

Picturing the Modern Amazon

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Picturing the Modern Amazon

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The Amazons in Greek mythology were female warriors with enormous physical prowess.¹ They allegedly removed their right breast to facilitate their practice of archery.²

Such painful bodily intervention was endured in order to pursue that otherness which allowed for the performance of feminine physical strength for which no other means were possible. In Plato's time, for example, women were barred from the agora, a restriction he challenged in his *Laws*. He advocated their visibility in public places and their political engagement.³ The Amazons, through transgressive action, could experience those important stages of multiplicity that exploded socially-imposed gender boundaries and the containment therein. Theirs could be understood "as an openness of time to futurity,"⁴ where multiplicities are acknowledged and moments of becoming occur. In these moments "things happen," philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote,⁵ which result in opening up trajectories for new ways of thinking and for novel pictures to be formulated.

The modern Amazon, like her ancient counterpart, displays an exterior physicality that reflects a strong interiority, which could be observed almost immediately in this exhibition, and from the sidewalk. The female bodybuilder stood behind the large window of the old storefront facade of the New Museum and lifted weights. She was joined by eleven others during a one-day *Pose and Perform* activity. This ephemeral side of the «installation» took place during the first few days and was concretized by work that focussed on feminine strength through historical images of women in vaudeville acts, comic books, and short film documentaries. To this, forty-five contemporary artists added their contributions, which included drawing, painting, sculpture, photography and video. Most of

the photography focussed on bodybuilders, performance artists in circuses and their corporeal landscape. Some of the titles read: *Bodybuilder Lesa Lewis* (1998, Andres Serrano), *Lenda Murray, New York City* (1997, Annie Leibovitz), and *Shavanaas Begum with her Three-year old Daughter Parveen, Great Gemini Circus, Perintalmanna, India* (1989, Mary Ellen Mark). Other submissions built on traditional subjects and artists, though marked by their own interventions. An ink drawing of *St. Sebastienne* (1998, Louise Bourgeois) inverted the male martyr, who is shown headless, allowing her body to speak. One painting used a famous nineteenth-century portrait by Ingres, but resisted the "original" mirror reflection. The *Comtesse d'Haussonville, Restored* (oil on linen, 1996, Kathleen Gilje) returns not the sitter's fleshy back, but the muscular proportions of bodybuilder Lisa Lyon, whose photographic portrait by Robert Maplethorpe was incorporated.

ARMIDE 2000

The most emotionally-gripping and intellectually-challenging work was, to my mind, Jocelyn Taylor's seven-minute video, *Armide 2000*, a take-off on Jean-Luc Godard's movie *Armide* (1987). It presents layers of unresolved issues in a unique style that combines the technical accomplishments and suspense of a film and the intimacy and directness of a home video.⁶ Technically, this single channel video is captivating in its abrupt shifts and contrasting, lingering shots. Shown at the end of the exhibition, it served as a stunning *finale*. In this work, Taylor reverses the filmmaker's composition of male athletes and nude women attendants, and replaces Lully's operatic music, "Armide" (1686), with a few spoken lines, although retaining the title. In so doing, is Taylor establishing a lineage to Godard (as the latter does to Lully), whose heir she claims to be but whose film she challenges and complexifies?

Projected onto a large wall surface to over-life-size proportions, *Armide 2000* thrusts the viewer into the physical actions, desired reactions and gendered unfoldings that take place in a gymnasium. We are made to focus primarily on the main protagonist: a cleaner. The video starts by zooming in on a slender person with brownish hair who, clad in a light green dress, brings us close to the tasks of scraping floors and dusting weights. Suspense builds as the camera rests on her reflective movements, which communicate a

remains, notably, invisible. A second voice-over is heard: "if you don't love me, you don't exist." In an unexpected move, the cleaner is seen clutching onto her admired Amazon, who, in mid-action-exercise, is unaware of the hefty embrace. A third voice-over declares: "You dismiss me but I'll come back for more." The video ends as the cleaner, while resting — and here the spectator is taken by surprise — reveals his sexual identity. Lying undressed on his back, he strokes his flat chest gently and repeatedly, articulating his



Jocelyn Taylor, *Armide 2000*, c. 2000. Video (Jarod Gibson, Vairie Peart). Courtesy of the artist.

longing, an uneasiness of being that is accompanied by an alertness of thought. As we emphatically engage with the cleaner's plight, an abrupt camera movement makes us participate in the flexing of muscles and the lifting of weights of black female bodybuilders. The photographic eye pans over their corporeal surfaces and fragments their actions so that we can experience the working of muscles and feel the(ir) sensations. As the workout continues, the cleaner, now visually absent, returns through a voice-over: "I attend to you thoroughly but you don't see me." She suddenly enters, walking in between weights and bodybuilders, to whom she

breast-wishes.

What are we to make of this? We can locate explanations, I suggest, in the conceptual framework of "becoming."

BECOMING / MULTIPLE

The cleaner's longing for that most feminine fragment of Amazonian sacrifice — the breast — is emphatically rendered as he lies diagonally to the camera's frame. But there is no erotic-pornographic dimension, wanting to fragment and possess the female body. Foregrounded instead, are his complex processes of becoming. We are made privy to the forces of the cleaner's desire, which make him enunciate, publicly,

the experience of his *lack(ing)*. Conversely, by declaring that lack, he also points to the fullness (which he seems unable to appreciate at this moment) — his multiplicity — the co-existence of sex(es) within one/his subject. Here, Taylor fascinatingly sutures us into the landscape of the protagonist's psyche through a stylistic device that makes us aware of subjective multiplicities and of that painful gap that we cannot fill except the through movement of thought that provokes reactions. As articulated, the strong forces of desire — of becoming — and this video's theoretical base, I would argue, can not be fulfilled (or not yet, perhaps). In a sense, desire must be kept in flight so as to allow the cleaner, as the voice over insists, to "come back for more" — to embrace. Indeed, he must come back, for all is not successful. *Armide 2000* points to failures that occur in communication between individuals (perhaps as socially alienated as the cleaner may be) and groups of people, where there is no space for dialogue, despite physical proximity, as in the gym. To repeat, the cleaner remains invisible to his attendants. Taylor stages an ignorance of the *other* while emphasizing a desire for *otherness* by way of apparent binary oppositions that produce productive tensions; so strong are they, however, as to become untenable. That is why we have contrasts of skin tones, slender and muscular bodies, weakness and strength, which, through desiring forces — the women in pursuit of the athletic, powerful body, the cleaner disguised as woman desiring that black, feminine physique —, start dismantling singularities of thought. The acceptance of multiplicities on all levels, individually and socially, requires such a dismantling.⁷ As *Armide 2000* problematizes boundaries of gender and race, it offers, through the personification of the cleaner as (desiring) mediator, an event of unfoldings that anticipate a time of futurity. Futurity, as the ultimate of new perspectives in thinking and living, is where moments of becoming turn into being.⁸ *Armide 2000* positions itself as critical discourse without firmly positioning the viewer. We are only caught or, better still, arrested, by the temporality of event, but we are also mobilized emotionally and intel-

lectually, the effects of which are the (strong) lasting forces of (our) becoming. These forces extend back to the ancient Amazons with whom, in part, otherness started and was overtly displayed. ■

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New York
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NOTES:

1. I extend my sincere thanks to Alice Ming Wai Jim for her editorial contributions.
2. The right breast is, indeed, absent in some antique statues of Amazons (Roman sculptures modelled after lost Greek marbles).
3. Plato, *Laws*, Book VII. For an interesting discussion, read Monique Canto, "The Politics of Women's Bodies: Reflections on Plato," Susan Rubin Suleiman ed., *The Female Body in Western Culture, Contemporary Perspectives* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press), 1986, 339.
4. Elizabeth Grosz, "Becoming... An Introduction," in E. Grosz ed., *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory and Futures* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), 1999, 3.
5. Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations: 1972–1990*, trans. M. Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press), 1995, 146. More also in Patrick Hayden, *Multiplicity and Becoming. The Pluralist Empiricism of Gilles Deleuze* (New York: Peter Lang), 1998.
6. For the production of *Armide 2000*, Taylor hired actors Jarod Gibson, Greg Keller and bodybuilders Rosemary Cheeseman, Betty Moore and Valrie Peart.
7. Dorothea Olkowski, "Flows of Desire and the Body Becoming," in E. Grosz ed., *Becomings*, 107.
8. This is further discussed by P. Hayden, 3 ff.

Pipilotti Rist

PETER
DUBÉ

Though admittedly a truism, it's hard to deny that reading is a difficult process. Trapped in the surface, between the words, images, signs, and the unretrievable "signified" we hope lies behind them, we all struggle to carry something away from the book and the gallery.

And, gallingly, the text always contradicts itself.

The best texts do it over and over again. That's one of the reasons — a good one — we return to them time after time; to try and trace the forks in the path of possibility. Contemporary texts, burdened with the baggage of post-modernity, contradict themselves with a rich dose of self-consciousness. The work displayed at The Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist does so with a noteworthy exuberance.

It is clear from the exhibition's first closed room, in which the artist's *Sip My Ocean* sprawls across a corner, that these objects revel in their

internal conflicts. The piece builds on the profound challenge to the hermetic boxes of traditional video — fine art and broadcast — that marks the work of Bruce Nauman and Gary Hill, for example. A projected work, it troubles most of the formal, iconographical and discursive assumptions about video art. The magnified image foregrounds troubling, grainy pixels, disrupting the tendency to read oversized images as filmic. The fragmented bodies displayed are never complete as they move through hallucinatory water. They are constantly doubled on the intersecting walls. Legs, arms and torsos melt into their twins at the building's seam, anonymously, since no head is ever revealed. Brightly coloured detritus sinks to the bottom. All of it is distorted yet familiar, kitschy yet disturbing. All of it moves like TV, is accompanied by a recognizable pop tune, and is so clearly not the comfortable patterns of the nightly entertainments. But this interrogation of scale and sense extends throughout the show. *Selfless In The Bath Of Lava*, in the next room, pointedly undercuts the heroicizing of large-scale works with its presentation of a minuscule monitor set in a hole in the floor that literally commands all of the otherwise empty space.

Rainwoman (I Am Called A Plant) — among the show's high-points — slams into the viewer's anticipations with singular effect. Here too, a large image fills the space, depicting a nude body prone in a downpour; a figure that might well be dead save for the occasional — startling — movement. The tape is projected atop a wall of cabinets and kitchen counters, playing the image's grain against the bold contrast of the smooth, determinedly *finished* effect of the surfaces beneath it. As the viewer moves closer, the effect of the contrast is heightened. It provokes a parallel con-



Pipilotti RIST, *Désintéressée dans le bain de lave (Selfless In The Bath Of Lava)*, 1994. Video installation. Courtesy Hauser and Wirth Gallery (Zurich), and Luhning Augustine Gallery (New York).