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CounterPose: A Curatorial Pose

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COUNTERPOSES, A CURATORIAL POSE

CounterPoses, curated by us, a.k.a. Display Cult¹, at galerie Oboro in Montréal last May, worked the intersection of exhibition and event. We invited artists to re-imagine the genre of “tableaux vivants” and incorporate a living person (or persons) in elaborate, site-specific contexts. Distinct from the sequential events characterizing festivals of performance art, twelve “peopled” installations were staged simultaneously throughout the 4001 Berri building. Our curatorial aim was to present an innovative exhibition prototype designed to explicitly foreground the aspects of presence and interconnection in aesthetic experience. Performances occupied two theatres, artist-in-residence quarters, a freight elevator, stairwell, storefront and utility closet, as well as the gallery spaces of Oboro itself. *CounterPoses* included artists from Montréal, New York, Winnipeg, Toronto, Québec City, Vermont and Chicago, and from a variety of disciplines including the visual arts, dance, theatre and burlesque.

The exhibition took four years to organize and involved extensive research into what we have termed “living display²”. For us, “living display” defines a specific type of staged presentation of human beings. Its origins are diverse and rhizomatic. They include the living *crèches* begun by St. Francis of Assisi in the twelfth century to tell the tale of Christ’s birth to illiterate Christians; Renaissance ceremonial pageants which featured living architectural elements; and eighteenth century aristocratic entertainments such as Lady Emma Hamilton’s “Attitudes,” which involved living enactments of classical sculpture.

Tableaux vivants, or “living pictures,” are perhaps the most recognizable form of living display. They became immensely popular in North America during the nineteenth century as a domestic pastime, a means for moral instruction and even, at times, a form of erotic entertainment. Other, less-benign forms of human exhibition – carnival sideshows, punishment spectacles, and colonial showcases – reduced handicapped, dispossessed or merely foreign individuals to “curiosities,” exotica or a vehicle for profit. In the twentieth century, performance artists have deliberately sought to confront such practices and transform cultural attitudes by working through the body.

In current media culture, living displays are so pervasive that they are for the most part taken for granted. Besides the work of performing artists, human beings are exhibited in the activities of supermodels, bodybuilders, living museums and public relations events. The theme of



Shawna Dempsey et Lori Millan, *The Eaton's Catalogue (1976)*, 1998. Performance still from *CounterPoses* by Display Cult at Oboro, MtL, 1998. Photo: Paul Litherland, Courtesy Display Cult and Oboro. Performed with Annie Martin and Anne Borden.

living display, in addition, is inherent to the notion of the “photo opportunity,” where persons are staged for the benefit of journalists and the media. Such events have been organized by all manners of individuals, from governments to thrill seekers to political activists. Living displays are also a regular feature of nightclubs (go-go dancers in cages), department stores (living mannequins) and street culture (Washington Square Park’s one-man “museum” who re-enacts Rodin’s *The Thinker*).

With VR and new technologies claiming the transcendence of the body, the genre of living display, by contrast, instantiates a recuperation of the body as a site of experience and knowledge. *CounterPoses* shifted the nature of aesthetic experience from a unidirectional consumption of art by the viewer to one of mutual encounter. The inclusion of a performer in the exhibition space charges it with an unmistakably visceral presence. This situation involves all of senses, not just vision. The environments of

CounterPoses implicated the viewer in the process of aesthetic apprehension; when the gaze is returned, it is difficult to remain distanced or detached. Because these installations incorporate a sentient person, they implicitly foreground the ethical dimensions of looking and the politics of the viewer-viewed relationship.

While *CounterPoses* could have included actual bodybuilders, fashion models, and so on, we did not want to be so literal. We sought artistic re-evaluations of the living display genre, projects that would problematize and rethink its assumptions. Living displays of the past, such as tableaux vivants or ethnographic spectacles, were generally not conscious of their own politics. The projects chosen for *CounterPoses* were ones that were intentionally aware, critically self-reflexive and sought to create challenging and interrogative variations of the living display format.

As performance curators, we were interested in how living display can be mobilized to explore contemporary debates about the body, lifestyle and viewing practices, and to be affirmative of difference. *CounterPoses'* twelve projects represented a range of styles, intentions and meanings. As the show evolved, six general themes emerged. These thematics, of course, overlap and many of the installations fell into several simultaneously. Briefly, the first thematic was a focus on the body as a material entity, exploring its limitations and capacity for sensory awareness. The second was an examination of the body as a vehicle for iconographic and allegorical interpretations, specifically, how meanings are inscribed onto bodies through the discourses of fantasy, myth, religion, nationalism and patriarchy. The third involved engaging the body in activities that foreground leisure, labour and ritual. Bodies exist in complex social contexts, and a fourth consideration was the body's intersection with institutional discourse such as department stores, hospitals, homes or funeral parlours. A fifth thematic considered the body as the signifier of identity, where presumptions about race, gender and sexuality are continually negotiated. The last thematic focused on the obsessions of viewing (i.e., voyeurism) and on the mediation of vision via video and photography.

The following is a descriptive "walk-through" of *CounterPoses* in the order in which a visitor might encounter the artworks. Starting from the street, traversing up stairs, and venturing into the furthest recesses of Oboro, the twelve installation-events below show how display and performative conventions can be rearticulated in intriguingly divergent manners.

Colette's *Hold On ... I'm On My Way* worked in continuity with the tableaux vivants she has been doing since the 1970s that place the female body at the intersection of commercial and cultural myths. For *CounterPoses*, she held a store-front "audience" for artworld *cognoscenti* and neighbourhood denizens alike. Deploying the viewing convention which traditionally enabled access to aristocratic or elite personages such as queens or reli-

gious figures, she sat on a Pope's throne, elaborately dressed, inviting audience members to come forward and be blessed. Pedestrians' attention was drawn by the Europop music blared out on to the street and Colette's voice proclaiming "Hello! Hello!" Between visitations she read from *Le Devoir*, talked on the phone and conversed with individuals in her "waiting room." In this role and manner of address she claimed the power of theocracy, traditionally a patriarchal prerogative. Her carnivalesque demeanor playfully disrupted the rigidities of hierarchy and elevated everyday street life to the status of ceremony and grandeur.

David McFarlane's *Autoportrait* took place in a dark, shoe-boxed shaped theatre space, empty of everything except a large fibreglass ball and circulating audience members. McFarlane was secured in a specially constructed sphere with a video camera focussed on his face – visible as a wall-sized video projection. Like an experiment in group psychology, viewers gradually discovered that they could roll the sphere, affecting the axis and comfort of the artist inside. Along with examining the mediating role of video, issues of trust and abuse vis-a-vis audience interaction were foregrounded. Most people were respectful, gently touching the surface of the ball and tentatively giving it a push. But as a crowd gathered, actions became more physical, to the point where a neighbourhood boy – dubbed "Bart Simpson" – spent a lot of time gleefully testing the endurance and composure of the artist. By virtue of the tightly framed, grainy, low resolution image of the artist's face, *Autoportrait* resonated with such cultural phenomena as moon landings, g-force laboratory experiments, even interrogation videotapes, questioning how competent we are in reading the signs of the face.

The theme of confinement continued in *Recreation*, by The Other Theatre, which superimposed the utopian space of the 1950s rec-room onto the frame of the freight elevator. The skewed set, designed by Eo Sharpe, shifted the normal vertical axis ninety degrees so that walls and floors became interchangeable. No exercise in fond, baby-boomer reminiscence, the piece fostered the sensation of a peep show voyeurism. Viewable only through the elevator's tiny, gridded window, one audience member at a time took turns watching fragments of this tabloid tableau. The content of the one-hour play – enacted by Stacey Christodoulou and Philippe Ducros – was a sordid story of a disintegrating marriage, a wife's murder, and the husband's frenzied attempt at a cover-up. In the manner of an "unsolved mystery," *Recreation* evoked the dark underbelly of the apparent suburban tranquility of daily chores, abundant leisure time and a "nothing ever happens here" banality.

Shawna Dempsey and Lorri Millan's *The Eaton's Catalogue (1976)* reconstituted the traditional theme of "The Three Graces," a theme frequently outlined in nineteenth-century tableau vivant manuals. This was a classic tableau vivant enactment: no action, no narrative, sheer presence. As the lights came up, the audience, seated

bleacher style, viewed three women – Dempsey, Annie Martin and Anne Borden – clad in polyester dresses with bathtub faucets emerging from their breasts. Suddenly water gushed from the fixtures, soaking their feet and everything below their knees. They remained absolutely still as “models” in postures excerpted from a glossy page in the title’s inventory of fashion. The aspirational aspects of nineteenth century tableaux vivants were updated to a more contemporary form of nostalgia – how the Eaton’s Catalogue, “the most read book” of the artists’ youth, functioned not only as an enticement for consumption but as a manual for constructing identity. With unflinching stares and wax-like complexions, these living mannequins would exemplify eternal chic perfection – if only their consumerism hadn’t gone humorously awry. Crossing the department store divide between hardware and evening gowns, typically at opposite ends of the macho-femme spectrum, the performers’ wry hermaphroditism demonstrated the fluidity of gender and the polymorphous nature of desire.

Travelling up the stairs, one unavoidably entered Louise Liliefeldt’s *Ethel-Forgive Me Not* through the vortex of a fierce windstorm. Amidst the raging and dizzying sound, a female figure leaned out over the stairwell, covered in glittering gold, draped in white cloth, hair blowing in the wind. Her position recalled a ship’s figurehead, a Valkyrie, Nike – or a female crucifixion. Liliefeldt’s blazing focus was absolute, fixed somewhere beyond the beholder’s glance. Struggling with the aftereffects of a Catholic childhood in South Africa, the artist portrayed a figure ensconced in an apocalyptic whirlwind that could alternately destroy or purify the world. Images of self-pleasure projected onto the billowing cloth instantiated her body as a source of pleasure and strength, despite the repression and guilt induced by a religious upbringing. An extremely physical and taxing piece, Liliefeldt posed for up to three hours at a stretch, charging the space with her determination. Her presence was rivetting and troubling; visitors witnessed a kind of shamanic ritual as the artist deliberately pushed beyond her threshold of endurance.

Rachel Echenberg revisited the tradition of “living sculpture” in *The Water Nymph Project*, a recreation of a wishing well. Especially referencing Baroque water fountains of women in heroic postures and tunics, she personified a sculptural maiden who, distinct from “standing in” for lofty, archetypal ideals of Liberty or Victory, directly addressed members of the audience with scripted monologues and improvised conversation. Substituting rubber-clad flesh for stone, representing the individual rather than the universal, Echenberg’s animated statue embodied the real instead of the allegorical. Moving from passive to active muse, she told of personal experiences, spun fabulist stories and legends, and conveyed philosophical wisdom and advice. For those who threw money into the splashing pool at her feet, she offered a vial of river water conferred with specific blessings and affective properties – medicinal remedy, love potion, mind-expand-

ing narcotic, psychic balm, mythic panacea. Eliciting the authority and theatricality of public monuments, the artist occupied public space in a way that has been traditionally impermissible for actual women.

Nathalie Grimard’s installation, *Mon cheval de bataille*, invoked the viewing ritual of the hospital visit. Grimard, who has worked for Urgence Santé, has for some time incorporated medical technology into her art to foreground the vulnerability of the body. Viewers entered a darkened, minimalist space. Poised upon a shiny black floor was a gurney bed with the artist, asleep, and beside her were standard hospital issue table, chair, lamp and glass of water. This patient tableau was staged behind a wall of thick plastic strips, effectively quarantining the artist. Stepping through the plastic one encountered an artificially heated atmosphere – like a stuffy hospital room or the warm intensity of a fever. An audio of horse hooves and neighing (recalling Fuselli’s famous painting of a nightmare) compelled one to dwell on the oneiric significance of the equine or to imagine a narrative linking the animal to the cause for hospitalization. In this intimate and secluded installation, the apparent passivity of the artist strategically exposed visitors’ own predilections: some pulled her covers up caringly, making sure she was comfortable; another left a rose, possibly in memory of someone who didn’t recover from their illness; while others felt provoked and harassed her to awaken.

Christine Martin’s performance, *Puppies are Not Just for Christmas*, collapsed the discourses of Disney and eroticism. Martin, attired in a “pretty” dress and high heels, adopted cheesecake poses and danced what she called “method go-go” or “displaced burlesque,” maintaining constant interaction with the audience. Her red, Christmas light-adorned stage was framed by a sylvan landscape of Bambi-like deer, excessively cute sparrows and oversized cartoon flowers (painted by Kenyan Gulotta). Tables and chairs positioned next to the stage approximated the layout of a strip-bar, encouraging her to interact humorously (and even dance) with audience members. On one level the artist intended to reclaim the experience of childhood innocence and transform the exploitation and humiliation conventionally present in pornographic displays and the sex industry. On another, she incisively commented on New York real estate shifts, specifically the Disney-financed renovation of Times Square and the banishment of adult entertainment from the area. Riding that edge between a feminist celebration of uninhibited sexuality and a perpetuation of the very x-rated culture it aimed to critique, *Puppies are Not Just for Christmas* viscerally challenged visitors to examine their own assumptions about sex and display.

The twinned theme of innocence and sexuality also appeared in Stéphanie Beaudoin’s installation, *Le Baiser Capital; Choix Capital*, conveyed through the romantic fantasy of fairy tales. Part of an extended series entitled *Je Suis Morte* where she staged her own death in order to interrogate the cultural mythology of artistic identity, *Le*





Louise Liefeldt, *Ethel - Forgive Me Not*, 1998. Performance still from *CounterPoses* by Display Cult at Oboro, MtI, 1998. Photo: Paul Litherland, Courtesy Display Cult and Oboro.

Baiser Capital was a kind of funerary theatre, simultaneously appropriating Victorian-style *memento mori* and parodying the contemporary “photo-opportunity”. The artist was present in two guises: as an immaculately dressed photographer, quick to display a smile and ice-breaking charm, and as a nude sleeping beauty photographically residing in the landscape of the infamous 1998 ice storm. For a token fee, participants were garbed in a grey cloak and photographed trying to provide the slumbering maiden with the mythic “kiss of life”. Their image was then inserted into a snow globe (the reverse featured an image of a rose-coloured vulva) and offered as a souvenir of the event. Combining a P.T. Barnumesque flair for entrepreneurship and an iconoclastic urge to flaunt the sexuality implicit in fairy tales, *Le Baiser Capital* foregrounded self-commodification as both a demonstration of agency and a means to control the terms of one’s own representation.

The display of labour was foregrounded in Kathryn Walter’s installation *Fool’s Gold*. One encountered the artist in Oboro’s storage room, engaged in what would normally be (if the door were closed) a secret activity. Dressed in a white lab coat, she sat engrossed in transforming nondescript, railroad gravel into “fool’s gold”. As she painstakingly coated each rock in shimmering paint, blurred images shot from a cross-country train ride were projected behind her. Referencing the transportation routes upon which communication, financial and cultural links were founded, the video alluded to how the Canadian landscape was (and still is) mastered and made productive. The presence of the artist-archaeologist-chemist interrogated the means by which *prima materia* is metamorphosed by shifting political and economic interests. Walter concretized what is normally a hidden and abstract process – the creation of value – in essence making the workings of capital visible and corporeal. The fool’s gold

was ultimately handed to visitors, leaving it to them to speculate (in the aftermath of Bre-X) on its worth as the rocks entered the circulatory economy of artistic relics.

Down the hall, tarin chaplin’s *Women’s Rites : Sifting* was housed in an all-white room. The ambience, created by antiques, kitchen implements and sacks of dry goods, appeared to be abstracted from a rural 1940s daily life. Two women occupied the space : Louise Cloutier, dressed in housedress and bandanna, sang ballads and childhood lullabies, while chaplin, wrapped in a quilted blanket, languidly moved in deep concentration. It was a surrealistic encounter between Betty Crocker and Butoh. When not sipping tea or pensively walking about the room, Cloutier sprinkled fragrant clouds of cinnamon, cloves and flour over chaplin, slapping her flesh and kneading it with the familiar gestures of bread-making. Chaplin’s demeanor, in turn, was withdrawn from the present situation, sustaining another sense of time and space. Audience participants could enter this ritualistic, intimate space by taking off their shoes; most however chose to peek through the muslin-covered doorway, shy about breaking the contemplative air of the performance. *Sifting* celebrated traditional women’s activities such as baking and parenting, suggesting the presence of a metaphysical dimension in what is commonly disregarded as the merely mundane. As the scent of spices, haunting melodies and enigmatic gestures filled the room, they evoked a complex affect of nurturing and mourning at once personal, cultural and mythic.

From the spice room, we move to a more pungent space. *Separate* presented Kim Dawn and Christof Migone engaged in the overtly corporeal processes of sucking, eating and spitting. Viewers beheld an orally excessive, sometimes infantile drama of physiological processes – an abject picnic. Sitting on silvery mylar, two otherworldly, white clad figures with racoon-like eyes were surrounded

by piles of fruit, chocolate bars, bowls of milk and buckets of honey; they chewed and spit out the plums, blew bubbles in milk, repetitively inflated and deflated a balloon, scratched a wooden block. At times Migone put his entire head in a bucket of honey and let the viscous fluid ooze down his body. Their prelinguistic actions were at once meditative and obsessive. Lights blinked on and off at regular intervals. Organic elements fermented and putrefied, and by the third day the atmosphere was saturated with a funky combination of the sweet and the rank. Dawn and Migone achieved a kind of cult status; a neo-primitive, punk couple, Mouse and Banana, excitedly related to us how they stole chocolate bars from the piece and ate them with the artists. Blurring the boundaries between inside and outside, food and excrement, self and not-self, disgust and pleasure, *Separate* provoked acknowledgment of the body's base corporeality.

With such potentially controversial topics as sexuality, death and spousal abuse addressed by the projects of *CounterPoses*, the body is shown to be much more than a raw material; it is the site where complex cultural discourses of identity, gender and affiliation are negotiated and reconceived. Part of the frisson of *CounterPoses* was due to the embodiment, rather than mere representation, of these topics and the way in which the aesthetic gaze – that disembodied, disinterested form of artistic contemplation – was undermined. According to some theorists, the unmediated encounter of such living displays places the viewer in an untenable position – that of a voyeur moved by “visceral fascination.”³ Instead of return to the “pure gaze,” a stylized manner of concentration upon artworks as if they were complete unto themselves⁴, the living displays of *CounterPoses* were intended to trouble such notions of objectivity while at the same time expanding upon the critical possibilities of visceral fascination. Instead of reproducing a “pure” aesthetic, they compelled a re-evaluation of the issues endemic to the activity of viewing. Indeed, they cultivated a gaze that was attached, embodied, interested and *implicated*⁵. Living displays exhibit the body in such a way that the experience of the spectator is itself a primary element for contemplation and critique. They problematize the assumption of a natural and transparent viewing position and seek to uncover its political and ideological investments.

In a culture where the objectification of others is normal and accepted, even profitable, the act of *self*-objectification, which many of the above works actively engaged, 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.”⁶ By exploiting this gap between body and being, the performances in *CounterPoses* not only critique ideologies that try to constrain and overdetermine the body's relation to being, but also explore alternative and affirmative possibilities.

These performance-events critiqued “the look,” especially the supposedly objective aesthetic gaze, through a doubling process that intensified and compounded it. The distance and detachment that served as the foundation for the asymmetrical power relations of the aesthetic gaze was undermined by the face-to-face encounter between performer and audience. This doubled gaze, a “looking” compounded by being “looked at,” set up an intersubjective relationship, a reciprocal engagement, that “confound[s] the privileged viewing normally operative in display culture.”⁷

To a large degree, the anxiety over “visceral fascination” contains an element of validity. The use of the corporeal in these works was not an end in itself, but strategically employed to examine the politics of viewing. Any anxiety experienced at being drawn into a viewing relationship was a sure sign that socially-approved viewing patterns were being unsettled. As Catherine Elwes notes, once the distance and safety of the voyeur's “cloak of invisibility” has been removed, viewers are exposed to the consequences of their own desires⁸. The encounters of *CounterPoses* encouraged viewers to acknowledge their own complicity in objectifying viewing practices, yet they also provided a framework in which to negotiate its problematics. It was our aim that *CounterPoses* serve as a reflexive exhibition prototype that revealed not only the determining aspects of such conventions, but also the generative potential of artistic agency.

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NOTES

- ¹ Display Cult is a collaborative framework for interdisciplinary practices in the arts. Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick are its founding members. They would like to thank The Canada Council and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec for their generous assistance to this project.
- ² We are in the process of editing an extensive anthology on the history and practice of living display, in both art and culture at large, to be published by The University of Chicago Press.
- ³ David Boland, “Body Art: Cheap Thrills,” *Art Monthly* #192, 1995-6, p. 42.
- ⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Historical Genesis of a Pure Aesthetic,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* #46, 1987, p. 203.
- ⁵ This concept is explored further in Jim Drobnick, “Body Events and Implicated Gazes,” paper given at the College Art Association conference panel “Rethinking Human Display: Tableaux Vivants, Performance Art and Living Exhibitions,” New York, 1997.
- ⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, New York, London: Routledge, 1993, p. 204.
- ⁷ Jennifer Fisher, “Exhibiting Bodies: Articulating Human Displays,” *Border/Lines* #31, 1994. See also her essay, “Interperformance: The Live Tableaux of Suzanne Lacy, Janine Antoni, and Marina Abramovic,” *Art Journal*, Winter 1997, pp. 28-35.
- ⁸ Quoted in Jeanie Forte, “Women's Performance Art” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, Sue-Ellen Case, ed., Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 263.