

Still/Desire
A Presentation on the work of Michelle Horacek
Art: Politics: Transgression: 20th-Century Avant-Gardes (Mlitt Degree)
University of Glasgow
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The performance entitled, *Still/Desire* by Michelle Horacek enacted at the 2009 National Review of Live Art (NRLA) was not the first of its kind. As such, I'd like to start this presentation by working chronologically and discussing Horacek's first incarnation of this performance.

Performed as the final work for her MA in visual performance and time-based art practices at Dartington College of Arts, in the 2005 incarnation of *Still/Desire* Horacek incorporated a further strand in conjunction with the egg cycle, in which she used soil to represent death or rebirth. Whilst in dialogue with the artist via email, I asked her why she had omitted the soil from the NRLA performance. Was this omission made with the intention of focusing on the life/fertility trope of the cycle or was there a deeper resonance of this omission?

Given that the time constraints imposed by a festival setting had not allowed her to re-explore the 'epic dimensions' of the first incarnation, Horacek explained that the extraction of the 'egg pole' emerged as part of a methodology for enacting the performance version of *Still/Desire*, as opposed to the full length installation event. She then went on to explain:

"I did also decide to extract the Egg Pole of the work, to look more closely at the dynamic within just this part. But I would say – it came less intellectually (i.e. I want

to explore just Birth), and more *intuitively* to extract this part.”¹ This notion of intuition is a sensibility that resonates throughout Horacek’s oeuvre, as is made explicit in her official artist statement: “I inhabit performance as a heightened state of awareness...I take a specific action/moment and re-enact it, embody it – to explore, to discover, to open and to know...Gesture coming forth from an unconscious place, from the darkness that comes before a thing is understood.”² Horacek is deeply concerned with mystery, intuition and discovery. For Horacek, her performances are physical articulations of meditative feelings, arrived at by a profound sense of reflection. She performs naturally and intuitively from an ‘unconscious place’.

For me, Horacek’s preoccupation with the unconscious and her subsequent intuitive focus on the ‘egg pole’ of the performance is a means of representing evolution in her work. Describing the ‘egg pole’, Horacek explains, “this part has grown and re-shaped itself since I have extracted it. I use the same score of movements – but it was only in this incarnation [‘this’ being, the NRLA performance] that the work started to take on an elliptical shape – and a yin/yang movement....”³ As is made explicit here, whilst maintaining loyalty to the fundamental concerns of the piece, Horacek has allowed the gesticulation of these concerns to evolve. The particular gesture that Horacek describes here, a ‘yin/yang’ movement symbolically resonant of harmoniousness, calls to mind once more the meditative aspect of her work.

Originally the duration of the performance was twelve hours, whereas at NRLA, *Still/Desire* lasted for four hours. I asked Horacek whether her intention “to use long duration, and fatigue, as a way to uncover a deeper awareness/knowledge in

¹ Michelle Horacek, correspondence with the artist via email 22/02/2009

² Artist’s Statement, www.mishaproductions.com

³ Michelle Horacek, correspondence with the artist via email 22/02/2009

the body”, as asserted in her artist’s statement, was still applicable to a shortened version of the work? What ramifications would the compression of the performance’s temporality have?

Horacek replied in the first instance as follows: “With this 4 hour work, I began focusing my energy many weeks before, and in the days before the work I did rituals and movements to frame the work in Glasgow (as a specific place).”⁴ Thus Horacek’s work extends beyond the bounds of the performance proper both temporally and spatially as she frames the work at a specific time, in a specific site, by enacting preparatory rituals.

But it is the following, subsequent expansion of Horacek’s response that interests me:

As it is not practically possible to perform ‘an ideal’ (maybe that is a 12 hour ideal), I learn to create ways to keep a consistent *integrity*, and *loyalty* to my credo... I make it work for me... In my work I aim to frame a space where a kind of magic can happen. I went into a deep state in the performance you witnessed – and I created a situation for myself where I was able to leave the concepts of time and space behind me (at least in waves)... I had 4 hours, and I made it stretch and become what I needed it to be. The linear and the absolute dissolve to some degree... That is the power of the work.⁵

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Hence, for Horacek, the boundaries of real time and space had been transgressed in such a manner that a compression of the performance's duration did not serve to detract from it in any way. By this rationale, 'long duration' and 'fatigue' are sensibilities that were indeed no less present in the 2009 performance than in the 2005 version.

In a further allusion to the unconscious, Horacek claims that she is able to achieve such a transgression of time and space by submerging herself in a 'deep state', a meditative abstraction. Although, whereas 'long duration' and 'fatigue' may've been applicable to the entire experience of the twelve hour long 2005 incarnation of *Still/Desire* (in terms of the audience and the space, as well as the artist), whilst their effect was still felt during the NRLA performance, Horacek's proclamation here, implies that these sensibilities were embodied more resolutely within her own body.

The artist concluded her response to my question as follows: "I hope to continue my investigation of the themes of *Still/Desire* for a long time. It is not just a durational work that exists over hours, but it is now a durational work that exists over months and years and different spaces. This intrigues me."⁶ *Still/Desire* is thus an exploration of temporality and space not just within the parameters of an individual performance but also in broader terms, in relation to Horacek's entire artistic oeuvre.

I refer now to the catalogue excerpt describing Horacek's performance, to remind ourselves of the 2009 NRLA incarnation, so as to discuss in greater depth the thematics inherent in the work.

⁶ Ibid.

Hands

Touching eggs.

Eggs

Rolling over body.

Sex to mouth – Awaken

Stillness. Desire. Reaching. Open.

This work aims to explore bodily perception through repetitive actions, gestures and dialogue of the female body with eggs. Canadian-Czech Performance Artist Michelle Horacek will work with 144 eggs. She will lie next to the eggs, naked, covered in white body paint. Horacek will work with single eggs, rolling them up and down her torso between her mouth and her sex. She will use her mouth and hands to explore the tension and texture of life potential within the eggs. She will describe the exchange between her body and the fragility held within the eggs.

This performance uses what is set as a podium for mystery to open. By describing an arched body in contrast with the tenderness of lips and flight motions, there is some beautiful discovery of a quiet feminine force...⁷

The ‘feminine force’ that is to be discovered in *Still/Desire* is an issue that demands much attention, as, seemingly at odds within the performance, there exists an ostensible disparity between the eroticised, sexualised female body, as evoked by Horacek’s arched form, and the articulation of a maternal tenderness gesticulated by

⁷ New Moves Catalogue Excerpt, p. 34, www.newmoves.co.uk

the artist as she kneels before the eggs, lightly grazing her lips over their fragile shells. When questioned about sexuality within her performance, Horacek responded as follows:

There are *layers*, and there is a *history* to what we think of as female sexuality, or to the sexual. I am exploring (through duration), an archetypal knowledge in the body. I believe the gestures I have found resonate very far back. I think of them as ancient. What I am trying to do is show them, excavate them from deep down in the body knowledge -- in their intensity, purity, simplicity – to (hopefully) awaken & provoke more layers and more depth in the response of the audience to the female sexual body. That these gestures have been made into fetish is a sign of how our culture marginalizes and tries to judge/undermine/cheapen them. In a more ancient culture, these gestures were openly gestures of the goddess.⁸

To utilise the terminology employed by Horacek in the catalogue excerpt, by revealing her intentions to “Awaken Stillness” in her spectators, Horacek suggests that they are equally as able as she to experience a deeper knowledge in the body. At this juncture, the title of the performance becomes particularly pertinent: *Still/Desire*. It is my contention that Horacek means to assert that, stillness (I use this term in this instance to connote numbness) that is resultant of the suppression of the ancient celebration of the female sexual body, has taken hold as a result of the manner in which contemporary culture has undermined or cheapened the sensual gesticulations of the female sexual body. Horacek aims to arouse this stillness (arouse, both in the

⁸ Michelle Horacek, correspondence with the artist via email 22/02/2009

sense of awakening but also in the sense of sexual desire), thereby encouraging a return to the ancient celebration of the female body. Hence, the sexualised feminine and the seemingly paradoxical tender and maternal feminine that may've initially appeared to be at odds within the performance are proved to be not so disparate after all. It is as though Horacek's performative self embodies both of these feminine types in one single entity.

As Horacek's artist's statement explains:

Performance is my way to touch a mythology that is held in the deep body. Manifesting gestures that are parts of patterns that are parts of rhythms that the body has sung and danced for cycles of time. The stories that bodies have lived again and again, as we reach towards evolution.

...I am pulled to locate my Self through a dialogue with time and place.

The body is sculpted by time, altered by experience of place.

I want to know my body/Self as it is changing, and as it is becoming.

I want my consciousness to shape my evolution.⁹

Horacek's use of the term 'mythology' here is deeply resonant of evocations of the goddess. The artist describes such mythologies as being 'held in the deep body' - i.e. for generations, as if Horacek's body, as cite of mythological reincarnation, expresses ancient gesticulations that conjure up notions of the cult of the goddess. Horacek

⁹ Artist's Statement, www.mishaproductions.com

declares her intention to promote female empowerment and thus the ‘beautiful discovery of a quiet feminine force’ is set in motion.

With the second stanza of the above quotation, Horacek reveals her work to be concerned with identity. Hers is a performance about reincarnation and touching the past, but it is also about self discovery in the present.

What if we consider sexuality within *Still/Desire* from a different angle? In her text, *Body Art / Performing the Subject*, Amelia Jones describes the negative attitudes of feminist theorists toward representations of women’s bodies as follows: “...any presentation or representation of the female body was seen as necessarily participating in the phallogentric dynamic of fetishism, whereby the female body can only be seen as ‘lacking’ in relation to the mythical plenitude represented by the phallus.”¹⁰

During my correspondence with the artist, I expressed my contention as to whether the intended signification of the white body paint was meant to denote a cosmetic façade, a reference to the fetishised female, acting as an extension of Horacek’s sexualised gestures as she lay on the floor, sensuously arching her back or as she lifted her breasts whilst pacing the perimeter of the circular performance space.

However, Horacek’s response flatly denied such an interpretation, as she asserted:

“That these gestures have been made into fetish is a sign of how our culture marginalizes and tries to judge/undermine/cheapen them.”¹¹ With this statement,

Horacek acknowledges the ease with which women’s bodies have been consigned as

¹⁰ Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 24

¹¹ Michelle Horacek, correspondence with the artist via email 22/02/2009

objects of the (implicitly male) gaze¹² in contemporary society in such a manner that is reflective of the dominant structures of cultural consumption.

As such, the body paint façade could be construed as a way for Horacek to communicate to others (i.e. the audience, serving in this instance as signifiers of society at large) the vacancy that they had inscribed upon her. Put another way, the body paint could be read as a literal concealment of the self whereby the female individual has been reduced by contemporary culture to a homogenous object. By this proposed rationale, my interpretation of the body paint as connoting the fetishised female could be positively utilised by Horacek as a means of critiquing societal objectification of the female body.

Cindy Nemser, in her essay *Subject – Object: Body Art* states that “artists are both reflectors and reflections of the culture in which they operate.”¹³ This notion, when considered in conjunction with *Still/Desire*, echoes my argument that Horacek’s painted body, were she to consider the possibility of it as representative of a fetishised object, could be seen as reflective of the society in which she is operating.

As a means to overthrow the dominant phallogentric structures of cultural consumption, feminist theorists propose the strategy of ‘distantiation’, a strategy appropriated and adapted by British feminists in the 1970s and 1980s from Bertolt Brecht’s avant-gardist theory. The submissive relationship between performer as

¹² For discussions of the objectification of women’s bodies see Mary Kelly, ‘No Essential Femininity: A Conversation between Mary Kelly and Paul Smith’, in *Parachute*, 37, n. 26 (Spring 1982), p. 31-35, p. 32 as cited in Jones (1998), p. 24 in which she speaks of the “predominant representations of woman as object of the look”.

¹³ Cindy Nemser, ‘Subject – Object: Body Art’, *Arts Magazine*, 46, n. 1 (September 1971), pp. 14-17 reprinted in Tracey Warr (ed.); survey by Amelia Jones, *The Artist’s Body* (London: Phaidon, 2000), pp. 233-235, p. 234

object, and spectator as bearer of the gaze, produces a passive viewing situation. Thus, in order to transgress such a condition, the artist must aim to displace and provoke the spectator.¹⁴ Griselda Pollock maintains the importance of the distanciation strategy for feminist artists because of its “erosion of the dominant structures of cultural consumption which...are classically fetishistic...Brechtian distanciation aims to make the spectator an agent in cultural production and activate him or her as an agent in the world.”¹⁵

Amelia Jones, however, disputes these arguments, asserting that such strategies are overly reliant upon pre-determining how the spectator will react.

This theoretical debate can be applied to *Still/Desire*. Horacek aims to solicit a response from her viewer by awakening the stillness within them. Thus she can be said to be employing feminist strategy. But is this strategy successful? Horacek assumes a response that she may not necessarily get. Her awareness of this is perhaps indicated by her statement in which she says that she aims to “(hopefully) awaken & provoke more layers and more depth in the response of the audience to the female sexual body.”¹⁶

Interaction between artist and viewer is therefore an aspect of Horacek’s performance that requires further analysis.

¹⁴ Jones (1998), p. 24

¹⁵ Griselda Pollock, ‘Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice – A Brechtian Perspective’, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 155-199, p. 163

¹⁶ Michelle Horacek, correspondence with the artist via email 22/02/2009

As Jones describes it: “Body art...-in its opening up of the interpretive relation and its active solicitation of spectatorial desire-provides the possibility for radical engagements that can transform the way we think about meaning and subjectivity (both the artist’s and our own). In its activation of intersubjectivity, body art, in fact, demonstrates that meaning is an exchange...”¹⁷ Without the presence of the viewer’s body, there exists no receiver for the artist’s activity and thus Horacek’s performance is dependent upon its spectatorial other in order for it to be successful in its aim to ‘awaken’.

The act of solicitation is diametrically opposed to passive viewing; therefore a mere objectification of the body is disallowed or problematised. Although Horacek is the object to the spectator’s subject in that her actions are the ones that are gazed upon, the way in which she attempts to solicit a reaction from her spectator means that the spectator becomes the object to Horacek’s subject. This concept of a simultaneous objectivity and subjectivity is an idea that I would like to expand upon.

According to Horacek: “The white paint is part of my own ritual. It is what I do to mark a distinction between my own private self, and the archetypical body I wish to contact in the performance. I used to say it is a way to neutralise the body...”¹⁸

I would like now to consider a different approach to the function of the white body paint in Horacek’s performance as a protective barrier, not unlike the natural function of the skin. Skin, according to Didier Anzieu, serves the purposes of containment, protection, and communication:

¹⁷ Jones (1998), p. 14

¹⁸ Michelle Horacek, correspondence with the artist via email 22/02/2009

The primary function of the skin is as the sac which contains and retains...Its second function is as the interface which marks the boundary with the outside and keeps that outside out; it is the barrier which protects against penetration by...others, whether people or objects. Finally, the third function-which the skin shares with the mouth and which it performs at least as often-is as a site and a primary means of communicating with others, of establishing signifying relations; it is, moreover, an ‘inscribing surface’ for the marks left by those others.¹⁹

What if we consider the other, that is, the mark maker or inscriber of Anzieu’s theory to be concurrently present in Horacek herself? What if we read the painted body of the artist as indicative of a split self? A duplicitous figure of simultaneity, a single body comprised of both self and other. Subject/object, private self/enacted self, internal/external. This interpretation confirms a further notion put forward by Nemser in which she argues that “...the primary goal of body art [is]the desire to bring the subjective and objective self together as a totally integrated entity.”²⁰

Let us consider Horacek’s description of the white body paint as “a way to neutralise the body”²¹, implying that the body is thus made into a blank canvas, to facilitate the engaging intentions of the performance. By creating a protective barrier of containment, a protective façade, Horacek is able to vacate any trace of the private

¹⁹ Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Self*, trans. Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 40 as cited in Kathy O’Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 20-21

²⁰ Nemser (1971), pp. 14-17 reprinted in Warr (2000), p. 234

²¹ Michelle Horacek, correspondence with the artist via email 22/02/2009

self so that her body becomes an object to receive the traces that are imprinted upon it by the performance. The body becomes a site in itself, an object upon which Horacek, as enactor (i.e. subject) imparts the traces.

A discussion here of the trace leads me to draw a comparison between *Still/Desire* and the work of Ana Mendieta, in particular her photographic *Silueta* series (1973-1980). I do not necessarily propose to draw an aesthetic parallel between the work of Horacek and Mendieta but I do see a degree of intersection in their similar artistic concerns.

Mendieta's *Silueta* photographs present the impression of the artist's body on the landscape, often in vulva formations reminiscent of stone-age goddess sculptures. In the later photographs of the *Silueta* series, Mendieta's body is absent, thus the artist is marked as trace rather than fully feminine self.

The body as trace is equally evident in Horacek's work, in the traces that are left imprinted upon both the artist's body and in the performance space. The latter of these types of traces can be said to prohibit the conventional masculine gaze simply by removing the body from view, thereby denying the objectification of the female body.

Mendieta describes her work as follows:

I have been carrying on a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette)...I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is...a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the

earth...I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs...[in] an omnipresent female force, the afterimage of being encompassed within the womb, in a manifestation of my thirst for being.²²

‘Becoming one with the earth’ is particularly pertinent in relation to the earlier 2005 incarnation of *Still/Desire* in which Horacek describes the relationship between the female body and soil. In intimate contact with the soil, Horacek likewise becomes ‘one with the earth’ as she traces on her body the line from mouth to sex, evoking something of the maternal or, indeed, mother earth.

Notions of being ‘cast from the womb (nature)’, ‘returning to the maternal source’ or being ‘encompassed within the womb’ are no less emphatically presented in *Still/Desire*, particularly in relation to still images of the 2005 performance in which Horacek is curled into foetal positions in the soil. Furthermore, the bodily performance of rituals and spiritual ideas concerning the female relationship to nature, as well as each artist’s feminist desire to recuperate lost goddess cults or matriarchal cultures, with their putative celebration of female empowerment demonstrates what I consider to be a parallel between their works.

²² Ana Mendieta, unpublished statement quoted by John Perreault in ‘Earth an Fire, Ana Mendieta’s Body of Work’, *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1987), p. 10 as cited in Jones (1998), p. 26; see also Miwon Kwon, ‘Bloody Valentines: Afterimages by Ana Mendieta’ (1996) in Catherine de Zegher (ed.), *Inside the Visible/An Elliptical Traverse of 20th Century Art/In, of, and from the Feminine* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 165-171

In reference to Mendieta's work, Nancy Shalala remarks: "Mendieta hails women as omnipotent creators, not slavish biological reproducers...Female body one with the earthen core, the feminine creative spirit reasserts her fertile sovereignty. The female force becomes primary mover."²³ I think that this same remark is equally applicable to Horacek's *Still/Desire* performance. Horacek seeks to deify woman as omnipotent, sovereign creator as opposed to mindless reproducer and in this aim there is perhaps an aspiration toward some 'beautiful discovery of a quiet feminine force...'

²³ Nancy Shalala, 'Artist Gets Physical for Feminism', *Japan Times* (27 September 1992), p. 11 as cited in Kwon (1996) in Zegher (1996), pp. 165-171

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II) Web Resources

www.mishaproductions.com

www.somethinglikespit.org.uk/horacek

www.newmoves.co.uk

Correspondence with Michelle Horacek via email 21/02/2009 and 22/02/2009