

Response to "A Forum: Presence and Absence, The Body Now"

Sponsored by Struts Gallery & Faucet Media Arts Centre

Sackville, New Brunswick

Saturday September 27, 2008

The public panel presentation, "A Forum: Presence and Absence, The Body Now," was held at the Sackville Music Hall on September 27, 2008. Conceived by Linda Rae Dornan, a nationally recognized artist and resident of Sackville, and organized by John Murchie, Coordinator of Struts Gallery & Faucet Media Arts Centre in Sackville, the purpose of the panel was to bring a group of artists together to discuss the relationship between the body and technology in contemporary society and art practice. Along with Dornan, who served as moderator, the panel members included Diana Burgoyne, a Vancouver artist whose practice uses technology and the body in performance to explore social, technological and environmental issues; Paul Couillard, a Toronto performance artist and founder of Fado Performance Inc., an artist-run centre devoted to the support of performance art activities, whose work focuses on the body's presence as a vessel of experience, knowledge and spirit; and Farheen Haq, a Victoria artist whose work, which addresses the body as a place of struggle against closed and rigid systems, was concurrently on view as a video installation at Struts Gallery.

The panel participants were asked to talk about their own art practices in response to a set of propositions and questions that were supplied to them in advance and summarized by Dornan for the panel's audience. These included the premise that the human body, as both a material and palpably real entity and a generator and container of symbolic meanings, has always been a contested site at myriad social, spiritual and political levels, and that, while gender is often at the centre of such contestation, its effects are experienced by both female and male bodies. This text also proposed that relationships between the body and technology have emerged in contemporary society and cultural discourse as particularly complex areas of discussion and debate, notably regarding such innovations as virtual space interaction, body enhancements, robotic workers and so on. Moral questions were posed as well about social and corporate control and about individual responsibilities in relation to reproductive and prosthetic technologies, bionics and disease control. These premises and questions have resonated widely in the work of contemporary artists, who, as creative thinkers, are often the first to explore the cultural and social significance of how the explosion of modern technologies has rendered unfocussed and undefined our previously secure distinctions between the organic and the non-organic, the natural and the unnatural, the self and the other, the human and the non-human.

The three panelists approached the general topic of the body and technology as it related to his or her art practice. Farheen Haq spoke first, referring to the two video projections in her Struts Gallery installation, which were also projected during the panel itself, as exemplary of what she describes on her website as her ongoing investigation of the body as a site of struggle and of performance as a way to activate space.¹ In both videos, fabric functions as a kind of tether, which serves as a central metaphor in Haq's work for the connection between the body, art and society. *Endless Tether* (2005) consists of a series of three-part split-screen vignettes filmed in slow motion. These begin with a woman's naked torso on the left and, on the right, a pair of evidently male hands holding a bundle of red silky fabric, which is then thrown across the screen to the woman, who proceeds to wind it round and round her body. As this vignette fades out, it is replaced by one showing the woman struggling against the efforts of the man's hands to pull the fabric from her body, and then, in the third sequence of images, the woman willingly unwinds the fabric from her body as it is gathered up by the pair of hands.

In her discussion of this work, Haq stressed the importance of the tension she sought to create between the protective, violent and seductive nature of these images as exemplary of the different ways we experience the body, which in her case, are

inflected by the particularities of her experience as a woman, and as a woman of colour. As context for these particularities, Haq made reference to her own Muslim family, in which her sister and then her mother took up the practice of veiling. Haq recounted that her sister's decision to veil was made from a consciously feminist perspective as a way to resist objectification, and that while Haq herself also took up the practice for a time, she abandoned it because it made her feel out of touch with her own body. Haq's ambivalence about upholding or rejecting these traditional familial and cultural practices is manifest in *Endless Tether* both by the red silky fabric, which clearly alludes to veiling and stands as the symbolic metaphor of tethering, and by the variations of her body's interaction with it during the sequence of vignettes.

Haq's second video, *Adrift* (2005), which similarly operates at a symbolic level, uses a two-part narrative structure to represent a journey from the external, physical world to the internal, psychological world. This external world is represented by slow-motion images of a woman (Haq) riding her bike, walking up steps and holding out her arms at a closed set of heavy wooden doors, while the internal world is represented by a sequence of underwater images in which a woman swimming alone is approached by two women holding a red silky fabric with which they wrap her body and set her adrift. For Haq, this

transition aimed to evoke connections to the community of the social world, especially the community of women.

In contrast to Haq, who uses technology (i.e., video projection) as a means to create images and stories about the body, Diana Burgoyne uses it explicitly both as subject matter and mode of interaction with the body. She made this evident by beginning her presentation with a performative demonstration in which she donned a facemask made of twisted wires and electrical components. As she walked through the room, the motions of her body caused the mask to emit amplified sounds like the ticking of a Geiger counter. After returning to her seat, Burgoyne explained that her interest in the relation between the body and technology began in the early 1980s when she heard the Canadian genetic scientist David Suzuki say that the "natural" path for humans was to "evolve" into machines. Skeptical of his unquestioning acceptance of such technological determinism, Burgoyne then began to base her work on an investigation of the tensions and conflicts she sees existing between the body and the forms of technology that seek to bring it under control.

Two examples of her work that Burgoyne discussed were *Digital Body One* (1982) and *Hanging One* (1990), both of which were performed multiple times in Canadian and international galleries or festivals. In *Digital Body One*, Burgoyne would enter the gallery space with buzzers attached to her body that

emitted irritating high-frequency noise. These buzzers were connected to levers placed randomly on her body, which she would then try to find to shut down the noise, but when she would let go of any one lever to find another, the buzzer it was attached to would start up again. This unrelenting cacophony of sound, and her inability to control it, served as a metaphor for the tension she sees as inherent in the struggle to control and manage the body and its relationship to technology. This struggle was addressed even more directly in *Hanging One*, which involved suspending herself in a harness structure attached to control mechanisms that were activated by gestures the viewer made with his/her head. Through a chain reaction, these motions caused Burgoyne's body to swing, which in turn caused her head to hit a trigger that set off thirty sound circuits throughout the space. As with *Digital One*, *Hanging One* addressed the contestation of power and control between the body and technology, but more emphatically stressed the role of social interaction. Not only did the artist put herself in a vulnerable situation, but by giving up control over her own body to the manipulations of audience members, she also tested the limits of their willingness to exert power over her.

Paul Couillard's presentation differed considerably from those by Haq and Burgoyne in that he did not discuss specific examples of his work, but instead elaborated on his ideas about

the forum's topic while enacting a form of performance. Having discretely positioned himself in the back of the room during the presentations by Haq and Burgoyne, he began by removing his shirt, with no explanation as to why, and then slowly walking among the audience members. As he did so, he addressed each of the three terms at issue in the forum: the body, technology and art.

Reflecting first on the term technology, Couillard recounted some of the discussions he recently held with his students regarding what they thought technology was. Noting that this question quickly made it evident that technology is an amorphous and profoundly complex term, the students nevertheless concluded that it is man-made, comes from science, mediates the relation between the body and its environment, and is associated with an opposition to nature. Without expanding further on these points, Couillard then addressed "the body," a term he said he dislikes using because it is so generalized and its meanings fluctuate at different periods. For instance, he observed, ten years ago we might have referred to "the body as text," while today we might talk about "the body as site." Couillard expressed particular concern about how such abstract theorizing seems to have no real relevance or connection to himself and his own body.

With respect to the third term, art, Couillard spoke again from a personal perspective, saying that he had come to it while working at government job and attended an event at SAW Gallery in Ottawa that was an epiphany for him. He abandoned his well-paying but dead-end job and turned to art as a place where one can create meaning from form in ways that resonate at more important social and spiritual levels. For this reason, he said he has come to reject technology in his own performance practice because it gets in the way of the body itself and prevents him from communicating the relationships and meanings he wants to convey.

Although this statement might suggest that Couillard regards the relation between the body and technology as irreconcilably oppositional, he countered any such assumption by concluding his talk with the announcement that the existence of his living body was in fact possible only because of the presence of technology embedded in it – namely an electronic valve attached to his heart. As he had walked and paused amongst the people sitting in the audience while giving his presentation, they could hear the slight ticking of this valve, but had no idea as to its source. Couillard's revelation at the end of his presentation provided a salient demonstration not only of the extent to which it is impossible to make clear separations or distinctions between the body and technology in

modern society, but also of the ability of art to elicit awareness of the subtle nuances of their relationship.

Following the panelists' presentations there was a brief question and answer period. One topic of discussion focused on Burgoyne's do-it-yourself approach to technology and her use of commonplace materials of the kind that could be purchased at Radio Shack. Both these aspects were seen to enhance the implications of Burgoyne's work that it is possible for individuals to take control of technology without submitting to its instrumental imperatives of relentless change, innovation and progress. And yet, while resistance in art practice to such imperatives can be seen as part of a long tradition of critical antagonism to what Lloyd Spencer called the ravaging "forces unleashed by modernity," there has also been a parallel tradition seeking to embrace and engage with those forces.² I would argue that this second response to modernity and technology is abundantly evident in contemporary art practice, and is well rewarded both by the priorities of funding organizations like the Canada Council for the Arts and the prominence given to "new media" work at international exhibitions, biennales and art fairs. Work like Burgoyne's stands not merely as an anachronistic alternative to these tendencies, but as a prompt to reflect critically on such

questions as who controls technology, for what means and ends, and with what results.

The second topic of discussion following the panel focused on the role of the body in these three artists' work. The lead-in question was about the significance each artist attached to the use of her or his own body and the two main responses came from Haq and Couillard. Haq said it was crucial for her to use her own body because her work is based on her own life experiences, while Couillard maintained that the presence of the artist's physical body is the defining condition of performance as an art form. This may often be the case, but it cannot be generalized as an absolute condition, for the historical evidence shows that there are many instances of performance that rely upon bodies without requiring them to be those of the artist/author of the work.³

These kinds of questions have been much debated in the history and theory of performance art, where they have been framed into dichotomous categories such as "presence and absence" or "liveness versus mediatization."⁴ Debates over these categories revolve around the concept of subjectivity and the supposition that the *raison d'être* of performance is the articulation of the artist's subjective agency. This again is often the case, but is not always so and must not be taken as absolute truth. Moreover, the real issue that lies at the heart

of these debates, and it is one that is rarely mentioned let alone analyzed, is that of authenticity. In effect, the presence of the artist's body and/or the liveness of the event are taken as evidence of the genuineness of the artist and her or his work's freedom from imposed conventions, codes, or restraints, whether aesthetic or social. This supposition is paradoxical, however, because claims to authenticity and freedom from convention are neither new nor unique to body-based contemporary art, but in fact are foundational to the historic tradition (i.e., convention) of modernism going back at least to the turn-of-the-century movements of Symbolism and Expressionism, if not to early nineteenth-century Romanticism.

What is even more problematic about relying upon claims, which is a tendency evident to a greater or lesser degree in the work of the artists on the panel, is that doing so runs the risk of making assertions of essentialism. While the many problems of essentialism have been thoroughly probed in postmodern, postcolonial and especially feminist theory over the past two decades, it ultimately and inevitably boils down to being a form of truth claim that is based on assertion rather than evidence and therefore stands as its own form of defense. In order to resist such risk, we need to be constantly vigilant and self-critical as artists and thinkers about the fallacies and dangers inherent in any such truth claims. One way to do so is to

continue to find opportunities to discuss and debate the kinds of complex issues and challenging questions arising from events like "A Forum: Presence and Absence, The Body Now."

¹ See "Artist Statement" on Farheen Haq's website at www.farheenhaq.com.

² Lloyd Spencer, "Postmodernism, Modernity and the Tradition of Dissent," in *The Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought*, ed. Stuart Sim (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 158.

³ A good example of this would be the performance work of Canadian artist Rita McKeough, who stresses the importance of the body and embodiment (often through vocalization and song), but typically delegates this presence to performers other than herself. For elaboration, see my essay, "Rita McKeough: An Ethics of Compassion," in *Caught in the Act: Canadian Women in Performance*, ed. Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2005), 344-51.

⁴ See, for example, Kathy O'Dell, "Toward a Theory of Performance Art: An Investigation of Its Sites (PhD diss., City University of New York, 1992)," 43-4; Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 146, 149-52; Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 11-18; Philip Auslander, "Liveness: Performance and the

Anxiety of Simulation," in *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 196-213 and *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*, especially the chapter "Against Ontology" (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 38-54; and Anne Wagner, "Performance, Video and the Rhetoric of Presence," *October* 91 (Winter 2000): 59-80. For a summary of these debates, see my *Radical Gestures: Feminism and Performance Art in North America* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 8-9.