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Thinking Liminality

Karilee Fuglem. *Between the Visible and the Invisible*

Karilee Fuglem, *Connective Tissue*, Galerie Pierre-François

Ouellette art contemporain, Montreal

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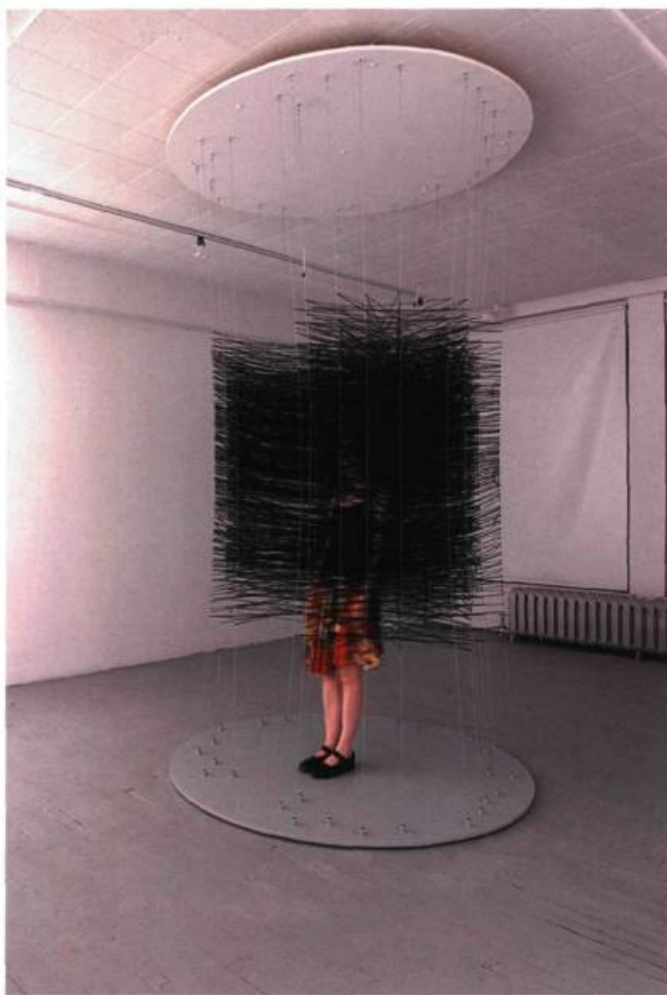
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ACTUALITÉS/EXPOSITIONS

Montreal

THINKING LIMINALITY: KARILEE FUGLEM, BETWEEN THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE

Karilee Fuglem, *Connective Tissue*, Galerie Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain, Montreal.

Funnel-web spiders demonstrate considerable ingenuity in the meticulous construction of their silken webs. The webs are open at one end; the other end contains a funnel that functions as an escape hatch. At the narrow end of the funnel; the spider waits, motionless, for its prey, attuned to the slightest vibration, the most imperceptible sound. These are vibrations humans can never hope to feel; sounds our ears will never hear. Karilee Fuglem's webworks exhibited at Pierre-François Ouellette art contemporain are constructed with a technical virtuosity unheard of outside the spider kingdom – a single thread has never been spun to more eloquent effect – and function as perceptual traps to catch such elusive phenomena. They also serve as both metaphor and plea for heightened sensitivity on our part, for crossing borders and opening us to the world; redeeming what seems like marginalia within the horizon of our own experience as first-level perceptual information.

If we are receptive, these floor-to-ceiling works – *A Continuous Thread* and *There's a Place on My Back That Isn't There* (both 2005) – also trap us within them; their filaments stick to our eyes and minds and we are captivated therein. The artist draws out over time our attention to phenomena that words spoken or written simply cannot express, that remain below the threshold of ordinary apprehension, assimilation and explanation. Yet, once we are inside these sticky webs, we are poised to learn of spaces in between.

Fuglem is a poet of the peripheral, an observer of slippages and evasive truths; the ephemeral, the unseen and the heretofore unthought-of are her core subjects. Her work is deeply relational. Her sculptures are really “antistructures” with themes like the lingering residue of spoken dialogue and soliloquy, the nerve-ending sense of the spectral presence of someone who has just died, or the lengthening shadow of thought itself. They are also open to interpretation. For instance the webworks also echo columns

of cloudy cones under the base of a cloud formation (cumulonimbus), an ocean-going vessel's chimney or smokestack, a huge Slinky or, for that matter, an elongated, achromatic Monet haystack.

Fuglem writes in a statement accompanying her exhibition: "Taking my cue from the tenacious spiders whose wisps disturb my presumption of an empty room, I've made two sculptures by slowly building up threads in accumulative weaving systems. From their outer area, roughly the scale of my arms outstretched, the threads' imprecise, gestural geometry gradually embraces human-scale spaces. Kilometres of thread are massed in an area within arms' length. In one, a continuous, nearly invisible, thread has been looped in and out of itself to form a column of light; the other criss-crossed in a skin-based constellation pattern, to form an elastic core of pressing darkness. Tension holds everything together, making architecture out of otherwise unsupported flimsiness."

With a spider's tenacity and a humility so familiar to long-standing followers of her work, extending from her methodologies to her materials – notably, those simple clear nylon and black elastic threads – Fuglem constructs liminality.

She is an Arachne (in the lineage of Luce Irigaray and admirably contra Freud) for our times who creates liminal sculptures and installations: In this exhibition, webworks which act as thresholds or doorways between not only conscious and unconscious levels of experience, but the seen and the unseen, the visible and the all-but-invisible to our senses, and even our private thoughts.

Before we plunge into these depths, however, we might take a short side trip by way of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and fiction by contemporary writer Angela Carter to arrive more readily at the heart of our argument. In the *Metamorphoses*, the first spider, the primordial spinner of webs, was named Arachne. Arachne was born decidedly lower-caste but ascended into the celestial firmament through her ambidexterity in spinning wool and weaving all manner of lovely tapestries. Fuglem guides the viewer towards the liminal places in the same way that Ariadne guided Theseus.

I am also convinced that Fuglem, like aforementioned writer Carter before her (especially when the latter wrote "Reflections" in *Fireworks*), is entirely cognizant of the myths of spiders and their weavings. Carter wrote of Arachne: "She, like the spiders, spun and wove her own thread and so had become clothed, for her shadowy hair was also the color of the stuff she knitted and so evanescent in texture." The viewer of Fuglem's evanescent installations, like the reader of Carter's fiction, becomes Arachne her/himself, and thus is able to negotiate the web

effortlessly, reconnoitering as though eight-legged every quadrant in and through the "unseen meditative distances" the artist speaks of concerning her own thinking. As she says, her thoughts have their own "touched" counterpart in the material itself, in each and every labor-intensive strand, reminding her – and us – that touch makes "a dwelling place for interiority," as Luce Irigaray put it, and so makes consciousness possible. And it is as though the web's myriad textures of light are being spun out of the artist's own body, each strand luminous with hard-won meaning and the promise of home.

These nests of light and darkness propel us with instantaneity from Descartes' Dioptrics – in which the action of light is proved by contact – to Luce Irigaray's understanding of light in terms of texture and touch. As Cathryn Vasseleu has said: "Irigaray contrasts the liminal flesh of the contiguously formed interiority of the tangible invisible with the cave or vessel-like inhabitable morphology of traditional femininity."¹ No exaggeration to suggest that, in these works, Fuglem essays the same contrast.

She weaves a nest of ligatures evanescent yet corporeal, resonant of womb and tomb and dream. Is the funnel web a snare for the Other – or a burial cloth for the Self? Its curvature suggests the organic and we are invited to step within one such funnel web like a house of touch. In conversation, Fuglem says she kept losing the thread and then finding it again, getting caught up in the web, lost in her own labyrinthine structure, lost in her own space of light and touch. But Arachne, like Europa, Leda, Antiope, Medusa and Erigone, prevails...

Her arachnoid work interrogates the hand-me-down assumptions about our lived reality and tries to uncover or recover data that have been completely abandoned, lost to our attention and our understanding. In any community, she reminds us, it is common to start thinking one-sidedly and communally of some phenomena as "central," and dilate on them exclusively; others are myopically construed as "marginal," and left by the wayside. Of course, the distinction between "central" and "marginal" then becomes taken for granted and effectively moot, and what was left at the margins becomes forever marginalized and all but forgotten. In practice, the only reparative measure is to bring the marginal phenomena back into the fold, into focus and play – and so this artist draws us into the spaces in between, the folds and the lacunæ, and the perforations in the seemingly infinite silken lattice of a funnel spider's web.

Fuglem does this by placing herself in what psychologists call "liminal space." In this space, boundaries are permeable membranes that can be crossed and one stands at the threshold of an indeterminate future tense. The word derives from the Greek *limnos*,

meaning “threshold,” and Latin *limen* which means the same. Liminality describes an in-between in space and time when the past is dead the future not yet born. This tense is gravid with indeterminacy, ambiguity, creative ferment – and infinite possibilities for growth.

The concept of liminality as a space of transformation is not subject to taxonomy. It exists outside hierarchies that privilege difference and it is interesting that liminality is synonymous with the aspect of creativity or potentiality and healing. (It is interesting to note that the silk of funnel web spiders was once used to cover wounds to stop bleeding.)

“Liminality” is a term that was employed by noted anthropologist Victor Turner of the University of Chicago.² Turner was referencing what human beings experience as they pass over the threshold from one stage of life to the next. He discussed the liminal stage, the in-between stage, when one’s identity and stature become more ambiguous. In effect, when one is outside taxonomy, in the no man’s land “neither here nor there,” and “betwixt and between all fixed points of classification.” The rules of the growth game are suspended, as is the present tense of longing. One inhabits the margins, cast off from the mainstream, in a manifestly indeterminate mode of being. Turner focuses on this marginality, this zone of indeterminacy, and so, too, does Fuglem. For this is the zone she works from. If she is able to communicate to us, her observers, the details concerning the uniquely ephemeral flora and fauna that inhabit this zone, and which fly under the radar of our senses, she is successful.

Fuglem constructs liminal sites and her webworks are thresholds that embody moments “in and out of time.” Perhaps her works are best understood as liminal journeys she invites us to accompany her on. Turner focused his attention on the liminal stage of rites of passage – the state of being poised on a spatial or spiritual threshold. In the state and process of liminality, there is the constant search for a sacred space.

Having spoken with a number of people who experienced Fuglem’s work, I was surprised by the discovery of a genuinely shared and shareable experience, which made me think of Turner’s discussion of a radiant form of social community which he termed “*communitas*” in which an intense sense of intimacy and awareness is experienced.

Through interweaving the visible and the invisible, Karilee Fuglem invites us to understand their interdependence, and invokes the *communitas* in constructing liminal spaces which are contiguous with our own bodies and contingent upon our own engagement with them within the wider intersubjective horizon of human life. In following the many



threads of her work, we are better able to appreciate the relationship between our world and its largely unseen, marginalized counterpart. The lesson we are poised to take away from all this is just how important it is, and especially in these dark days, to confront Otherness with understanding and, above all, with empathy.

JAMES D. CAMPBELL

NOTES

- ¹ Cathryn Vasseleu, “Textures of Light: Vision and Touch”, in *Rigaray, Levinas and Merleau-Ponty*, London, Routledge, 1998, p. 127.
- ² For Victor Turner’s thought, see the following publications: V. Turner, *The forest of symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1967.
- Idem, *The drums of affliction: a study of religious processes among the Ndembu of Zambia*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1968.
- Idem, *The ritual process: structure and anti-structure*, Chicago, Aldine Publishing Co, 1969.
- Idem, *Dramas, fields and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1974.
- Idem, *Revelation and divination in Ndembu ritual*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1975.
- Idem, *Variations of the theme of liminality*. In *Secular ritual*, Ed. S. Moore & B. Myerhoff. Assen, Van Gorcum, 1977, 36-52.
- Idem, *Image and pilgrimage in Christian culture: Anthropological perspectives*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1978.
- Idem, *From ritual to theater: The human seriousness of play*, New York, PAJ Publications, 1982.
- Idem, *On the edge of the bush: Anthropology as experience*, Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press 1985.