

# Speaking the ineffable:

New directions in performance art

Linda Sproul's *Listen* &

Barbara Campbell's *Backwash*

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Women are currently leading the field of performance art. Their work is complex, drawing on a wealth of technological resources and techniques such as *bricolage*, and problematic, in that it has been both denigrated as obscene and lauded as brave as women articulate their irony, frustration, anger, and disappointment.

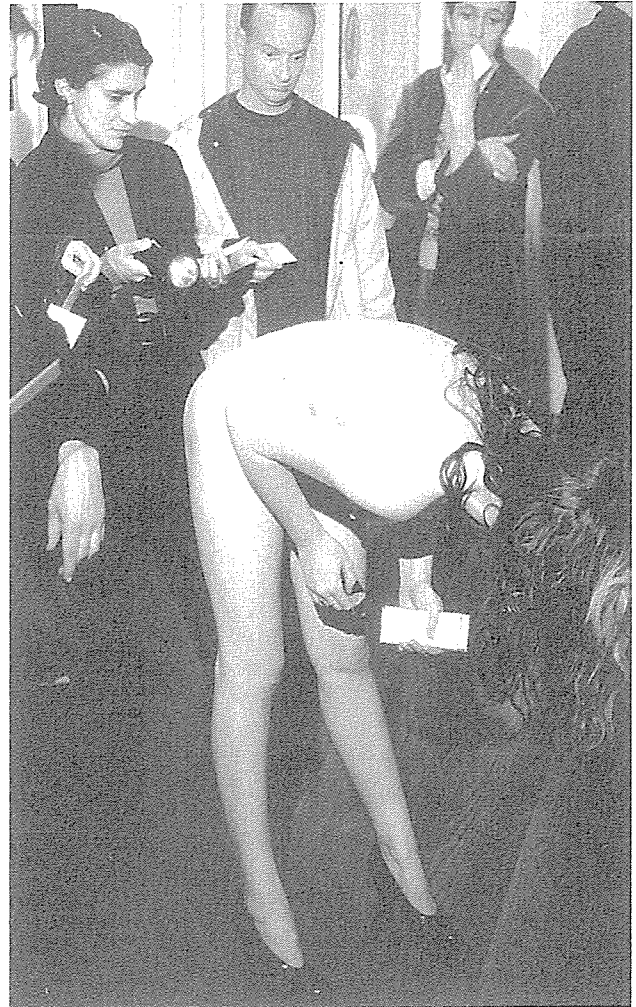
Representing very different approaches to performance, Barbara Campbell and Linda Sproul both articulate their ideas through challenging new visual language systems. In recent work Campbell re-examines the role of women in history with the aid of technology, and Linda Sproul questions our society's conscience with regard to women and violence by drawing on the discomfort engendered by the emotional and physical presence of body art.

Barbara Campbell's performance *Backwash* (*Perspecta*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1993) investigates several language systems in the search to find the 'lost' or unspoken narratives of women's history. This performance is part of her continuing theme to re-examine female archetypes within a patriarchal history, such as the role of Marie Antoinette or Mary Queen of Scots, by revealing or emphasising more particular and personal aspects of their experience. In *Backwash* she examines three women's stories all of which are about the 'jungle', and parallel narratives of experiences usually associated with men. The central story is that of Gracie Silcox,

telephone operator, who, during the 1937 Stinson crash in the Lamington National Park, co-ordinated communications and organised the search party for the missing men. Simultaneous to this narrative is the recounting of a particular memory of Elena Coppola, and, using film footage of a jungle set complete with mechanical elephants, she recalls how during the making of *Apocalypse Now* she commented that the Philippines were 'better than Disneyland'. This disparagement of the absurdity of the simulacrum-based 'authentic' male experience is emphasised with a copy of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, meticulously retyped by Campbell, which is used as a backdrop for the film projection.

In contrast the minutiae of these women's memories are given central place and attention. In several parts of the performance we hear the names of people and places monotonously recounted by Gracie Silcox and Campbell herself as a way of establishing their place in history. Both women are from the same area in Australia, and through costume and role-playing within the performance Campbell clearly establishes identification with the role of the telephone operator.

Remaining in a swivel chair throughout the performance, Campbell's only action is to control buttons and switches which trigger several tape recorders, and slide and film projectors. Other women performance artists such as Laurie Anderson or Lyndal Jones have used technology in their work, but here Campbell presents herself as a



Linda Sproul, *Listen*, 1993, performance at Linden Gallery, St Kilda, Photos: Collin Bogaars.

mediator through which to channel its creative force. The metaphor of the telephone operator, or 'switch-girl', suggests a contemporary Shaman who is able to bring about changes through manipulation of technology. In this case the suggestion is that (his)stories can be retold, re-filmed and indeed re-constructed, and that women's narratives are not lost but, with the switch as a new symbol of empowerment, they remain in the memory waiting for the trigger to release them.

Although Linda Sproul denies that her work has a shamanic element, preferring to emphasise the revelatory and didactic elements, her performances lead us through ritualistic narrative sequences and in her presence it is hard to avoid seeing her in a mediator's role.

Campbell and Sproul both use familiar language systems, in

Campbell's case, that of literature and film, both of which have made a vital contribution within patriarchy to establishing and reinforcing what is understood to constitute femininity. But whilst Campbell's forays reveal the quirky and even comic aspect of women's experiences, Sproul uses the theatrical imagery of sado-masochism and fetishization to expose the more sinister and suppressed side of being a woman. Where Campbell's work is esoteric, Sproul's is confrontational, and in this respect is comparable to the wave of 'angry women' best represented by New York artists Annie Sprinkle and Karen Finley who believe that in terms of drawing attention to the second-rate treatment of women in our society, active protest may succeed where feminist theory has not.

What Sproul and the New York

artists also have in common is an insistence on an interaction within a public arena and that their performances should be seen as mirrors to our society designed to prick its conscience. During *Listen* (Linden, August 1993), through theatre convention, Sproul's disturbing action is watched in silence, which draws attention to the fact that society will tolerate and condone the degradation of women within certain contexts. The viewer becomes complicit in this hypocrisy and is subsequently made to feel uncomfortable. As Sproul explains "my interest is making a space, where the material that the viewer brings to it beats up against mine".<sup>1</sup>

*Listen* examines the long-term effects of physical, sexual and emotional abuse, traumatic experiences which Sproul considers have been rendered banal and sensationalized by programs such as



Barbara Campbell, *Backwash*, 1993, performance, Art Gallery of New South Wales.  
Photo: Heidrun Löhr.

'Hard Copy' and 'Hinch'. She believes that society's concern only extends to "the moment of "the penetration, the hit, and there is a reduced ability to deal with the marks that are left, and how long they take to surface".<sup>2</sup> In *Listen* Sproul uses the bruise and its ugly stages of emerging, real and inflicted on her own body, as a metaphor for marking the psychological aftermath for such experiences.

In the initial part of the performance she deliberately does not prepare the viewer for the shock of seeing her wounds. She descends a carpeted stairwell, barefoot in a dowdy bri-nylon nightie complete with *broiderie anglaise* and ribbons. The image is one of vulnerability, and also implied security for it suggests the realm of domesticity. But for Sproul the home represents a frightening place, where, behind closed doors, it is statistically the most common site of violence and abuse. In two small actions those doors are opened and the truth behind them is revealed. Putting on a pair of dominatrix-style patent stilettos she appropriates the language of fetishization created to feed male fantasy and above all to contain the power of female sexuality. With similar deliberation she then unties the ribbons of the nightie and signals the transgression of revealing what it is designed to contain. On removal of the nightie

the viewer is confronted with Sproul's naked body, bruised and newly lacerated, and as she minces through the audience on the high heels she becomes a ghastly parody of woman as object of desire.

Voluntary mutilation is an emotionally powerful tool for it signals the human's last resort for gaining attention, and it is within this framework, and not one associated with the practice of sado-masochistic 'play' that Sproul locates and justifies such radical action. Not surprisingly it has been misread by feminists and misogynists alike as perpetuating and confirming women's second-rate status, although self-mutilation has precedents in the practice of performance art such as Gina Pane's self-inflicted razor cuts, and Jill Orr's invitation to cut off her hair.<sup>3</sup> It can also be read in terms of preparation of the artists' materials, in this case the artist's body, for Sproul's real wounds are as essential to this piece as the training of Campbell who spent months in a gym in order to skip for fifteen minutes<sup>4</sup> or that of Finley who fasts before a performance to achieve a light-headed frenzy on stage.

Sproul walks amongst the viewers displaying her wounds in silence and offering the viewers a torch to help their examination whilst she compliantly bends over. The torch becomes a literal and figurative

illuminative device over which she retains control. Since Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual pleasure and narrative cinema*<sup>5</sup> women artists have dealt with the problems of the male gaze by absenting themselves, exemplified in the work of Mary Kelly. The new wave of performance artists believe however that being absent is itself more detrimental in perpetuating a marginal position in society and that it is better to be seen, and to take control of how they are seen, a belief which Sproul consolidates with the control of the light, and Campbell with control of the switch-board.

Although Sproul leads the viewers through a form of a 'rite of passage' she deliberately disrupts any possibility of a cathartic finale. Unlike the New York performances which end on a point of optimism, Sproul denies the viewer the possibilities of a healing, and instead leaves them with a sense of loss and betrayal which she believes more accurately describes the consequences of abuse. For in the final sequence she puts on a dress and meticulously fastens a long row of buttons, which signals the return to the cover-up of both her body and the truth. It is perhaps at this point that the most disturbing point is made which is that women themselves are complicit in this betrayal.

While Campbell's cool positivity (representing the new intellectually-based feminist artist who makes use of historical research and analytical discourse) reflects the new optimism for feminism in the 1990s, Sproul's angry protest (exploring the political position of 'everywoman') reminds us that in real terms of social equality there is still a long way to go. □

#### Footnotes

1. Linda Sproul, *Taped conversation*, November 1993.

2. *ibid*

3. See Gina Pane, *Psychic action*, 1974, and Jill Orr, *She had long golden hair*, Experimental Art Foundation, 1980.

4. See Barbara Campbell, *The diamond necklace affair*, Artspace, 1991.

5. See Laura Mulvey. 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema' *Screen* 16, no 3, 1975, pp 6-18.