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Gaining Ground

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PERFORMANCE

MONTREAL GAINING GROUND

Kinga Araya, *Grounded I*, Observatoire 4, Montréal. November 20 - December 11, 1999

In her recent work, Kinga Araya has been focusing on the movement of the human body, nurturing the ideas of walking and covering ground into complex metaphors. In this exhibition, as its title *Grounded* suggests, Araya seems to be addressing the concept of mobility in terms of that which frees or impedes the body. And like the multi-layered meaning that the word grounded suggests, her investigation into this type of movement employs aspects of the personal, social, and psychological.

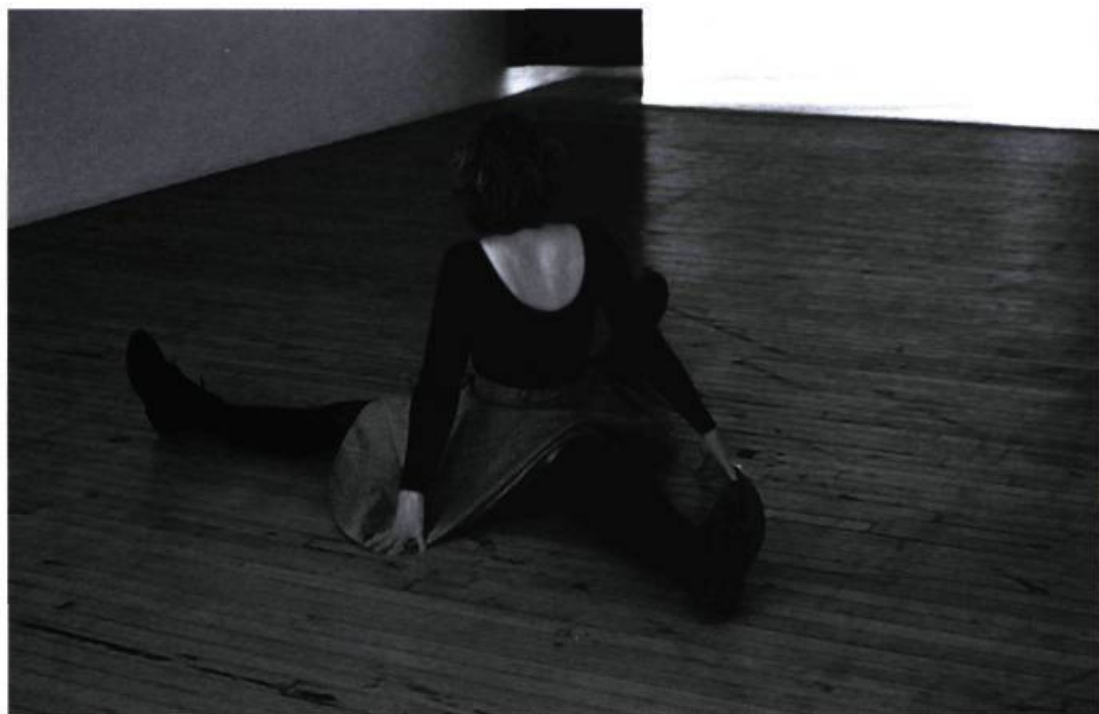
Araya's performance piece for the exhibition was staged during the Vernissage. Emerging from the back of the gallery, she carried with her a kettle, mug, and what was revealed to be a prosthetic leg to the center of the gallery. Placing the kitchen implements on the floor to prepare for a cup of tea, she then proceeded to strap the artificial leg to her body. Meanwhile, a video was projected onto the back wall of the gallery which consisted of a melange of images that alternated between footage from tourist travels and the sound of labored breathing as Araya, camera in hand, climbed up a winding staircase. Through-

out the performance, Araya watched this footage while struggling to make herself comfortable. This video backdrop of constant movement and exploration was at odds with Araya's frustration to make her body comply with her desires. This third leg, which extended out from behind her, shifted the body's relationship to itself. Impeding natural movement, everyday actions were transformed into conscious, laborious events.

Kinga Araya's use of a third leg was inspired by a metaphor Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector creates in the opening pages of *The Passion According to G.H.* (*A paixão segundo G.H.*, translated by Ronald W. Sousa, University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Lispector writes :

*Something's missing that once was essential to me
and is so no longer. I don't need it anymore, as
though I had lost a third leg that until then kept me
from walking but made me a stable tripod...*

The use of a third leg in Araya's performance can be understood as an acting-out of this metaphor, a realization



Kinga Araya, *Grounded I*, 1999.



that the very things that seems to provide comfort and stability can, in fact, be what keep us from moving forward. There is a sense of irony in the fact that this extra leg is able to provide a sense of groundedness while simultaneously resisting movement. This extra leg that impinges movement forward is the embodiment of emotional weight, psychic burdens that hinder the self.

This metaphoric construction is also reflected in the other pieces that make up *Grounded I*. After the performance, the layout of the gallery is revealed to be quite sparse, allowing for two small sets of glass sculptures at the entrance of the gallery, and leaving the rest of the long, narrow gallery for a video projection that takes up the entire back wall. The glass sculptures maintain the performative qualities of the prosthetic leg, like past accoutrements the body has cast off. Three pairs of glass shoes (*Discipline*) rest on the floor. These shoes are far from the glass slippers that Cinderella donned for the Royal Ball. In fact, they are closer to what she may have worn around the estate while completing her grueling chores. Their coarse design makes the shoes heavy, awkward and dangerous – painfully impossible to wear. Shoes are intended to act as extensions of the feet, aiding the body's ability to walk. Araya flips this function into an extension that grounds the

body to the floor, making it easier to rest in place that to move forward.

Three glass boomerangs hang on the opposite wall, as though daring the viewer to use them. Although I easily imagine myself gingerly trying on a pair of shoes and testing the weight of a boomerang in my hand, actually moving with these shoes or throwing the boomerang would be another matter. Two of the boomerangs, *Standard* and *Albatros*, are of the sort that return. The third, *Hunting*, is a non-returning type of boomerang. Their different forms are like metaphors for travel. Our movement is usually like a returning boomerang, always coming back home, always returning to comfort. The third boomerang is the courageous nomad, who continuously moves forward, finding a sense of home within herself.

Araya is no stranger to this nomadic tendency. Born in Poland, she spent her later adolescent years in Italy before immigrating to Canada. Settling in Ontario, she continued her studies at York University, completing an MFA. She recently uprooted herself to study in Texas, where the work for *Grounded* was produced. Currently, she is studying in Montreal, completing her Ph.D in Interdisciplinary Studies at Concordia University. This ability to remove oneself from comfortable surroundings and to



Kinga Araya, *Tahoka*. Extraits de la vidéo.

rediscover one's bearings in a new situation is not unfamiliar to Araya. In fact, she seems to crave the ability for mobility, the cyclical process of becoming grounded and ungrounded. Even this exhibition is "grounded" in two sites. *Grounded I* is the Montreal housing for this work before it leaves for Poland, where it becomes *Grounded II*. The physical impossibility of being fully grounded in two places suggests another way of looking at the nature of being grounded: one that necessitates mobility and growth.

In *Tahoka*, the video projection, Kinga Araya comes to terms with this nomadic way of travel, creating a performance of a literal and metaphorical unburdening

of the self. The opening view is of a vast, empty landscape out of which Araya gradually comes into view. She struggles to make her way forward, carrying a suitcase of tremendous weight. Although we can't see where it is she has come from, it seems that her destination lies at the precise point where her suitcase overcomes her strength. Finally, she throws the suitcase onto the barren ground, and wipes the sweat from her brow. The suitcase is worn, packed solidly, as though it has been lugged about for a lifetime. And it has. This is no random suitcase, but the accumulation of all excess memories, ties, responsibilities and illusions which eventu-



ally weigh down the self and impede movement forward.

The suitcase is not unlike a third leg. There are certain things we carry with us, things we think we cannot be without. The suitcase is like the shell on a turtle's back, the portable home we carry with us when we have to leave its safe confines. The longer the absence from home, the heavier the portable home becomes. The heavier the suitcase, the more security it lends us. Until, of course, it becomes too heavy to continue to carry; then a decision needs to be made.

What is it that finally compels this woman to douse this suitcase in gasoline, and light the match that sets the

suitcase ablaze? Perhaps it is a question to which even she cannot respond with certainty. She has arrived at this point looking exhausted. The dress she wears is stained; the flowers she carries are wilted; her hat has not been able to keep the heat of the sun from bearing down on her. Once the fire is roaring, she removes these last belongings and adds them to the pile. No longer weighted, free to move, naked in all senses of the word, she walks off into the distance.

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