allowed the dark body to become something much more abstract and mutable. For me, being naked has different meanings and uses, but it is absolutely not connected to a vision of an authentic exotic, savage body – quite the contrary. I am trying to make myself more vulnerable, to reach a more fragile position. And it is also an homage to women performers who have used their body as a material and the act of being naked to critique the omnipotence of men in authoritarian environments. The institution is one such environment. And then again, the painted body is similar to wearing a mask on your face. It is not exactly my body; it is my painted body. It becomes a sign that is more abstract than my body. Importantly, this gesture of painting my body came from reading an anecdote about the supposed romantic relationship between Baker and Le Corbusier that took place on a transatlantic boat. One night during a party, Le Corbusier showed up dressed like Baker, painted black and with feathers attached to his body. I was fascinated with the idea that, in order to seduce her, Le Corbusier imitated Baker.

(H.C.) Initially you only danced in your studio. When did that change?

(L.R.D.) I showed these first videos in the context of La Triennale in Paris in 2012, a few months after they were made. It was the first time that I displayed myself in my work. Before I had always used the bodies of others, my friends, my family. People liked these videos, or at least so it seemed to me. This positive reaction to the work, when I was expecting a more troubled response, I took as an indicator of the desire that art audiences have for direct access to the artist’s body, or life, even. And somehow I decided that I could exploit myself a bit more, to see where that would take me. When I was invited to take part in a group exhibition at the Generali Foundation, I thought it was the perfect context to move the performance from the studio and into the institution. And also because Generali has a strong tradition of showing works that are critical to an institutional context, and I see this dance as a form of institutional critique – one that could make use of the body, the affect, sexuality, even, as tools for a productive form of criticism. Since then, I dance whenever I am invited to do a show, but I don’t necessarily show all the subsequent videos. Altogether they form a video journal of some kind; they may be seen as an archive of my circulation as an artist and also of the current exhibitions being held here and there. Somehow the dance itself becomes less and less about Baker. I now incorporate other elements of myself making phone calls, reading, cleaning the space, smoking, etc.

(H.C.) You talk about the vulnerable position you are in when performing, but I think that, in fact, it’s also quite an empowering act. You are marking out a territory and letting it

Live Through That?!, 2014 Suit, t-shirt, foam, cut out photograph, duct Band und glass, 165 x 75 x 2,5 cm Courtesy: Galerie Emanuel Layr, Vienna
previous pages: Live Through That?!, 2014 Installation view, New Museum, New York Courtesy: kamel mennour, Paris and CLEARING Brussels, New York (pp. 86-87)





empower you as an artist making art. At the New Museum you literally took over the whole building, performing in the exhibition spaces during the transition between exhibitions. Elsewhere, like in the performance you recently did at Museion in Bolzano, Italy, you are exposing the institutions' private spaces, its storage and offices – those spaces that are deliberately hidden from the public eye – and in that sense making the institutions vulnerable.

(L.R.D.) Of course when you talk about empowerment I can't help but think that my vision of Baker is of anything but an exploited woman or an exploited body. I think she was very much in control of her own image and body – she was super independent, but also somehow enacted a certain homelessness, which was quite radical. She was a cosmopolitan, a very contemporary figure, completely constructed and at the same time very physical. I want my project to be anti-systematic and so I film myself in various situations: during installation, in the final exhibition, in the storage spaces and offices, in other artists' exhibitions. On New Year's Eve, for instance, I filmed myself in Pierre Huyghe's exhibition at the Centre Pompidou. It really varies; there are no rules except the limitations of what I can do and can't do. It is important for me to enact a certain instability in the work because it also presents a truthful way to think about Baker, who was never completely settled. And of course the black, moving silhouette is used here to challenge exhibition space conventions: its whiteness, its static aspects, its attempts to fetishize objects, and so on.

MAKEUP

(H.C.) Continuing our discussion on the use of makeup in your work, this is something you started using when you began making the dance videos, correct?

(L.R.D.) The first performance with body paint was *LOVE=U.F.O* (2008). It was inspired by Bruce Nauman's *Art Make-Up* (1967- 68), four videos in which he paints himself first white, then pink, then green, and then black. Putting these colors on top of each other, they mix and become blurred until the final blackening. In *Love=U.F.O*, Mary Knox, a performer I work with very often, was sitting at a dressing table designed by the Memphis Group, applying makeup on her face in four different colors: yellow, red, green, and black – the Rasta colors. On the wall behind her was a large-scale projection of a video in which another friend and collaborator, Jean-Marie Racon, was mimicking the act of putting makeup on his face and shot in the same environment as the one Mary was sitting in. Jean-Marie is both the shadow and the model, the guide for Mary's actions. *Art Make-Up* really is the foundational reference for using body paint. But also the way Nauman camouflages his own body, making it the material in his works, the kind of vulnerability he shows, and even other works that depict him in his studio doing simple actions. These have been very important for my work. I never really highlighted this connection again, but very early on when working on the show for the New Museum, I felt that this context could allow for it. The specific architecture of the museum as somehow a sequencing of white cubes sitting on top of one another made me think back on this sequencing of the makeup that appears in Nauman's work. In each of the four performances on the floors of the museum, I painted myself in Nauman's colors, these same colors that also appear throughout the installation I made.

(H.C.) Can you explain the choice of the Rasta colors and the multiple references to black culture in your earlier works?

(L.R.D.) In the early works I wanted to reach a situation where the work would not be imprinted by such markers as my education, my gender, my nationality, my race, my age, my position, and so on. I was trying to discard myself altogether, or at least to question this continuity between the author and the work being produced. Using references to these other cultures was an attempt to disrupt all these identification markers and question them altogether. But it worked only up to a certain point. When you appropriate something, especially when it's cultural appropriation, you have to give something back. You cannot just capitalize; you have to make yourself vulnerable and transparent too for things to work. That's why I prefer to talk about circulation rather than strict appropriation; it's also the reason why I started using autobiographical elements and working with my mother and grandmother, for instance. And finally this led me to use my own body in the work, in the dance videos. At that point, I think I was also questioning how I was channeling other people's bodies through my own work and asking how I could find ways to create a balance between the performers and myself – some kind of retribution, of complicity even.

OBJECTS

(H.C.) The body also appears through the props that you have used in performances and in much of your sculptural work. You have, for instance, repeatedly included casts of body parts such as hands, arms, and legs, while some performances have even involved the casting process itself. Recently, you started to make full-size silhouettes of bodies using male suits and pajamas. Can you talk about this recurring interest in multiplying bodies and body parts?

(L.R.D.) Again, in the performance you evoke, *Why should our bodies end at the skin?* (2012), I thought about the history of exploited bodies. The performance took place in the Roman amphitheater of Arles in the context of a rather experimental exhibition curated by the artists Liam Gillick and Philippe Parreno called *To the Moon via the Beach*. I kept thinking that the amphitheater was originally a place for bodies (of gladiators, of slaves) to be providers of the most extreme forms of entertainment and exploitation, a history of domination and alienation. This was one reason why the performance took place not in the center of the arena but on the bleachers, in a slightly remote upper part where the audience would normally sit, as a way to reverse these power structures. And in the act of replicating body parts live, there was an interest in this kitsch practice of getting your baby's feet cast or your leg if you are a footballer or your hand if you are a musician and so on... to keep these as traces of your abilities, again as if these abilities were completely separated from your brain and dependent on the body alone. Of course, the silhouettes' gesticulations mirror my own body when I dance. But I guess the convulsed figures, with their rather slapstick poses, are somehow a fantasy of how these very formal male silhouettes could all of a sudden start moving on their own accord, emancipated from their role in society, and become quite transgressive. It's a bit like Robert Longo's series of drawings *Men in the Cities* (1979). I suppose this is again a way to fragment the body in order to think about its potential for being exploited, being displayed, being used, being an instrument or a sculptural material. I think that's what interests me in *Dustan*, in *Baker*, in *Nauman*, and generally in most of the other figures I have addressed or used in the work, including myself!



PERFORMANCE

(H.C.) Recently you took that idea of exploited or displayed bodies a step further in that you initiated the performance project *Performance Proletarians* together with Benjamin Valenza, a program of 36 hours of live performance streamed live on the internet from the Magasin in Grenoble. Can you talk about the background for that project and how it connects to the ideas which run throughout your own work?

(L.R.D.) ‘Performance Proletarians’ is a term coined by Diedrich Diederichsen in his book *On (Surplus Value) in Art*, which discusses the formation of value of an artwork today, but also how the circulation of other cultural “products” such as music or porn videos has changed greatly under the new technological regime of the internet. In this short essay, Diederichsen makes use of the vocabulary of Marxist theory and speaks of what he considers now to be a “life force”, subverting the notion of “labor force.” He analyzes, with a lot of wit and humor, how these new proletarians make use of – and even exploit – their energy, their charm, their talent and their bodies in order to produce a constant stream of entertaining manifestations of life, quite stereotypical and interchangeable – for a very meagre remuneration, and in some cases for no remuneration at all. He compares this new class of cultural producers to the traveling troupes and minstrels of the nineteenth century, who toured from one city to another, making just enough money to live up until the next show in the next city, with different troupes performing curiously similar looking shows in terms of themes or content. I had been invited to curate a performance program in Magasin, and I wanted to think of a different way of approaching performance, evacuating altogether the archive of the performance (which has become an obsession, not always for the best) and its audience, or at least the physical presence of this audience. So the idea was to propose a live stream for the internet that would not be archived on the internet after it has taken place, but which would also involve a very serious amount of energy in its production. Like some sort of energy expense (and eventually loss) pushed to its maximum. We wanted to work with performers or video artists for whom the voice, the body, and a certain excess are important parameters in their work, such as Michael Smith, Alex Bag, Deniz Unal, Mathis Collins and Christian Falsnaes. And it was really a crazy collective experience to be stuck all of us in the Magasin auditorium – which had been transformed into a recording studio – with no audience. There were so many artists that we became some sort of an audience for one another, producing a new performance that we knew people were watching via the live stream.

(H.C.) It’s interesting how you on the one hand have built up a quite comprehensive archive of your own performances where you perform without an audience present, and then now did this exhaustive project that is also really, in some sense, an outreach to an audience, but one that is really very dispersed and simultaneously a very intimate relationship in that you are aware of your own direct relationship to the events happening live in that moment. It obviously opens up a range of questions in relation to the documentation and dissemination of performance works, but first I wonder how undertaking this project affects your own work and what you are working on next. It almost makes me think that the project marks a shift in your thinking about your own performance works and how they are experienced and I am curious what will then come next.

(L.R.D.) Yes, I think this question of the audience and maybe of a remote or delayed relation with the audience is something that I am investigating more and more. In one of my first shows, *Black Mariah*, I was exploring the idea that the audience was arriving too late, that is to say after the performances had taken place, being left only with the props, a worn and dirty stage, and many videos of all the performances (once again, friends and family). And now I am investigating what happens when there is no audience present, or a very minimal, intimate one. I just started this thing in my studio in Grenoble which I named *Maladie d’amour* [Love sickness], where I invite artists to come and spend a few days or just one evening in Grenoble and to make or present a new work in my studio. I am the only spectator with my boyfriend when he is around, maybe we have just one or two additional guests when we “open” the show. They are probably the most deserted openings ever, but very nice. I will also invite people to give talks, again just for myself. I document everything and plan to create a website at some point to gather all the sound and visual material. I don’t want to Instagram these things because I want to keep a separation between the moment they appear in the studio and the moment they will appear on the internet. I don’t want simultaneity or instantaneity. I am interested in misusing the Internet or its potential. So far there’s been a site-specific sculpture by Simon Haenni and Léo Wadimoff and a sound piece by Caroline Mesquita. More artists, such as Lauren Huret, Ramaya Tegegne, Min Yoon or Verena Dengler will come in the next few months. My idea was also to use this invitation to bring artists and friends to Grenoble where I sometimes feel lonely. I navigate from moments when I am surrounded by many people – like when I teach or when I travel to make a new show – to moments when I am somehow quite isolated. I think I am attempting to create bridges between these opposite situations and to escape the normative aspects of “exposure” and these events the whole art world is supposed to attend and post on whatever network. Another thing I am working on is a sound installation: an electronic opera on the subject of AIDS and prophylaxis. I will sing it together with my students, Macon is again making the music, I wrote the libretto. The epidemic stands here for an idea of circulation and transmission and of the blurring of the boundaries between the private and the public. The Opera will – hopefully – be a melancholic celebration of sex and politics and a tribute to my ’90s and the ’90s of many people of my generation.

previous pages: I am intact and I don’t care, 2013 fabric, bleach, glue, plywood, 200 x 50 x 8 cm
 Courtesy 21er Haus, Vienna (pp. 90-91) Live Through That (Atelier Brancusi), 2014 Black & white video (mute) 7’ 35”
 © Lili Reynaud-Dewar Courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris (pp. 94-95)

A short version of this interview was previously published by the New Museum in connection with the exhibition
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