Power Structures & Rituals

Sculptures become props for performances, performed by the sculptures, which become part of the installation and then feedback into parts of performances. The elements of the performance are visual impressions, which can be watched and heard.

Julien Fronsacq, Spike Magazine

Machtstrukturen & Rituale


Julien Fronsacq, Spike Magazine
"Power Structures, Rituals & Sexuality of the European Shorthand-Typist" – it is with this bombastic title that Lili Reynaud-Dewar decided to launch a two-part exhibition series, first in the gallery Mary Mary in Glasgow (2009) and then at Kamel Mennour in Paris (2010), exploring themes of anthropology and emancipation and specifically dedicated to the figure of the typist. One area of the Parisian gallery contained a video projection, which documented a performance, as well as some of its props: a wooden cage and a number of black suits. The video depicts a woman – «caught» in this «structure» and this male outfit – whose hands are being painted by someone else. The metaphorical implication of this scenario should be understood in relation to the history of the shorthand typist, which is marked by standardization, mechanization, the division of labour and gender polarization. However, it was not until the early 20th century that the profession of the typist came to be associated with women – a feminization that was synonymous with a certain popularization of the profession, and which led to the establishment of pools of typists in large corporations. In another part of the exhibition, a conference table – bizarrely, topped by a mirror – seemed to have been the site of a performance. On top of the table sat two typewriters, two suits made of an African wax-printed fabric and two projectors screening videos of yellow, blue, red and green hands typing. Since these fragmented body parts literally bore the apprentice’s marks, they could be conceived of being part of a primitive ritual. Standing in the centre of the table was a sculpture depicting coloured hands as tall as viewers. One might have asked oneself: In the context of this bizarre narrative, could this sculpture constitute the street-level sign in front of a secretary school or the emblem of a mysterious, archaic, emancipated secretary’s devotion; the symbol of an authoritarian system or of a ritual based on the subversion of the same system’s conventions?

In an early work, Reynaud-Dewar explored the relationship between text, object and performance, and she examined colonization (as well as forms of resistance to it) through a Caribbean fiction: the story of a Rastafarian community that attempted to convert the United States by proselytising in designated, protected areas reminiscent of luxury resort hotels. In The Center and the Eye (2006) the artist exhibited totem poles draped with pieces of cloth bearing the colours of the Jamaican flag, suspended circular mobiles, geometric sculptures and chairs. All of these artworks simultaneously served as the props and the setting for a performance: By saying «I and I», one performer in...
Lili Reynaud-Dewar
oked the Rastafarian unity between Jah (God) and mankind. Elsewhere, a performer stood behind a tower of rectangular frames and seemed frozen amongst mobiles, which could be described as naïve. Attached to wooden sticks, these circular sculptures were adorned with pieces of leather and details cut out from posters, which represented ingenuous, silent faces. In addition, an actor read excerpts from Silence, a text written by American composer John Cage, who based his work on the Zen principles of «indetermination» and the «interpenetration» of opposite values. In linking Rastafarianism and Cage, Reynaud-Dewar drew together a constellation of astonishing diversity. And this contamination of genres was echoed in the sculptures’ formal complexity.

In 2009, Kunsthalle Basel invited the artist to conceive a show dedicated to Sun Ra. The Afro-American musician combined experimentation with political engagement, and he constructed a character that simultaneously served as an alter ego identity. Reynaud Dewar decided to opt against a straightforward presentation of the archives compiled by the musician and poet. Instead, she decided to organize a show in which she invited her mother, Mireille Rias, to reenact one of the musician’s concerts in 1970. A film was made of the performance, in which Rias leaned on a throne-like chair made with African fabrics and related the story of the concert, and it was screened amidst a circle of large, triangular speakers. In the same room, the artist installed huge panels inscribed with Sun Ra’s own texts. Later, in 2011, following an invitation from Tramway, an art space in Glasgow, Reynaud Dewar created a performance, Jean Genet’s Walls, Speaking of Revolt, Media and Beauty, that pushed previous limits in terms of the sophistication of her staging. As preparation for the performance, Reynaud-Dewar asked Pierre Giquel – a friend and poet as well as her professor at the École d’Art in Nantes – a series of questions about the novelist Jean Genet, his biography, his literary path, his relationship to style and his political activism. The interview was then translated, re-staged and filmed. In its final form, the video of this re-staging was interspersed with scenes from Genet’s film A Song of Love. Reynaud-Dewar’s video was also integrated into the performance at Tramway; it was projected behind a group of sculptures, entitled Four Walls Speaking of Revolt, Media and Beauty, which were conceived as a monument to Genet’s political writings. Mary Knox, the artist’s favourite actress, read in tan-

MAN KÖNTE DIE MOTIVATION VON REYNAUD-DEWARS KÜNSTLERISCHER PRAXIS VOR ALLEM ALS POLITISCH BEZEICHNEN

Lili Reynaud-Dewar

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The works that have to do with Sun Ra and Genot are filled with references, which is unsurprising since the two were complex figures and both were engaged in numerous political debates defined by a singular militancy. In fact, in large part, the motivation behind Reynaud-Dewar’s artistic practice could be defined as political. But the involvement of Rias and Giquel, two individuals beloved by the artist, is instead based on their shared memories and personal understandings.

In other words, a delegated authority is present, which the artist stages and represents through texts and films. From a feminist perspective on the topic of shorthand typists to Rastafarian ideology, and from Sun Ra to Genot— in every case, Reynaud-Dewar refers to narratives of emancipation.

Nevertheless, the artist’s performances could be considered, simply, as staged situations of alienation. The elements staging Power Structures, Rituals & Sexuality of the European Shorthand-Typists — the suits, either African or traditionally Western, and the sculptures, either the cage or the big, coloured hands — develop a poetic of ambiguity. Historically, tactics of resistance from colonial rituals to social phenomena are often based on inverted signs of domination. The cargo cult, for example, developed through Melanesians’ mimicking of colonial behaviours. And the word «camp» apparently derives from the French verb «se camper», meaning “to play the part of”. In Notes on «Camp», an essay written by the American writer Susan Sontag in the 1960s, «camp» is described as being the same as «artifice» and «exaggeration».

SYMPTOMS OF ALIENATION CONTAMINATE HER SCULPTURES, PERFORMANCES AND VIDEOS

Today, «drag», which could be defined as an exaggeration of a gender’s stereotypes, is widely considered to fall into the category of «camp» practices. Recently, in reference to the type of makeup called blackface — which, in theatre, is when a nonblack performer’s face is painted over with black makeup — Reynaud-Dewar described the practice as a “type of rabbit-duck,” a picture puzzle, something which can be understood perfectly well in two different ways. Although it may seem paradoxical, the artist’s use of blackface in her own works — which occurs quite often, for example in her Liebling darstellerin der Künstlerin, führte eine Art Dialog mit dem Interview im Film, las aus Texten vor, die ihr Reynaud-Dewar gab, während sie sich gemeinsam über die Bühne bewegten.


SYMPTOME DER VERFREMDEUNG KONTAMINIEREN DIE SKULPTUREN, PERFORMANZEN UND VIDEOS DER KÜNSTLERIN
recent exhibition Some objects blackened and a body too (2011) – can be seen as a metaphor for the tactics that she develops through sculpture, staging, installation and video. In fact, stereotypical blackface characters have been played both by white actors and also by black actors. Whereas the practice of blackface has perpetuated a racist stereotype, it has also been popularized within black culture. Beyond its racist background, blackface has been defined as a symbolic strategy through which one may decide to embody the emblems of a race, social group or gender that stands in opposition to one’s own. Reynaud-Dewar avoids generating a discursive authority by simultaneously engaging eclecticism and the rough cut montage of sources. By allowing the symptoms of alienation to contaminate her sculptures, performances and videos, the artist creates work that stands as props and rituals of resistance and of the inversion of dominant systems.


Represented by Mary Mary, Glasgow

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