



Barbara Campbell, *Loom of Arachne*. Live performance with 2 super 8 film loops. First Draft West, Sydney. Photo: Brian Dougherty.

BARBARA CAMPBELL: LOOM OF ARACHNE

Live performance with two Super 8 film loops

Sound by Jamie Fielding

First Draft West, Sydney;
Institute of Modern Art,
Brisbane

Since the 1970s the relationship of women to their bodies in art, has mostly been understood as operating on two levels: the exhibition and documentation of previously unmentionable physical aspects of the female body and experience—fertility, menstruation, childbirth, sexuality, rape, incest—has been one challenge to the accepted discourse. The other means of asserting a female identity has been the recuperation of matriarchal myths and mysteries, particularly those associated with pregnancy, birth and childrearing.¹ Nevertheless, these interventions, however well intentioned, remain problematic for those women whose sense of self is neither tied to a notion of the body as a 'natural', organic subject beyond culture, and/or those whose experience and desires are not bound up with the maternal body.

The propensity of some feminists to associate 'feminine' creativity with female corporeality posits the mind and the body as mutually exclusive terms. Historically of course, masculine ideology has insisted on the designation of woman as lesser or partial man, reinforcing the analogous valuation of the body as inferior to the mind. Typically, reason has been understood as a masculine characteristic and within the Cartesian tradition, unaffected by the corpo-

real nature of the knower. Conversely, western cultural codes associate women and nature, identifying women with the body.

Thus the problem for women who still choose to work with performance is complicated by a number of historical factors which insist that performance is an art of mediation rather than creation—the woman who could not become an artist, could nevertheless turn herself into an artistic object, paint her face, shape her body, modulate her vocal tones—the body being the only accessible medium for self expression.² Performance has also been understood as the proper mode of expression for women who have been characterised as inherently duplicit or theatrical, narcissistic and histrionic.

Barbara Campbell's performance, *Loom of Arachne*, is thus particularly interesting, as whilst it might be understood as gesturing towards any one of these positions, it nevertheless illustrates what Megill has described as "a continual movement between two poles, that of immediacy (corporeality) and that of detachment (ideality)".³ The performance has a certain expressionistic quality which is countered by the framing and distancing devices of the two super 8 film loops, Jamie Fielding's soundscape and a blue two-person tent.

As in an earlier performance, *Ariadne's Trace* (presented at The Performance Space in 1990), the title provides a starting point—although not a resolution—towards a reading of the work. Ariadne and Arachne both, are Greek mythical figures whose stories are told through metaphors of spinning and weaving. Visually, Ariadne's thread becomes

Arachne's web⁴ however, the myth functions gesturally rather than recuperatively.

Subjectivity begins with the body but as Liz Grosz has pointed out:

Biological or organic functions are the raw materials of any processes of production of determinate forms of subjectivity and material, including corporeal existence... Biology provides a bedrock for social inscription but is not fixed or static substratum: it interacts with and is overlaid by psychic, social and signifying relations. The body can thus be seen, not as a blank page, a neutral ground of meaning, but as an active, productive, whiteness...⁵

Barbara Campbell's performance assumes the female body as always inscribed. The condition of the feminine as investigated in the *Loom of Arachne* is constructed through the minutiae of childhood experience, games, rhymes and rituals. However, neither the child nor the woman can be understood as a blank page, innocent, a "neutral ground of meaning". Rather, the cats cradle, riddling, rhyming, skipping and shadow puppetry are games into whose knowledge the female child is initiated—in the family, on the street, in the playground—the feminine is produced within a particular social and family nexus. The games and rituals are thus evocative of both pleasure and playfulness and an ancient guile and knowingness.

On film and in silence two hands deftly weave skeins of wool over and over in endless repetition. The image splits and while the hands continue their obsessive patterning, gold shoes skip out a regular beat. The sound is something akin to someone eating crisps at the cinema (*sic*) or perhaps feet on gravel. Below the projection and



Sally Hart, *Mexican Wilderness*, 1991. From *Siren Screams*. Cafe Europe. Photo: Chris Feld.

barely visible is a tent within which, in the reflected light from the film, the shadow of a woman moves. The sound is slow, rhythmic, eerie, emphasising drums, odd clicks and whirrs.

A slide projector snaps on creating a window of light against which the black shadow of the performer is silhouetted starkly. The shadow of the woman as she moves around and around within the confines and constraints of the tent, distorts into Matisse-like shapes. Above, the hands continue to weave in and out whilst the feet skip out endless rhythms. What kind of body is this? The temptations to read the body in terms of some idiosyncratic matriarchal myth is countered by the absurdity of the tent which evokes memories of camping out in the backyard as a child. This is an erotic rather than a passive body but the quality of that eroticism is disturbing as childhood sexuality, perhaps, is always disturbing. This is of course a reading of the child from an adult perspective and one which exposes the traces of psychosis in childhood activities and games.

The tempo shifts as the body slows to a standstill. The naked body is at once revealed—in silhouette—and concealed—in shadow. The rhythmic sounds now clearly reproduce the tempo of skipping:

Lizzie Borden had an axe
She gave her mother forty wacks
When she saw what she had done
She gave her father forty-one.
One, two, three, four...

Barbara Campbell's accompanying essay bears only an oblique relationship to the body of the performance, however, the skipping rhyme

reproduced therein, reinforces the suggestion of childish innocence as somehow knowing and moral.

The body is viewed in profile; the weight resting on the shoulders as the pubic mound rhythmically rises and falls, but over the pelvis, her hands create shadow images: the head of a goat, a rabbit, a dog snapping, a snail. Despite the relentless movement of sound and image this is not the kind of performance that depicts the woman's body as a vast gaping blackness capable of swallowing men up; this is not vagina as maw. *Loom of Arachne* plays with obsession/desire, ritual and rhyming to evoke a sense of the feminine that cannot be contained or understood simply in terms of an organic femininity. Rather it attempts to bridge the gap between representation and experience, suggesting a knowledge which is non-rational, non-sensory and indefinable; beyond the phenomenological world even as that world provides the matter of the performance, evokes our curiosity, our desire to 'know'.

This desire to 'know', to impose a linear, narrative form is particularly pervasive when looking at performance. Despite the proliferation of abstract art practices throughout this century, it seems that audiences are compelled to seek concrete meanings from amorphous images, perhaps because the body is always suggestive of the 'real' world, is read as the vehicle of narrative. In resisting narrative, *Loom of Arachne* activates the sensorial body and a perceptual space, emphasising the temporal nature of the event and employing various media as a means of extending, amplifying and transforming experience. Barbara Campbell explores the fragment

of experience to create a carnal centre deliberately structured to reveal the particular distortions of the body. *Loom of Arachne* provokes synaesthetic relations between the disparate elements of the performance and in so doing, creates not narrative, but a provisional or enigmatic outline of the female body.

As the music changes, now sounding almost like the snapping of fingers against a breathy, high pitched, keening, the shadow hands keep moving as the body slowly rotates to 'face' the audience, legs splayed wide. An interesting position: legs splayed, the performer knowingly constructs herself as victim of the audience's gaze; is both the subject and the object of the performance. How are we to understand the relationship of the performer to the spectator within this deliberately constructed scopophilic situation? The hands centre above the pubic mound forming a black shadow spider. The tempo becomes even more compulsive as the spider/tarantula seems to climb up the wall of the tent. As it does so, it becomes impossibly large, the stuff of nightmares and flattens out. Sound and movement reach their crescendo—Blackout.

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NOTES

1. Hewison, R., *Future Tense: A new art for the '90s*, Methuen (London, 1990).
2. Gubar, S. "The Blank Page" and the Issues of Female Creativity", *Feminist Criticism: essays on women, literature and theory*. Ed. E. Showalter, Virago Press (London, 1986).
3. Megill, A., *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida*, Berkeley, U.C.A. Press, 1985, quoted in Amy Newman's "Aestheticism, Feminism and the Dynamics of Reversal", *Hypatia*. Vol. 5, No. 2 (Summer 1990).
4. Arachne challenged Athene to a weaving contest and hanged herself when the goddess destroyed her web. Athene