

ETC



Mythical Echoes in a Journey of a Phantasma

Liliana Berezowsky, Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal. Du 11 novembre 1998 au 17 janvier 1999

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Number 47, September–October–November 1999

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/35497ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Lerner, L. (1999). Review of [Mythical Echoes in a Journey of a Phantasma / Liliana Berezowsky, Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal. Du 11 novembre 1998 au 17 janvier 1999]. *ETC*, (47), 38–41.

MONTREAL

MYTHICAL ECHOES IN A JOURNEY OF A PHANTASMA

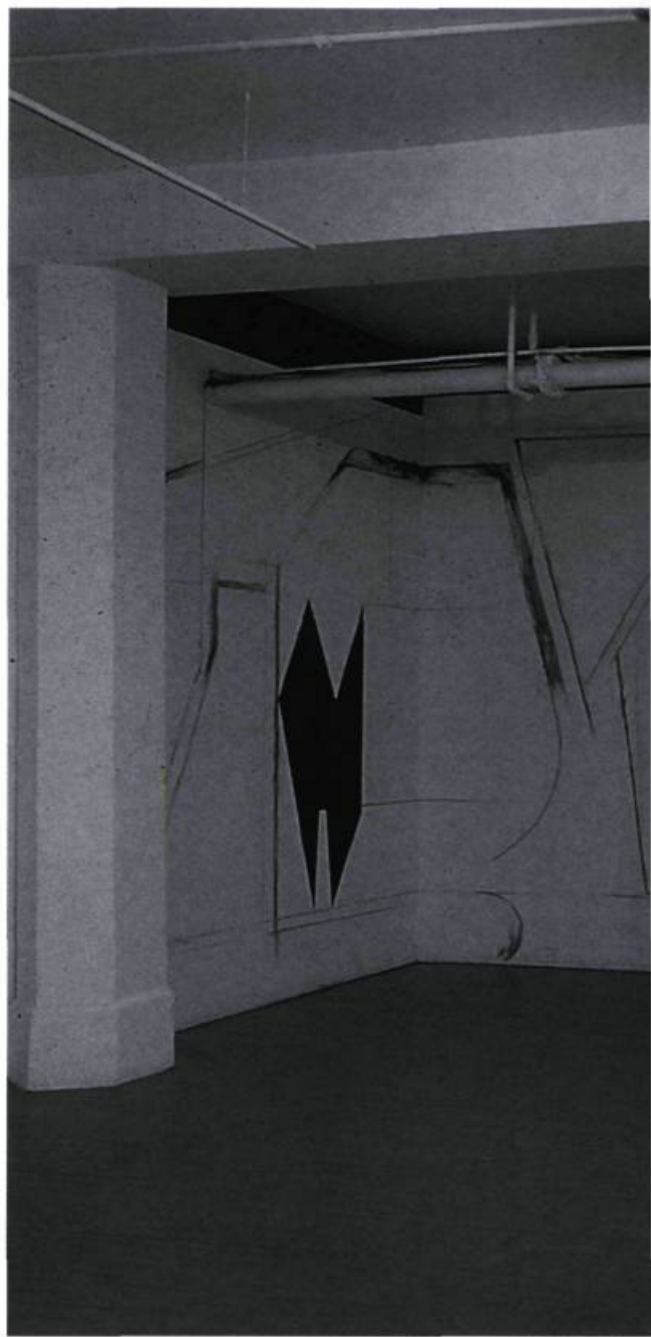
Liliana Berezowsky, Centre international d'art contemporain de Montréal. Du 11 novembre 1998 au 17 janvier 1999

In these four installations Liliana Berezowsky connects two earlier large scale constructions with new smaller pieces. "I wanted to connect the pieces and the interplay of what is outside and what is inside, what is real and what is ephemeral", she says. Arguing against Descartes's dualism of mind and body, as she puts it "probably the 20th century's greatest *faux pas*", Berezowsky ventures another affinity. In accord with Aristotle's picture-like "phantasma" of the soul, her cryptic architectonic configurations function as quasi-imprints of the mind, asserting that the mind is always inventing and manipulating the outward through its capacity of inwardness.

Jenyk IV, created in 1990 for Les cent jours d'art contemporain de Montréal conjures up both intensely personal and profoundly public meanings. On the personal level this is story of Berezowsky's family in 1990 when her marriage was falling apart. Her family, four cylindrically pointed steel bobbins or needles, knotted with thick rope, groundless and unbalanced physically, suspend two pulleys and support a set of wooden yokes. Upon first viewing, *Jenyk IV* was explained as an uneasy marriage of the components of the shipping and needle trades representative of early Montréal. Critical inquiries about male and female divisions, authority, family engagements, and labour issues were understood to be at work here.

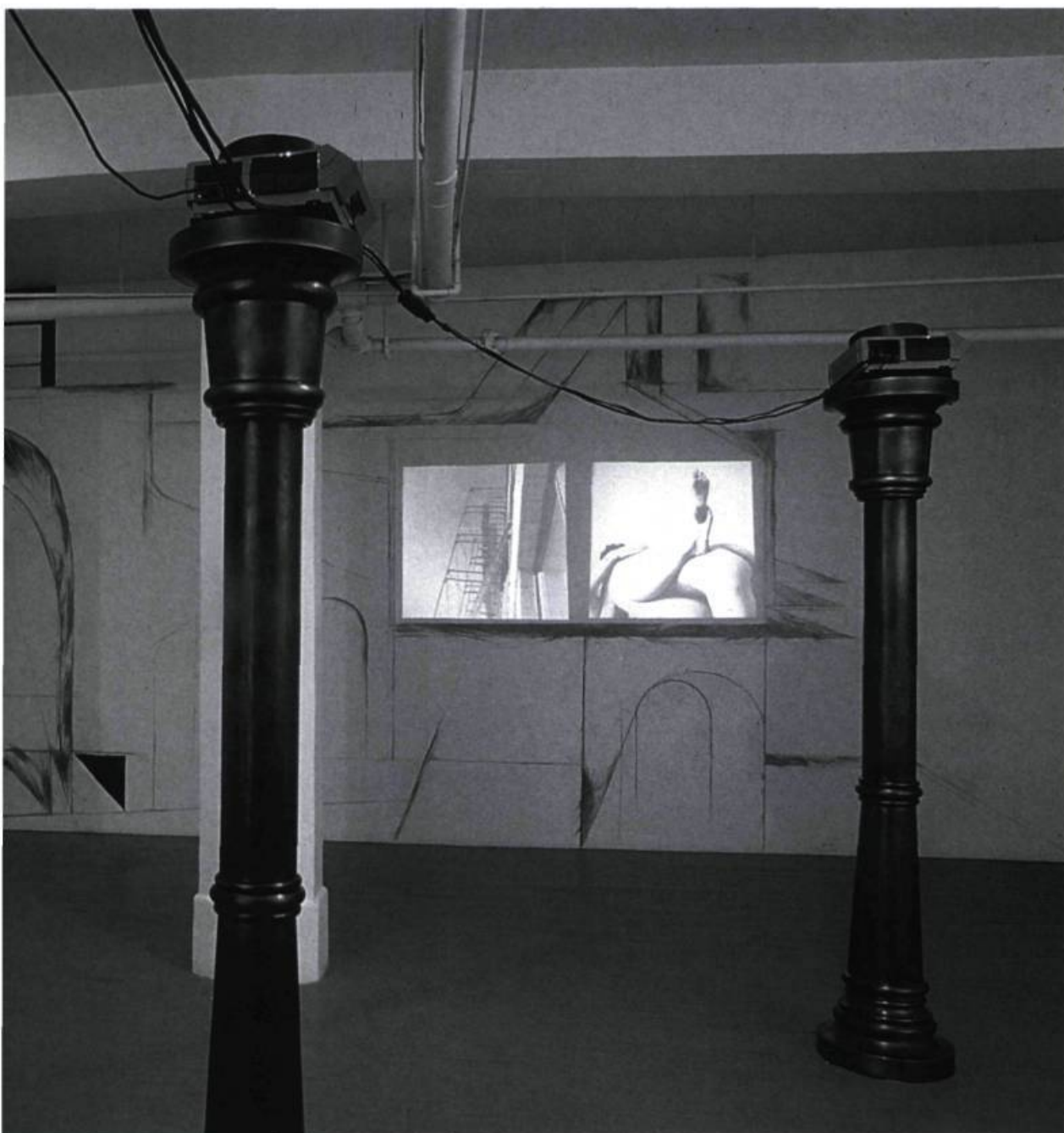
Seen again, adjacent to these recent pieces, *Jenyk IV* elicits a new interpretation. In these four installations is Berezowsky sharing a secret camaraderie with freemasonry? Intent on a system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated with symbols, freemasons in elaborate rituals and secrets have, like Berezowsky, drawn upon Greek myths and Aristotelian philosophy. There seem to be at least three allusions to freemasonry in *Jenyk IV*. The prominence of the knotted rope is the first. Freemasons appropriated from ancient Greece and Rome the symbolic meaning of solidarity and wholeness indicated by spirals or knotwork. Reversing this, in a marriage disentangling, the chords in *Jenyk IV* have become the antithesis, attachments and constraints that are unravelling.

The masonic free association with Greek gods and goddesses is the second. Athena, intermingling the human and divine, is the warrior-goddess who inspired arts and crafts. She is the city goddess, the protectress of children, and the source of psychic creativity and inner stability. The spear is an attribute of Athena, piercing with fighting spirit and keen intelligence. In *Jenyk IV*, a small boat with a wheel at either side appears intent on departing the



scenario, its spear aimed elsewhere, trailing behind loosened chords. In Greek mythology at end of a voyage we are told that the justified can sing. "The bonds are loosened. I have thrown down all the evil which was upon me. O mighty Osiris I am born again." The boat is leaving with Berezowsky in the guise of Athena, ending one journey and beginning another.

Masonic rhetoric about rites of passage point to even more relations. In masonic initiation ceremonies the initiates pass from one state to another, in trials by water, fire, air, and earth. From Aristotle the freemasons appropriated these elements and how each represents and is identified with life situations. In a transformative sequence we also pass through water, a life centre of rebirth and regenera-



Liliana Berezowsky, *Give the Image an Architecture, Can it Solidify the passing Moment...*, 1998. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

tion. We enter another state in a work entitled *If I Give the Image an Architecture Can It Solidify the Passing Moment*.

This second intimate installation was newly produced for this small room that also acts as a passage way from one gallery space to the next. There are two brass columns, each supporting a slide projector, and the projectors are joined by wires. The slides in pairs, repeating every four minutes, follow a building in progress from fall to winter, from constructing the foundation to erecting the skeletal structure. Slide images of two middle aged naked lovers caressing (the artist and her male lover) appear intermittently. A woman's breast cupped by a man's hand is juxtaposed with an air duct. A plastic sheet acting as

temporary wall appears adjacent to a woman's thighs being stroked. Charcoal and graphite drawings reminiscent of Berezowsky's *Muir Park II* (1986) series cover the walls with building motifs such as tubular contours, cylinders, and archways.

As in *Jenyk IV* the parallels are between bodies and constructions. Taken as a sum of its parts the installation suggests life as formation be it architectural or personal. But Berezowsky cautions us in our zeal to make easy comparisons. Somehow the bodies, for which there are far fewer slides, seem more architectural and lasting in the intimacy of touching than the building in the repeated process of being constructed. Loving caresses withstand the changes of time and aging better than a building's



Liliana Berezowsky, *Antigon VII*, 1991. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

“ skin ” designed to resist wind, snow, humidity, moisture transfer and other atmospheric infiltrations and pressures.

The strange confluence of images meeting in this space also continues to suggest masonic references. Akin to the two brass columns with slide projectors perched above is the freemason’s sign of two columns with spheres on top. Symbols of two polarities, male and female, the masonic columns hark back to the pillars of Jachin and Boaz that stood on either side of Solomon’s Porch. Berezowsky’s columns could also be representative of a synchronized male-female vision of harmony, a sign of indissoluble contact and everlasting stability. The wires

connecting the slide projectors as well as the bodies intertwining may signify masonic knotwork denoting the linking of one heart to another. The strange black geometric shapes on the walls could relate to the idea of geometry held in high esteem by the masons as the foremost form of architecture.

In the third room is *Antigon VII* (1991), a large soaring steel-like airplane wing coupled with a skeletal wooden wing is attached precariously at midpoint. Four accordion-like stairs on a strange angle anchor the wing to the gallery floor. On a personal level this is the story of Berezowsky, survivor of a plane crash at age eighteen.



Here is Berezowsky like Antigone choosing the eternal laws of Zeus against the limited and relative decrees of men, redefining some basic moral and ethical categories because they do not fit her, even if it means her own resolute acceptance of death. As well it could refer to death and facing death so central to the precepts of freemasonry in the idea of trial and rebirth.

The masonic trials involved the Aristotelian elements of water in the boat in *Jenyk IV*, air in the wings of *Antigon VII*, and fire in the electricity and welding of *If I Give the Image a Architecture*, although aspects of the other properties are also present in each work. Now we pass into *Métamorphose*, entering into earth in the last part of this journey. In *Métamorphose* the photographs from *If I Give the Image an Architecture* have been etched onto steel

plates. Different physically, now rusted and illusory remains of body and construction images, they become transformed, alchemized and fossilized, into some other earthly matter. Greek myths are filled with stories of metamorphoses, of gods changing themselves into other beings and inanimate dwelling places. We are also reminded that Aristotle's primary example of being is not a form considered in itself but rather a particular individual, a changing and developing being. In the spirit of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* where the mythic age of iron turns thought toward unknown arts and changes the laws of nature we marvel at Berezowsky's inventiveness and wonder where her next metamorphoses will take us.

LOREN LERNER